

CHAPTER ONE

GIDEON NOVAK had almost canceled the meeting. He would have if he'd possessed even a shred of honor. Some things in this world were just too damn good for him to be associated with and Lucy Baudin topped that list. To hear from her now, two years after...

Focus on the facts.

She'd called. He'd answered. It was as simple as that.

The law office of Parker and Jones was the same as it had been the last time he'd walked through the doors. The small army of defense attorneys took on mostly white-collar crimes—specifically the ones that paid well—and that showed in every element of the interior. Soothing colors and bold lines projected confidence and created a calming effect.

Pale blue walls and good lines didn't do a single damn thing to dial back the pressure building in his chest with each step.

He usually didn't contract out with law offices. As a headhunter, Gideon preferred to stick to tech companies, various startup corporations or, literally, anyone except lawyers. They were too controlling and wanted their hands on every detail, every step of the way. It was a pain in the ass.

This is for Lucy.

He kept his expression schooled on the elevator ride up. When he'd known her, she was somewhere around floor six, proving herself by working cases not big enough for the lawyers with seniority to want but that were too big to turn down. Now she was on floor nineteen, only a couple below Parker and Jones themselves. She'd done well for herself in the two years since he'd seen her last. Really well.

The elevator opened into a large waiting room that didn't look anything like an actual waiting room. The more money people had, the more care was required in handling them, and the coffee bar and scattering of

couches and trade magazines reflected that. The hallway was guarded by a large desk and an older woman with tasteful gray shot through her dark hair. Surprising. He'd expected a bottle-blond receptionist—or perhaps a brunette if they were feeling adventurous.

But then the woman looked up and he got the impression of a general surveying her domain. *Ah*. They'd chosen someone who couldn't be bulldozed, if he didn't miss his guess. Useful to keep unruly clients in line.

Gideon stopped in front of the desk and did his best to appear nonthreatening. "I'm here to see Lucy Baudin."

"She's expecting you." She turned back to her computer, effectively dismissing him.

He spent half a second wondering at her qualifications—and if she was amiable to being poached for a different company—before he set it aside. Stepping on Lucy's toes by stealing her receptionist wasn't a good way to start off this meeting.

He'd spent the last week trying to figure out why the hell Lucy would seek *him* out. New York was rife with headhunters. Gideon was good—better than good—but considering their history, there had to be someone better suited for the job.

You could have said no.

Yeah, he could have.

But he owed Lucy Baudin. A single meeting wasn't much in the face of the fact that he'd more or less single-handedly brought her engagement down in flames.

He knocked on the dark wooden door as he opened it. The office was bright and airy, big windows overlooking New York, the only furniture a large L-shaped desk and two comfortable-looking chairs arranged in front of it. Gideon took in the room in a single sweep and then focused on the woman behind the desk.

Lucy sat straight, her narrow shoulders tense, as if she was about to step onto a battlefield. Her long dark hair was pinned back into some style that looked effortless but probably took a significant amount of time to accomplish. She raised her pointed chin, which drew his attention to her mouth. Lucy's features were a little too sharp to pass for traditional beauty—she would have made a killing on a runway—but her mouth was full and generous and had always been inclined to smile.

There were no smiles today.

“Lucy.” He shut the door behind him, holding his place to let her guide the interaction. She was the one who’d called him here. It didn’t feel natural to take his lead from someone else, but for her he’d make an effort.

At least until he heard her out.

“Gideon. Sit, please.” She motioned at the chairs in front of the desk.

Maybe she could pretend this was like any other job interview, but he couldn’t stop staring at her. She wore a dark gray dress that set off her pale skin and dark hair, leaving the only color present in her blue eyes and red lips. It created a striking picture. The woman was a goddamn gift. She always had been.

Jeff, you fucked things up beyond all recognition when you threw her away.

Focus.

She hadn’t arranged this meeting because of their past. If she could be professional, then he’d manage, as well. It was the least he could do.

Gideon sank into the chair and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “You said this was about a job.”

“Yes.” A faint blush colored her pale cheeks, highlighting the smattering of freckles there. “This is confidential, of course.”

It wasn’t quite a question, but he answered it anyway. “I didn’t put together a nondisclosure, but I can do that if you need to make it official.”

“That won’t be necessary. Your word that it stays between us will be enough.”

Curiosity curled through him. He’d had clients insist on confidentiality in the past—it was more the rule than the exception—but this felt different. He set the thought aside and focused on the job. “It would help if you’d describe the position you want filled. It gives me a general idea of what you’re looking for, and we can narrow it down from there.”

She met his gaze directly, her blue eyes startling. “The position I need filled is a husband.”

Gideon shook his head, sure he’d heard her wrong. “Excuse me?”

“A husband.” She held up her left hand and wiggled her ring finger. “Before you get that look on your face, let me explain.”

He didn't have any *look* on his face. *A husband. Where the fuck does she think I'm going to find a husband?* He opened his mouth to ask exactly that, but Lucy beat him there. "The timing isn't ideal, but gossip has come down the grapevine that I'm being considered for partner at the end of the year. While that would normally be a cause for celebration, some of the old guard have very strong beliefs about single women." She rolled her eyes, the first *Lucy* thing he'd seen her do since he'd arrived. "It would be laughable if it wasn't standing in the way of what I want, but I watched Georgia get passed over for a promotion last year for this exact reason. She wouldn't bend and they chose her male competition instead."

She was dead serious.

Gideon took a breath, trying to approach this logically. Obviously she'd put a lot of thought into the idea, and if she was misguided, that didn't mean he had to verbally slap her down. *This Lucy*, put-together and in control, was a far cry from when he'd seen her last, sobbing and broken. But that didn't change the fact that they were one and the same. He could handle this calmly and get her to see reason.

But calm and reasonable wasn't what came out of his mouth. "Are you out of your goddamn mind, Lucy? I'm a headhunter—not a matchmaker. Even if I was, getting married to secure a promotion is bullshit."

"Is it?" She shrugged. "People get married for much less valid reasons. *I* almost married for love before, and we both know how that ended. There's nothing wrong with handling marriage like a business arrangement—plenty of cultures do exactly that."

"We aren't talking about other cultures. We're talking about *you*."

Another shrug. As if it didn't matter to her one way or another. He *loathed* that feigned indifference, but he didn't have a goddamn right to challenge her on it.

She met his gaze directly. "This is important to me, Gideon. I don't know about kids—I love my job, and having babies would potentially interfere with that—but I'm lonely. It wouldn't be so bad to have someone to come home to, even if it wasn't a love for the ages. *Especially* if it's not a love for the ages."

"Lucy, that's crazy." Every word out of her mouth cut into the barrier of professionalism he fought so hard to maintain. "Where the hell would I find you a husband?"

"The same place you find people to fill the positions normally. Interview. We're in New York—if *you* can't find a single man who's willing to at least consider this, then no one can."

Gideon started to tell her exactly how impossible it was, but guilt rose and choked the words off. He thought this plan was bat-shit crazy, and the thought of Lucy in some loveless marriage irritated him like sandpaper beneath his skin, scratching until he might go mad from it.

But it wasn't his call to make.

And he was partially to blame for her single status right now.

Fuck.

Gideon straightened. No matter what he thought of this plan, when it came right down to the wire, he owed Lucy. He knew that piece of shit Jeff had cheated on her, and Gideon had kept his mouth shut for a full month before he'd told her the truth. That kind of debt didn't just go away. If she was coming to him now, it was because she'd exhausted all other options, and his saying no wasn't going to deter her in the least—she'd find a different way.

Really, he had no option. It might have been two years since he'd seen Lucy Baudin, but that didn't change the fact that he considered her a friend, and he'd never leave a friend hanging out to dry when they needed him. Gideon might have questionable morals about most things, but loyalty wasn't one of them.

She needed him. He'd have found a way to help her even if he didn't owe her.

At least if he was in the midst of this madness, he'd have some ability to keep her as safe as possible. He could protect her now like he hadn't been able to protect her from the hurt Jeff had caused.

If she was crazy for coming up with the plan in the first place, he was even crazier for agreeing to it. "I'll do it."

Lucy couldn't believe the words that had just come out of his mouth. It was too good to be true. Attempting to rope Gideon Novak into this scheme had been her Hail Mary. She was desperate and he was the only one she trusted enough to even attempt something like a search for a husband. But she hadn't thought he'd actually agree to it.

He said he'd help. Shock stole her ability to speak for a full five seconds. *Say something. You know the drill—fake it until you make it. This is just another trial. Focus.* She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, did you just say yes?"

“Yes.” He studied her face with dark eyes lined with thick lashes, which she secretly envied. Gideon had always been too attractive for Lucy’s state of mind. His dark hair was always styled in what she could only call “rakish,” and his strong jaw and firm mouth would have kept her up at night if he wasn’t firmly in the friend zone.

At least, he used to be.

She set the thought aside because going down the rabbit hole of despair that was her relationship with Jeff Larsson was out of the question. It had ended, and her friendship with Gideon had been a casualty of war.

Until now.

Gideon shifted, bringing her back to the present. “How exactly were you planning on going about this?”

This, at least, she had an answer for. Lucy had spent entirely too much time reviewing the steps required to get to her goal with minimum fuss—a husband and her promotion. “I thought you could come up with a list of suitable candidates, I could have a date or two with each, and then we could narrow the list down from there.”

“Mmm-hmm.” He tapped his fingers on his knee, dragging her attention south of his face. He wore a three-piece suit, which should have been too formal for this meeting, but Gideon managed to pull it off all the same. The pinstriped gray-on-gray gave him an old-world kind of feel, like something out of *Mad Men*.

Thankfully for Lucy, he had better morals than Don Draper.

She fought not to squirm in her seat under the weight of his attention. It was easy enough to be distanced and professional when she’d laid out her proposal—she’d practiced it the same way she practiced opening and closing statements before a trial. Getting into the nitty gritty of the actual planning and actions was something else altogether.

“I’m open to suggestions, of course.” *There—look at me, being reasonable.*

“Of course.” He nodded as if deciding something. “We do this, we do it on my terms. I pick the men. I supervise the dates. And if I don’t like the look of any of them, I have veto rights.”

Veto rights? That wasn’t part of the plan. She shook her head. “No. Absolutely not.”

“You came to me, Lucy. That means you trust my judgment.” He gave her an intense look that made her skin feel too tight. “Those are the terms.”

Terms. Damn, she’d forgotten the most important thing.

It doesn't have to be the most important thing. He doesn't know it was part of the plan, so it's not too late to back out.

But if she backed out, the deep-rooted fear from her time with her ex would never be exorcised. She'd spend the rest of her life—and her prospective marriage—second-guessing herself and her husband. It would drive her crazy and ultimately poison everything.

She couldn't let it happen, no matter how humiliating she found asking for Gideon's help with this.

Lucy managed to drag her gaze away from his. She pulled at the hem of her skirt. "There's one more thing."
"I'm listening."

She smoothed her suddenly sweating palms over her desk. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

It had everything to do with things. She'd never known Gideon to hold down a relationship longer than a few weeks, but that didn't mean he hadn't somehow changed in the last two years. The entire second part of her plan leaned heavily on the assumption that he *hadn't* changed.

The Gideon she'd known before had been her friend, yes, but he'd also been a playboy to the very definition of the word. He hadn't dated seriously. He'd never mistreated women, but he hadn't kept them around for long, either. Lucy had heard the whispers in college about his expertise in the bedroom—it was legendary enough that most women ignored the fact they had an expiration date from the moment he showed an interest in them.

To put it simply, he was *perfect* for her current situation.

She just had to find the strength to speak the damn words. She forced her hands still. "I'm going to need...lessons."

"Lucy, look at me."

Helpless, she obeyed. He frowned at her like he was trying to read her mind. "You're going to have to explain what the hell you're talking about."

It was so much harder to get it out while looking at him. She pressed her lips together. She'd faced down some of the most vicious prosecutors New York had to offer. She could damn well face Gideon Novak down, too.

You know these words. You've practiced them often enough.

“I need lessons of the sexual nature.” He went so still, he might as well have turned to stone, so she charged on. “This might be an arranged marriage, so to speak, but it would be a true marriage. And, as I don’t cherish the idea of being cheated on by yet another fiancé, that means sex needs to be part of the bargain. It’s been a long time for me, and I have to brush up on my skill set.”

Not to mention the only man I ever slept with was Jeff, and he never missed an opportunity to tell me how uninspiring he found our sex life.

Or that he blamed his cheating on my being unable to meet his needs.

She didn’t let what Jeff thought dictate her life anymore, but Lucy would be lying if she pretended his words didn’t haunt her—that they hadn’t been instrumental in her two-year celibate streak. She’d enjoyed sex. She’d thought Jeff had enjoyed it, as well. If she could be so terribly wrong on such a fundamental level before, what was to stop her from failing at it again?

No, she couldn’t allow it. If she trusted Gideon enough to secure his help finding a husband, then she trusted him enough to create a safe space to teach her something she obviously needed to know to be an effective wife. His rumored sex prowess just sweetened the bargain, because he was more than experienced enough to walk her through a crash course in seduction.

He still hadn’t said anything.

She sighed. “I know it’s a lot to ask—”

“I’m going to stop you right there.” He stood and adjusted his jacket as he buttoned it. “I will charge you for the husband hunting—the same rates of a normal client. I’m not a sex worker, Lucy. You can’t wave a magic wand and acquire lessons in fucking.”

She did her best not to wilt.

You knew it was a long shot.

“I understand.”

“That said…” He shook his head like he couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth any more than she could. “Come by my place tonight. We’ll talk. After that, we’ll see.”

That…wasn’t a no. It wasn’t a yes. But it most definitely wasn’t a no.

“Okay.” She didn’t dare say anything more in fear that he’d change his mind. *I can’t believe this is happening.*

He didn’t look happy to have offered the invitation. In fact, Gideon looked downright furious.

He pinned her with a look. “Seven. You remember the address.”

It wasn’t a question but she still nodded all the same. “I’ll be there.”

“Don’t be late.” He turned and stalked out of her office, leaving her staring after him.

What just happened?

A thrill coursed through her. What just happened was that Gideon Novak had agreed to help her. Professionally he had a reputation for always getting his man and, personally, he had everything required to get her pending marriage off to the right start.

He said yes.

With him in her corner, there was no way she’d fail.

The promotion was hers. She could feel it.