

# **Blurb and Table Of Contents**

# Shattered Illusions... [SAMPLE]

## Table Of Contents

Blurb

Characters

Chapter 1: The Flirtation That Started Everything

Chapter 2: Keeping It Casual

Chapter 3: Pausing Love for Ambition

Chapter 4: Divine Intervention

Chapter 5: Giving Love Another Chance

Chapter 6. Falling Madly in Love

### **Blurb:**

When **Louie Lawrence** meets **Augustin Cisse** at a friend's wedding, he seems like the man of her dreams: charismatic, ambitious, and irresistibly magnetic. Their connection is instant, and for the first time in years, Louie allows herself to hope for a love that doesn't come with confusion. But as their relationship deepens, the cracks in Augustin's perfect façade begin to show. His controlling behavior, cryptic past, and manipulative tendencies leave Louie questioning everything she thought she knew.

Trapped in a web of lies and gaslighting, Louie struggles to reconcile the man she fell for with the one who now seems to hold her captive. As she digs into Augustin's past, she uncovers dark secrets that threaten not only their relationship but her own safety. With the help of her therapist, her fiercely loyal siblings, and her own growing intuition, Louie must find the strength to break free from the chains of her toxic relationship and reclaim her life.

*Shattered Illusions* is a gripping exploration of love, betrayal, and the resilience of the human spirit. Filled with unexpected twists and heart-pounding suspense, this story will keep readers on the edge of their seats until the very last page.

-- Tone: Dark, suspenseful, and emotionally charged.

-- Themes: Love, manipulation, betrayal, self-discovery, and .....

## Chapter 1: Flirtation And Desire

The moment she felt his eyes on her, Louie froze—just for a second. The wineglass hovered near her lips, forgotten, as an unfamiliar heat crawled up her spine. It wasn't a glance. It was a claim.

When she turned, he was already walking toward her.

*Augustin.*

She didn't know his name yet, but she would. Just like she didn't know the wreckage he'd leave behind or how, in the end, she'd be the one dragging her own heart out of the fire. But something in his walk, in the deliberateness of it, told her: *this one's different.*

Which was exactly the problem.

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Fifteen minutes earlier, Louie had sworn off men. She was on her second glass of wine and the third cynical thought about love when the string quartet behind her struck up something slow and romantic. This was the kind of song that made people feel brave enough to make promises they'd never keep.

Louie Lawrence tightened her shawl around her shoulders, watching as a couple drifted past her table. The bride and groom, still flushed with champagne and giddy from the photographer's flash, twirled together slowly and sensually like they hadn't just spent half their engagement arguing over hors d'oeuvres and venue locations.

Weddings brought out the worst in her—hope, mostly. It clung to her like the floral mist sprayed across the dance floor, the kind of hope that made people forget everything they'd already survived. She hated it. Now, standing on the edge of what felt like a new beginning, Louie felt a wave of uncertainty crash over her. She wasn't looking for love—not really.

She turned as she heard familiar-sounding laughter from the next table. It was her best friend and maid of honor, Sharona Reynolds. Louie could see her talking eagerly with the groom's cousin, a Wall Street banker and probably a potential stepdad for Sharona's 8-year-old. Sharona had already tried to set Louie up with a groomsman who used the word "wifey" like punctuation. Louie had politely said *hell, no.*

Instead, she sat at the edge of the celebration, watching joy unfold like a well-rehearsed play. Everything was choreographed to feel spontaneous, from the tinkling of glassware to kids throwing confetti in the air. She should have left earlier. Slipped out after the toasts and claimed an early meeting or a headache. But something kept her here. Maybe it was the way the garden outside caught the sunlight just right, transforming the hedge maze into something romantic. Or

maybe it was the part of her that still—despite everything—wondered what it would be like to be chosen, not chased.

She'd gotten good at spotting the danger signs. Love, in her experience, had always been a double-edged sword, capable of cutting just as deeply as it could heal. Her childhood taught her that, as well as how to navigate the stormy waters of unhealthy relationships. After all, growing up in a household where love was often tangled with chaos meant learning early on how to keep her head above water. Her parents' marriage was a masterclass in dysfunction, with the usual loud arguments that shook the walls, followed by tense silences that stretched for days. The cycle was so predictable it could've been a bedtime story.

*Once upon a time, there was a girl who learned to confuse intensity for intimacy.*

Louie had vowed to be smarter. To be different. She built walls with bullet points: successful, independent, emotionally literate. A woman with her own law degree and a brand-new practice, not the kind of person who'd lose herself for anyone. She didn't do chaos. She didn't do complicated.

And yet... she could feel the air around her suddenly cool. That was when she felt it.

His stare.

It wasn't just a glance. It was a stare—intense and unwavering, like he was trying to see through her. She turned, and there he was. From the moment she saw him, she was hooked. He was tall and impeccably dressed, with a confident, magnificent smile. But it wasn't the suit or the smile that caught her off guard—it was the way he looked at her. Not like a stranger noticing a pretty woman, but like a man recognizing something he'd been searching for. Like she was already his.

Their eyes met, and there was no surprise in his. No quick glance away. He looked at her like she was the last detail in a picture he'd been studying for hours. She held his gaze longer than she meant to. Something in it made her pulse catch, something knowing and intense.

Louie lowered her eyes and took a slow sip of her wine, giving herself a moment to recalibrate. Weddings always managed to unearth another part of her she loathed the most—longings she didn't have the time or energy to indulge. She knew better. Men like him didn't look at women like her with anything real behind the stare.

But when she looked back up, he was walking toward her. There was no arrogance in his stride, just an assured ease, like he was a man accustomed to people stepping out of his way. Louie's heart gave a low, tired thud. She didn't want to do this. Not tonight. She wasn't in the mood for polished charm or half-true introductions. And yet, her feet stayed planted.

He stopped a pace away and offered his hand.

“May I have this dance?”

The question landed softly, but it carried weight like it had already been decided. Louie glanced

down at his outstretched hand, then up again. His expression was polite, but there was something quietly unshakable beneath it.

She should say no. She *wanted* to say no. Her fingers twitched at her side, itching to grab her purse and disappear without saying her polite goodbyes. But instead, she studied him—his eyes were warm but unreadable, and his expression was patient and confident, like he already knew the answer.

A practiced charmer, no doubt. They always started like this.

“I’m not much of a dancer,” she said lightly, giving him the out she hoped he’d take.

“I’m terrible,” he admitted with a charming smile that should’ve been reassuring yet somehow wasn’t. “But I promise not to step on your toes.”

It was exactly the kind of line she’d come to expect at events like this. The kind meant to disarm and entertain. But it didn’t feel rehearsed. It felt...observant. As if he’d already noticed she wasn’t the kind to leap into things, and adjusted his approach accordingly.

Louie should’ve walked away. She even pictured excusing herself with a polite nod, then turning back to her table and finishing her drink alone. It would’ve been smarter.

Instead, she placed her hand in his.

His grip was firm yet warmer than she expected. There was steadiness in it, an unspoken confidence that made retreat seem awkward now. He led her toward the edge of the dance floor, where the music was gentler and the crowd thinner. The air was scented with roses and crisp summer grass, and the lanterns above cast soft golden halos over the gathered guests.

They began to move.

It wasn’t formal. More of a sway than a step. His hand settled lightly at the small of her back, and hers found its place against his shoulder. The rhythm was slow and sure, and Louie found herself slipping into it without resistance.

But her thoughts resisted. *Don’t get drawn in. He’s just a man, just a smile. Just another mistake waiting to happen.* But the music was low and coaxing, the kind of melody that wrapped itself around your ankles and pulled you close. Yet while her body was moving to the music, her mind was cataloguing every detail—his nearness, the heat radiating through his suit, as well as the slight pressure of his hand guiding her movements. She wasn’t the kind of woman who forgot herself because of a dance.

“You don’t talk much,” he said, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“You don’t know me yet,” she replied.

“But I’d like to.”

That should have made her soften. Instead, her spine straightened. His voice was smooth—too smooth. The kind that slipped under defenses and coiled around logic.

Still, she didn’t stop dancing. She tilted her chin slightly. “Maybe I’m just listening.”

“To what?”

“To see if your charm is as honest as it seems.”

He smiled again, but slower this time. “And?”

“Jury’s out.”

He laughed, and it was a low and smooth sound that felt meant for her ears only. But even as she allowed herself to enjoy the warmth of it, a warning stirred at the back of her mind. She didn’t know him. And his eyes were completely on her. It was the kind of attention that felt like a gift and a burden at once. Flattering, yes. But also unnerving.

They continued to dance, and Louie tried to refocus. The music had shifted into something older and more melodic.

He leaned in slightly. “Augustin Cisse.”

She met his eyes again. “Louie. Louie Lawrence.”

“I know,” he said.

It caught her off guard. Her next step faltered, just slightly, but he adjusted with ease, steadying her without comment. She looked up at him with a frown plastered on her face.

“You know?”

“I asked around.”

That should’ve unnerved her more than it did. She’d had men Google her before meeting. Some were clumsy about it, while others were outright creepy. But this felt...different. Like he hadn’t done it out of curiosity but necessity.

Still, it was enough to stir the old reflex. When the song ended, Louie took a small step back, reclaiming her space.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice composed again. “For the dance.”

He didn’t protest. He just inclined his head slightly, with the corners of his mouth still curved.

“Anytime.”

Louie turned and walked back toward her table, aware of his gaze following her the whole way. The night around her—the laughter, music, and clinking of glasses—all of it felt a little distant now.

That wasn't just a dance.

—

When Louie returned to her seat, the table had emptied. A few guests lingered at the far end, chatting quietly, but the space around her felt abandoned—except for him.

Augustin stood near the dance floor, his eyes still on her. He wasn't pretending not to look. He didn't glance away when she noticed. There was no self-consciousness in it, just that same steady gaze that had followed her since the moment they met.

She let out a breath, set her glass down, and made her way toward the terrace. The night air was cooler now, scented with blooming jasmine and a hint of something woodsy from the garden's edge. String lights hung overhead like soft stars, and for the first time that evening, she felt the thrum of music fade enough to hear her own thoughts.

She turned to go back inside—and nearly collided with him.

“Oh—sorry,” she breathed.

He lifted his hands slightly in mock surrender. “Didn't mean to startle you.”

Louie stepped back, giving them both space. He was closer than she expected “You have a habit of appearing at just the right time.”

He tilted his head, smiling. “Or the wrong one, depending on how you see it.”

The quiet between them wasn't awkward. It stretched, slow and charged, like the air before a thunderclap.

“You don't seem like the type to linger at weddings,” she said after a moment.

“I don't,” he replied. “But tonight feels... different.”

There was something about the way he said it that made her pause.

“You mean because of the wine or the company?”

He gave her an amused look. “You tell me.”

Louie crossed her arms loosely. “What brings a stranger like you to a celebration like this? You

don't exactly blend in."

Augustin threw his hands up slightly in mock surrender. "*Touché!*"

Louie's eyebrow lifted slightly. "Sorry?"

"It's French," he explained, lowering his hands, his eyes twinkling. "Means 'you got me.' A fair point."

Demi: "Ah, French." A knowing smile touched her lips. "*Oui, je comprends*. Occupational hazard."

At his questioning look, she elaborated, "Lawyer. We dabble in French, Latin... the languages of loopholes and legacies."

Augustin's expression shifted to one of genuine impressiveness. "*Avocate? Très chic et très intelligent*. Impressive." He leaned forward slightly, his curiosity clearly piqued. "Okay, Counselor. Given that many guests here are dark-skinned like yourself, what specifically tipped you off that I wasn't part of the local contingent?"

Louie chuckled softly, enjoying the easy back-and-forth. "It wasn't just one thing." She subtly nodded towards his attire. "Your suit itself is tailored, European style. But," she pointed discreetly with her chin, "those cufflinks look distinctly like Ashanti gold weights, and the tie bar has a beautiful Fulani braiding pattern. It's a sophisticated blend, very intentional, and very much not the standard uniform for weddings around here. You wear your roots with style, but it definitely makes you stand out."

Augustin looked more than impressed. "This is the part where you tell me what I had for breakfast. You really are on point. But you didn't learn all this on the History Channel, did you?"

Louie chuckled again. "My mum's mum was African. She was very big on roots and all that stuff."

"I'm blown away," he murmured in a deep, sensual voice. "I knew we'd have another thing in common."

Louie arched an eyebrow. "Another thing?"

"Well, we both seem to be making conscious effort not to interact with anyone else here," he said slyly. "And someone clearly dragged us here."

Louie laughed. It was an honest, genuine one. Probably the first real one she had had this night.

"You're right on point," she chuckled, meeting his gaze directly and allowing herself to really look at him for the first time. She couldn't help but note that beyond the clothes and the confident air, he was indeed handsome. His facial features were sharp, almost angular, dominated by the most striking amber-brown eyes she'd ever seen. They were warm and held an intensity that

seemed to command attention effortlessly. His dark skin possessed a rich undertone that glowed faintly in the reception lighting, making his magnetic smile truly captivating. His hair was styled in neat, twisted locs, framing his face wonderfully rather than being tied back as she imagined they might be when he was focused or working. It all contributed to a presence that filled the space around him without any obvious effort.

Snapping out of her brief assessment, she tilted her head slightly. "So, the impeccably dressed man who stands out beautifully... how exactly did you land an invitation to this wedding?"

He chuckled, seeming completely unfazed by her directness. "A friend of the groom. We went to school together years ago. He made me promise to show up—said I needed the distraction."

"From what?"

Augustin glanced toward the garden, his smile slipping by a fraction. "From my old life."

Too vague. Louie felt a subtle nudge at the back of her mind.

"You trying to run from something?"

"Trying to forget some things," he said. "Big difference."

"And is it working?"

He looked back at her, his eyes darker now. "Ask me tomorrow."

She didn't answer right away. A breeze swept through, brushing a loose curl across her cheek. Before she could tuck it back, Augustin reached out and gently moved it behind her ear. His fingers lingered a second too long. Louie's pulse quickened.

"I don't usually talk like this with people I've just met," he said.

"You mean evasively?" She replied, arching a brow.

He laughed. "*Touché.*"

She smiled, but there was steel behind it. "I ask questions, Augustin. If that's a problem, you should probably head back inside."

"Not a problem. I prefer people who look beneath the surface."

His gaze dropped then, not to her eyes but to her mouth. He watched the way she shaped her words as though studying something fragile and precise. Her breath caught. Not from fear, not quite. It was something quieter. An awareness that his attention wasn't leering but with intent. Her brain sent up a quiet flare: *Too much. Too soon.* But her heart had already leaned in. Curious. Hungry.

“So,” she said, needing the ground again, “this old life you’re escaping—what did it look like?”

He shifted his weight, his smile returning, but tighter this time. “Demanding. Predictable. Every day the same, down to the minute. I needed to break the pattern.”

“And what pattern are you in now?”

“I wake up wherever I land. Move when I want. No ties. Just stories waiting to be found.”

“Sounds romantic.”

“Sounds lonely,” he corrected.

She nodded slowly. “That’s a hard kind of freedom.”

Augustin’s expression softened. “You sound like someone who knows.”

Louie’s gaze drifted to the lights overhead. “I do. I’ve spent most of my life avoiding roots.”

“Why?”

“Because everything I planted kept getting torn up.”

It slipped out before she could soften it. She didn’t usually offer that much. Not to strangers. But Augustin didn’t flinch.

“Then you’re the kind of person who grows stronger in spite of it.”

His words were gentle, but Louie felt something strange in them, a question hidden inside a compliment. She studied him, unsure why that bothered her.

“You’re easy to talk to,” he said, his voice low again, nearly lost in the hum of cicadas. “Most people don’t really listen. But you do. You look for meaning in things. I can tell you’re someone who understands how the world works.”

Louie’s lips parted slightly, caught between the warmth of the praise and the red flag it set off. *No one says things like that without wanting something.* Still, it was the kind of sentence she’d once longed to hear back when she believed understanding would earn love. That being seen meant safety.

But with Augustin, she couldn’t quite tell what he saw. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

They stood like that for a moment longer until a burst of laughter floated through the open terrace doors. The wedding was winding down. The night was thinning, and so was her armor.

She didn’t want to move. Neither did he.

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An hour later, they were still deep in conversation. Augustin's voice seemed to take up all the space between them, like they were tucked inside a quieter, separate moment.

"I used to travel," he said, hands in his pockets. "A lot, actually. Europe, parts of Asia... I spent about a year just moving from place to place. Backpack, camera, bad cell reception. It was the best kind of freedom."

Louie looked at him, intrigued. "On your own?"

He nodded. "Mostly. I'd meet people along the way, of course. But there was something about landing somewhere unfamiliar, knowing no one... waking up and not knowing where I'd go next. It rewired something in me."

"What did it change?"

His eyes turned toward the garden again, looking thoughtful. "Perspective. I stopped chasing the version of life people said I should want. Career, structure, predictability. The cities I visited—Lisbon, Fez, Kyoto—taught me to listen better. To watch people. To take things in slowly."

There was a sincerity in the way he spoke, like he was building something carefully. And Louie found herself leaning into it. She folded her arms lightly.

"That sounds... beautiful. A little lonely, but beautiful."

"It was both," he admitted. "I think sometimes people mistake solitude for sadness. But when you give it space, it can become something else."

Louie wanted to believe that. But even as he spoke, she noticed it—small things. A slight falter when he mentioned Kyoto. A split-second hesitation before Budapest. A flicker in his eyes when he said, "people I met."

"You mentioned Morocco earlier," she said gently.

His eyes flicked to hers, then away. "Yeah. Morocco was... complicated."

"In what way?"

His tone changed. Not defensive, but distant. "It just didn't end well. Some things are better left as lessons."

Then, as if realizing he'd let the mask slip, he gave a practiced smile, tipping his head toward her in that charming way that had worked earlier in the night. "But that's a story for another day."

Louie didn't press. But she didn't forget either.

"You speak like someone who's seen a lot."

"I have." He looked back at her now, more present again. "But lately, I've started to wonder if I'm just collecting stories to avoid telling my own."

That stopped her. "You mean you hide behind them?"

His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Don't we all?"

For a moment, she wasn't sure whether he was deflecting or admitting something real. Maybe both. His truths felt like locked doors. Beautiful ones, with intricate carvings, but locked all the same.

Still, she didn't pull away. Not yet.

"What about you?" he asked. "If you could pack a bag and vanish tomorrow, where would you go?"

Louie considered it. "Somewhere quiet. With water. And a sky I can actually see."

"No city?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather be surrounded by things that don't need explaining."

He gave a low hum of appreciation. "That's poetic."

"It's honest," she said simply.

Augustin's gaze lingered on her a moment longer. Then, softer, "You know, most people talk to fill space. But you speak like it matters."

Louie held his gaze. "That's how you know someone's listening."

A beat passed. Then another. A rustle of wind moved through the trees behind them. And in that suspended hush, she realized she wanted to know more. She wanted to ask about the shadows behind his words, the weight behind his smile, and the places he didn't mention. But something told her if she asked too soon, he'd vanish—like mist in the morning.

So she stayed quiet. For now.

The band had begun winding down, the lights dimmed, and the wedding guests began to thin out. Yet Louie and Augustin remained in place—as if the world around them had receded just far enough to let them stay suspended in their own atmosphere. She didn't know how long they'd been talking. It didn't feel like hours, but it must've been. She could feel it in her feet, finally

aching in her heels, yet she didn't want to move. She hadn't felt this alive in a long time.

Then came Sharona with her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Well, well, who's this?" Sharona teased, nudging Louie playfully.

Louie blinked, pulled out of the haze. "Sharona, this is Augustin," she replied, her cheeks flushing.

"Nice to meet you, Augustin," Sharona said smoothly, offering a hand while sizing him up like a jeweler inspecting a diamond with one hidden crack.

Augustin smiled easily. "Likewise."

But Sharona leaned in, her voice low enough for Louie only. "He's smooth, I'll give him that. Just watch your step. I've seen that look on you before. You know how those types can be."

Louie waved her off with a laugh, but Sharona's words lingered in the back of her mind. It wasn't until the band started packing up that Louie realized how late it was.

"I should probably head out," she said, reluctantly pulling away.

Augustin nodded, but his expression shifted. It was a flicker of something crossing his face. Regret? Guilt? "Before you go," he said, his tone suddenly serious, "there's something I should tell you."

Louie's heart slowed in a way she didn't like. She didn't know why, but the way he said it made her stomach twist. "Okay..."

"I'm engaged," he said matter-of-factly.

The words didn't register at first. They landed in the space between them like static. Faint, dissonant, and wrong.

And then—impact.

Louie felt like the floor had dropped out from under her. She didn't know what to say. Her breath caught, like when something cracks open inside your chest and all the air rushes out at once.

"You're... what?"

"I didn't want to lie," he said quickly. "It's complicated. We've been distant for a long time. I don't even know if—" He stopped himself. "I know how that sounds. I do."

Louie stared at him, trying to form a coherent thought, but her mind suddenly flooded with sharp-edged memories of other moments. Other men. The exact same feeling of falling for

someone who wasn't fully available. She hated how familiar it was. Hated that she still felt pulled.

"I don't expect anything from you," he said, his eyes searching hers. "I just... wanted to be honest. I didn't expect to meet someone like you tonight. So I didn't want to leave without telling you the truth."

Louie told herself to walk away. She knew better than to get involved with someone who was already spoken for. But something about him—the vulnerability in his voice, the way he seemed to see her in a way no one else did, that kept pulling her back. And then there was that look in his eyes, that flicker of something darker she couldn't quite place.

"So, what are you expecting me to do?" Louie asked, looking up at him. His face was open, his eyes regretful, and yet there was still something behind them. Something dark and unreadable. A shadow he hadn't let her see.

He didn't answer right away. He just stepped forward and handed her a simple white card. There was no logo or flourish. Just a name, a number, and a sense of invitation that left more questions than answers.

"I don't expect anything from you," he said softly. "I just... wanted to be honest."

Louie took the card slowly, fingers brushing his. And she hated herself for how he still made her heart still beat faster.

—

That night, Louie walked through her front door with a thousand versions of herself trailing behind.

The confident one who knew better.

The cautious one who always stepped back.

And the reckless one who, tonight, had leaned in.

She kicked off her shoes, letting them fall in opposite directions, and moved through the stillness of her apartment like it wasn't hers. The city hummed outside her window, distant and indifferent. But inside, the silence pressed against her ribs. She sat on the edge of her bed, then lay back slowly. Her eyes were fixed on the ceiling fan, tracing slow, hypnotic circles overhead.

Augustin's voice lingered like perfume on skin. Every laugh. Every look. Every careful pause before he dropped the word "engaged" like a guillotine between them.

She told herself she should feel nothing. Or at least something simple. Disappointment. Frustration. Maybe closure. But what she felt was far more complicated. Her chest was tight with

guilt, but not because she'd done anything. Not yet. It was the guilt of wanting someone she shouldn't. Of imagining different versions of him—versions where he wasn't already tethered to someone else.

She thought of her parents. Of the way her mother had waited too long to leave. Of the years spent drowning in a marriage built on silence and second chances that never came. Louie had sworn she'd never be that woman. And yet here she was, lying in bed with a man's voice in her head and no promise of safety. Drawn to a man who was already taken, playing with fire just like they had.

Her phone buzzed suddenly, startling her. She picked it up, expecting to see a text from Sharona. They hadn't left together like planned. Instead, the screen lit up with a number she didn't recognize.

*Still thinking about me?*

*I knew you would.*

*Sleep well, Louie.*

—A

Louie stared at the screen in shock. The words weren't threatening. Not explicitly. But there was something about the way he assumed. The way he knew. He was already in her mind, and now he'd left his mark on her night. She didn't type a response. She didn't delete it either. She just stared at the screen. Then, she turned the phone face down on the nightstand and closed her eyes, not to sleep, but to think.

Some part of her had known it wasn't over. That tonight was only the start of something. She just didn't know whether that something would set her free, or pull her under. Little did she know that this was the flirtation that started everything, the start of something far more dangerous than she could have imagined, something that would test her strength, her sanity, and her very sense of self.

Then, Louie shot up in bed.

*Wait, how the hell did he get my number?*

