



"A love story with flair, sincerity,
and a cast of characters you want
to keep close to your heart."

—Andre Fenton, author of
The Summer Between Us

Luscious Love

KATERINA
BAKOLIAS

Luscious
Love

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For Rosalia — may you always know you're worthy of love.

01 *First Day on the Job*

CLOTHES WERE SCATTERED all over Mina's bedroom floor, some flung across her bed, and what remained in the closet was half-hanging. How could she have so much clothing and not a single thing to wear on her first day? Mina stood in front of the mirror on the back of her bedroom door, a place she normally hated to be, but today was different. Today was her first day as a sales associate at Luscious Lingerie, and she wanted to pick out the perfect outfit. The dress

code was all black, Mina's favourite colour. She'd settled on a pair of black leggings, a black cami, and a cropped black knit cardigan. She turned to the side and inspected her outfit, adding a simple pair of gold earrings and pulling her curly black hair back into a ponytail. *Comfy, practical, and cute*, she thought with a smile. She wasn't usually the type to focus so much on her appearance, but she wanted to look the part.

Mina hurried downstairs. Her older brother and sister, Dimitri and Alexandra, were already sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast. Her mother, Voula, stood at the counter preparing some phyllo pastry. Although she'd been up for hours, she hurried around the kitchen with an energy that made it impossible to know if she was having fun or running around in complete and utter panic. Voula was the type of woman who had an opinion about everything and a solution for every problem.

"I've been calling you for an hour," her mother said, looking up from the counter. "Is that what you're wearing?"

“Ma!” Mina rolled her eyes and inspected her outfit again.

“What?” Voula sighed as she threw her hands in the air. “I can’t ask a question?”

“You look fine,” Alexandra called from the table, annoyed at the early-morning commotion.

Mina poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. “I’d like to look more than *fine* for my first day,” she muttered under her breath.

“And you do,” Alexandra assured her. “Right, Ma?”

“Yes, yes, now eat. Eat,” Voula said as she placed a plate of fresh bread on the table.

“Oh, is it your first day at a new internship for the National Bank? Did you beat out fifty other applicants to earn your spot?” Dimitri chirped. “No, wait, that’s me.” He puffed up his chest and grinned while shoving a whole hard-boiled egg into his mouth. Mina rolled her eyes, and Alexandra ignored him.

“So many firsts today.” Their father Yiannis beamed as he waltzed into the room with his backpack

flung over his shoulder. “I’m very proud.” He kissed each of his children on the tops of their heads before kissing Voula on the lips and pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Mina’s father never wore a sweater with fewer than five pockets, he never spent money on extra things (his wallet was just an elastic band wrapped around his bank cards), and he always told his family that he was proud of them. Yiannis pulled out his phone, opened the camera app, and held it up over his head. “Let’s get a family selfie.” Everyone groaned but leaned in for the photo. He had a whole album on his phone dedicated to family selfies that featured his forehead in the front with the rest of the family scattered in the background.

At last, the whole family sat down to eat. Mina looked at the delicious spread on the table: sliced fruit, toast, a bowl of hard-boiled eggs, and feta cheese. She filled her plate and began eating. Her mother sat down beside her and swiped a piece of bread off Mina’s plate. Before Mina could protest, her mother’s phone rang.

It was louder than an ambulance driving through the middle of their living room.

Voula answered the phone and launched into a conversation in Greek. Mina continued to eat, defiantly taking another piece of bread and slathering it with jam. She could tell that her aunt, Thea Georgia, was on the other end of the call. She heard her sister's name and assumed they were talking about her recent acceptance into medical school.

But who knows? It's all Greek to me, Mina thought, literally.

She understood some of what her parents said. They had been committed to teaching their kids Greek, that is until the Greek Church changed their lessons from Wednesday nights to Friday nights, which conflicted with Alexandra's soccer practices. And once Dimitri came along they had to drive in two nights a week for level 1 and level 2 Greek courses. So by the time Mina entered the family picture, things were too hectic and they'd given up. One day she would learn, especially since she planned to travel to Greece, and

knowing the language would make it much easier to get around.

Thea Georgia and her mother were always fussing over whose kids were doing what, who was getting this award, who was accepted onto what sports team, who was going to be the first one in the family to get married, and on and on. Mina tried not to worry about it. She wasn't smart and popular like her sister or athletic and charismatic like her brother, so her name didn't come up much in those conversations.

"Your Thea wishes you good luck," her mother said when she finally hung up.

"Thanks," Mina and Dimitri said at the same time, glaring at one another.

Once breakfast was done, Mina ran upstairs to grab her purse and pick out a nice pair of black shoes to match her outfit. She looked at herself one more time in the mirror, not sure if she now hated the outfit she'd chosen earlier. She placed her hand on her stomach and squeezed. She knew she had a belly; she wasn't blind, but she didn't know why having one had

to consume so much of her thoughts. In a weird way it seemed like other people were constantly reminding her to focus on it.

Or is it just me? She turned to face the mirror again and tugged at the cropped cardigan. *Maybe I should change into a sweater that covers my stomach . . .*

“Mina, let’s go!” Dimitri called from downstairs.

Too late, she thought. Dimitri agreed to drive her to work on his way to the bank. She hated driving in his dingy little Honda Civic with the embarrassing black spoiler on the back, but it was better than taking the bus. She took one last look at her room and sighed, knowing she had a huge mess to clean up later. Then she hurried down the stairs and out the front door, where her brother was waiting for her.

On the drive over, Mina scrolled through the @LusciousLingerie Instagram account. They had over two million followers, both fashion icons and regular women. While they posted pictures and videos of the Lush Models, as they called them, and their products, they also posted photos of their employees from all

around the world. *Lushes* was the unofficial title the employees gave themselves.

“Ugh, don’t tell me you’re trying to be a TikTok star,” Dimitri spat after quickly glancing at Mina’s phone.

“No. What do you care anyway?” Mina retorted.

“I don’t, but Mom and Dad would freak.” He chuckled.

“Whatever,” Mina scoffed, “keep your eyes on the road.”

“I’m just saying, Mom and Dad expect more from you.” He shrugged and leaned back in the driver’s seat. Mina rolled her eyes. She loved her brother, but sometimes he was such an ass.