



My

MADAME

SAVVIV

MY MADAME



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To the kickass women that inspire us all

My Madame Playlist

Unchained Melody – Cyndi Lauper

Wicked Game – Janet Devlin

A Million Reasons – Lady Gaga

I'll Follow You – Shinedown

Always Remember Us This Way – Lady Gaga

Kiwi – Harry Styles

My Immortal – Evanescence

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CHAPTER ONE



Charli

WHERE. THE FUCK. Are You?

Jade?

Charli?

Seriously?

I sighed and snatched up my phone as I made round number six through my office—still felt weird to call it that—checking the board, the monitors, *everything* one last time like I'd seen my mother do before me and her mother before her, via a chisel and a rock. The memory of my smartassed, foul-mouthed grandmother made me grin. Gram had hated all this technology, trusting only pen and paper and her own eyes.

I watched one of the bartenders on the second floor short-pour an overpriced drink, glancing over his shoulder toward the camera. On the next screen, a girl in our exclusive, lower-level casino was clearly propositioning a client—and she wasn't one of mine. I snapped a quick photo with my phone. Sometimes there was something to be said for the old ways. Stopping in front of the giant windows that overlooked all three floors of sin and debauchery below me like some paranoid all-seeing eye, I addressed my friend Vi's sweet and delicate texts.

Me: Coming. Fix me a drink. 15 mins tops.

Vi: Lies.

“Fuck, be patient,” I muttered under my breath, backing up two steps away from those windows. Away from the judging eyes below—

“Excuse me?”

I whirled around, automatically stiffening, raising my chin, glazing my thoughts over as I crossed my arms.

Channeling my mother.

I cleared my throat as that thought made me feel stabby.

“What can I do for you, Cherry?”

The stunning redhead in front of me was flawless. Statuesque in Louboutin heels, a deep-purple silk dress poured around her curves like she was sewn into it, and her hair twisted up in a perfect chignon I’d never be able to duplicate. Looking at me with eyes so sharp, I felt the edges. It took everything I had not to check my hair or smooth something.

You stand up straight and cower to no one, Charli Vaughn.

Gram’s words whispered in my head. Words I’d heard from the day I was born. Camille Vaughn started it all, right here in Las Vegas, with the help of a certain blue-eyed Rat Pack crooner—or so was the rumor. She and my mother, Chanel, collectively created an empire over the course of nearly sixty years, and I was the one who’d strayed. Most parents try to keep their daughters away from the things that go on here. The things promised here for the right price. My family designed, dressed, and draped those things instead, wrapping them up in irresistible beauty. The gorgeously seductive, sensual, and sexually driven world that was Cameo.

You’re a Vaughn. You have to forget the past. You have to take charge now.

Those words were a lot more recent and threatened to burn behind my eyes. I curled my nails into my palms to keep my hands still.

Do you hear me, Charli?

I hear you, Gram.

“The app is down again,” Cherry said, her voice fluid and velvety. Classy. No one would ever guess her profession. “Paisley and I have an appointment at the Luxor, and we can’t sign out.” One perfectly arched brow rose. “The rule is—”

“Never leave the house without two points of notification,” I finished for her, angling my head slightly. “I’m aware.”

God, was I aware. I probably could have listed all the house rules and protocols, in alphabetical order, before I learned multiplication tables.

“So, how should I proceed?” Cherry asked, impeccably manicured fingers smoothing her fitted dress, her only tell that she’d been slightly hand-slapped. “We don’t feel safe without the app. I’ve let Bailey know, but I couldn’t find Jonathan.”

“You rang?”

My assistant, Jonathan Tucker, breezed around Cherry as if she were just an inconveniently placed mannequin standing in his way. I loved him for that.

Jonathan was almost as new to the office as I was, but he had adapted much quicker. Where I had grown up here at the feet of my mother and Gram, and knew every possible nook and cranny and hidey-hole of the place, being up here in this office every day, running things—*all* the things—was not my comfort zone. Jonathan, on the other hand, had only been here five months, and he was indispensable.

He showed up after one of the darkest times of my life—after the horrific car accident that took my mom and Gram and left me with only a broken finger but a legacy to uphold. If that wasn’t enough, Amy—my mother’s assistant and my oldest friend other than Jade—left suddenly, just weeks later, to be with her family. Not only was I suddenly in the hot seat, in charge of the one thing I never wanted, but I had no direction and was down one friend.

Jonathan was my saving grace, had mad administrative skills, and took shit off no one. Kind of like Gram used to be,

but with a nice ass and blonde scruff that made him look sweet.

“The app isn’t working again,” I said. “Can you call the programmer and tell him to get it up to one hundred percent, or we’ll go with someone else?”

Jonathan’s eyes narrowed. “Do you have someone else?”

My phone buzzed again, and I glanced down at Vi’s accusing finger-pointing emojis. She knew me. She knew I’d take care of fifteen other things before actually walking out the door. “No, but *you* will in the next twenty-four hours,” I said. “And tell him twelve. Because it does us no good if we can’t trust it, and we need to track our escorts.”

“On it,” he said. “Cherry, love, text me the details—well, not the *details*,” he added as that brow of hers lifted again. “But you know what I mean. I’ll update the site myself with your checkout.”

“Thank you,” Cherry said. To him—not to me—as she sauntered out of the room.

I closed my eyes. “They have no respect for me.”

“Yes, they do,” he said, distracted, as he tapped into an iPad.

“Seriously, they don’t,” I said, frustrated, my feet carrying me to my bookshelf where the two women who *had* held power here gazed back at me from a photograph.

It was taken last year when Gram, Mom, and I had relaxed for a rare personal moment at Chez Paris right after I got the management position there. We were outside on the patio and laughing, and our waitress captured the moment. We looked like three versions of the same person, with our icy blue eyes and different varieties of bloneness. Gram’s was mostly silver by then, and Mom’s was still spun gold, mine a mix of my normal caramel color with highlights. We might have had the same genes running through our veins, but we couldn’t have been more different women.

“I get it,” I continued. “I may have the name, but I left. I’m an outsider as far as they’re concerned.”

“So, do something about it,” Jonathan said.

I turned on my heel. “What?”

He looked up from his iPad with a weary sigh as if I just wore him the hell out. “Okay, permission to speak freely? You want the ugly version?”

“Please,” I said, crossing my arms again.

“You’re right,” he said. “You’re a Vaughn, but you haven’t earned it.”

“Excuse me?”

“In their eyes,” he said, holding up a hand. “You wanted ugly.”

I exhaled slowly and blinked a couple of times. “Keep going.”

“You’re the heiress to the kingdom, Charli,” Jonathan said, setting down his pad and strolling closer to me. “But you’re also the daughter that shunned said kingdom because you were too proper to do what they do. Be what they are.”

My arms came down, fists clenched. “I never said—”

“I *know*.” Jonathan’s hands gripped my fists, opening them. “I know. I’m just telling you what they think. You never walked in their shoes, love. You stepped away. Did something else. But now you’ve been handed the magic wand without earning your stripes, and they are probably a little resentful. Wary. Like gypsies that only trust their own kind, or cops, or—the Kanes.”

My stomach twinged on the name, and I pulled free of him and the words before anything could show on my face. “You’re comparing them to cops and gypsies?” I said, pretending to look for my purse.

“Okay, we’ll stick with those two,” he said under his breath.

“So, they’ll never trust me because I’m not one of them,” I said. “That’s what you’re saying.”

“Unless you change that,” he said, tilting his head.

A laugh bubbled out of my throat. “You’re suggesting—”

He held up a finger and touched his Bluetooth earpiece as he got a call. “Got it.” Looking back at me, he smiled. “Drop-in VIPs in the red room tonight. Senator Stevens and his posse asking for Sasha and Jezzi.”

I nodded. “They’re the best. Are they leaving the premises?”

He lifted his chin. “If they do, I’ll make sure it’s paid online first and sign them out. Don’t worry.”

“I do worry,” I said, rubbing my neck. “It’s like having thirty children to take care of, and when the system fails—”

“I’ve got it, Mama Vaughn,” he said.

I frowned, hearing that echo through the walls. That was Gram’s nickname. She loved it. She embraced it. I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t call me that.”

“Also, we have Kanes in the house.”

My jaw clenched. “Of course, we do.”

I refused to ask who. To Jonathan, it wouldn’t matter. The Kanes were the other side of Cameo. The muscle. The protection. The money. From the beginning of time—or our time, anyway. A Kane coming into the house meant he had business there. Business that probably wasn’t on the books. Once upon a time, a certain tall, dark, and incredibly sexy Kane in the house meant he was there for me, but that was many, many moons ago. I felt my heart rate speed up, and I flexed my fingers to shake it off. *Seriously?* I hadn’t seen his face since the funeral, and after all these damn years, thinking of those dark, broody eyes and the mountain of muscle moving through the building somewhere nearby—damn it, it was crazy that he could still do that to me.

“Anyway,” Jonathan said, shaking his head. “Back to what we were talking about.”

What were we talking about?

“I’m not suggesting you jump in, no,” he said, bringing me back. “You couldn’t be a dancer, love. You have the body, but you’re too stiff,” he said with a wink. “Your ass would stop the hearts of any man down there, but I’m afraid you’d break your neck on a pole.”

I chuckled. Actually, I’d learned how to pole dance when I was seventeen, when I begged an expert named Phoebe to teach me so that I could drive that certain hard-bodied Kane insane with need. He’d stayed out of my pants till then, but that night drove him over the edge.

I couldn’t do the upper acrobats now, but I could hold my own on the floor if I needed the money. Hopefully, I never would.

“You’re probably right,” I agreed.

“And I don’t see you ever having the courage to take an escort appointment.”

My gaze flew to his, landing hard as my blood went hot. “You have no idea what courage I have.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Free speech time is over,” I said, resisting the urge to fan my silk camisole against the sudden heat.

“Charli.”

The *Miss Vaughn* retort was right there, full of acid, but the memory of my mother’s face while saying that so many times stopped me before it fell out. “Jonathan,” I said instead, slowly, feeling each letter on my tongue. “Thank you. You’re being a friend, but you don’t know everything.”

So many everythings. So many reasons I only came by for short visits. That I largely avoided anything longer than lunch even though I was only minutes away. That I kept to my small

circle of longtime friends, and a respectable distance from anything Cameo or Vaughn or—Kane.

He held up his hands. “No, I don’t,” he said. “I’m sorry that I made assumptions. But that’s my point. They do the same thing.”

His meaning sunk into my bones. “So, I need to . . . *what?* Invite them all to Vi’s house tonight for our monthly girls’ night? That’s my sanity check, Jonathan. Violet and Jade and—well, it used to be Amy, too—we have years together.” I gestured at my tailored suit that left little to the imagination. “There’s no pretense or fancy clothes or makeup. It’s cookie dough and yoga pants and alcohol.”

As if on cue, my phone buzzed in my pocket. Jade was probably there by now, and they were both cursing me.

“Just don’t be so distant,” he said, turning to pick up his iPad. “Don’t take the elevator out. Take the big stairs. Talk to more than just Vi and Jade. Walk among them. Ask about their days. Their lives. Be present. They have scandalous, even scary jobs sometimes. Find out what makes them tick and keeps them up at night.”

“And you know these things?” I asked, blowing out a tired breath.

He winked. “It’s my job to know these things. My grandmother, Gigi, taught me to be thorough.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, thinking about the redhead who exuded confidence. “So, Cherry?”

Jonathan looked up from his tablet. “Is very OCD and meticulous about her appearance. Did you know it takes that woman over two and a half hours to get ready before an appointment? Some would call that vanity. She calls it necessary.” He shrugged. “I don’t care. As long as the clients are happy, I call it business.”

I had to chuckle. “You’re indispensable, you know that?”

“Gigi taught me that, too.” He held up a finger as he looked down. “Don’t forget you and Bailey are interviewing a new singer for Sizzle tomorrow. Seriously, the girl has emailed me twice to confirm. And you need to decide yay or nay on adding the male revue one night a week.”

“Stairs, walk, talk, be present, singer,” I said on a sigh, leaving. “Got it.”

“And the guys?” he called after me.

“Yes,” I said. “Hell, yes. All the ladies can join me for the auditions, and we can bond over it.”

“There you go.”

Walking down one of the huge winding staircases into the plush golds and pearls and earthy glow of Cameo always felt like something from *Gone With The Wind*—if Tara had been a gentlemen’s club. This particular evening felt different. Like an experiment. Being *present*.

Okay, fine. I’d be present. Instead of attempting to parody my mother and pull off the Chanel Vaughn iciness, I made eye contact. Focused on softer body language. Embraced my femininity and let things sway as I descended, smiling at the ladies behind the giant silhouette screens as I left the third floor. Gave a thumbs-up to Lily, an escort who also still danced on occasion and was an amazing acrobat on a pole from two stories off the stage, performing for faces she couldn’t see behind highly private VIP rooms with one-way windows. The rotating warm lighting glowed on her, while dimming elsewhere, giving the entire room an ethereal ambiance. People everywhere were talking, drinking, enjoying the sexy views, and tasting delicious samples of gourmet appetizers from our Oral Treats bar and the steakhouse in the back, Sizzle. All offered with a smile from beautiful, scantily clad waitresses with cameo pendant chokers gracing their throats.

Beautiful, carefree people lounged about Cameo, enjoying a beautiful feast of the senses. I slowed to observe two more

dancers performing on the newly installed, hydraulic first-floor stages that rose and sunk into a hidden floor. The ladies were sparkling with body glitter and mesmerizing a group of nearby businessmen who were torn between that show and a popular blonde bombshell named KK giving a seductive, private lap dance several feet away.

KK had a slow, circular twerk going on for a guy who looked entranced. He was running his hands along her ass and up to palm her tits while she swooped slowly up his body and pretended to fuck him in slow motion. She winked at me as I passed, and I chuckled.

Okay, maybe they didn't *all* hate me.

I stopped at the hostess counter.

"Alicia, have security escort someone from the casino, please," I said softly, showing her the photo I'd snapped. "Gold sequined dress, dark hair, gold barrette on one side. Do it quietly. If she's with a client, escort them both."

"Yes, ma'am," she said. "What if they make a fuss?"

"Page Jonathan and call the police," I said, letting a smile tug at my lips. "Of course, we don't allow solicitation here."

Alicia smirked. "Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, and who's bartending upstairs tonight? Stage left?"

She consulted her tablet. "That would be Denton."

I nodded. I'd deal with him later. Right now, I had a soft couch and a crackling fire and girlfriends with no judgment calling my name. My phone buzzed again, this time a call, and I hit the accept button.

"I'm on my way," I said, heading back into the showroom to take the back door out to my car. I'd done it; I'd made eye contact and was present, and I felt better about things. *I could fucking do this.* "You two go ahead, get your drink on."

"It's just me here," Vi said. "And I did. Hell, I'm going to be drunk before anyone gets here at this rate."

“Jade’s not there yet?” I asked. “She told me she was getting off early tonight. Lily’s dancing for her.”

“No, and I’m spending my night off alone, girl,” Vi said. “Not cool.”

“Oh, relax,” I said. “I’ll be there in a few.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t *hmm* me,” I said with a low laugh. “I’ll—”

My words died on my tongue as a larger than life figure I’d always and forever know in my soul suddenly emerged from the Sizzle entryway, nearly colliding with me.

Dark, brooding, nearly black eyes.

An even darker, dangerous aura.

A hard body even his expensive black-on-black suit couldn’t disguise.

I hadn’t seen him in six months, since he’d sat at the back of the church with the other mafia royalty, behind strippers and hookers and clients of all kinds that were brave enough to show their faces and pay their respects. While I sat between two caskets and cried and grieved and felt my whole life disappear.

There was a time when we wouldn’t have avoided each other like that, when he *wasn’t* larger than life and flanked by hired guns. When we would have stolen any possible second to get our hands on each other, and one look across the room set our blood on fire.

Those days were long gone, thanks to him.

I lifted my chin, meeting his dark gaze, and mentally kicked myself for noticing that his once unruly, dark curls were now cropped into short, respectable waves. “Gotta go,” I mumbled to Vi under my breath.

“Miss Vaughn,” he said, his eyes following my hand as I dropped it to my side.

A sweet voice crooning a melody inside the restaurant drifted to my ears before the door closed on it. Somehow, the sound framed him.

“Gideon.”

There was a moment—less than a split-second moment of time—where our gazes locked, and we knew who we were. Where the fact that all my extremities went numb made perfect sense. Back before being a Kane and a Vaughn and his being a supreme prick changed that.

Then, the blood-stopping scream behind me stole my breath.

CHAPTER TWO



Gideon

GIDEON. SHE CALLED me fucking Gideon. The only person on the planet, other than family, who had the guts to call me anything other than Mr. Fucking Kane.

History or not, it goddamned grated for reasons I would not explore, not when all I could focus on was her soft curves right in front of me and the way her full, sexy lips wrapped around the syllables and how they used to wrap around—

All the blood drained from her face and knocked me back to my senses when a blood-curdling scream ricocheted through the air. On instinct, I stepped between Charli and the crowd, and shot my man, Chris, a glance.

“Watch her.”

He nodded once, and I shot off like a bullet, my enforcer, JD, by my side as always. We headed straight toward the fray of tittering people and screeching women, and someone called my name as I shoved my way through the crowd, but I ignored it as JD and I bulldozed our way through, along with a couple of my other men.

Then, just as I burst through the line, a small hand yanked mine. I glanced back.

Charli.

With Chris right behind her, panting, as he caught up.

God. Fucking. Damn. It.

She'd managed to get past him then outrun him in her tight little suit and too-high heels and was staring up at me with those impossibly blue eyes that had once upon a time made me promise her the world—the world I shattered for us both.

“Let me through, Gideon,” she said, those eyes flashing.

“Holy Christ,” Jarod, another of my guys, said, disgust lacing his voice. “Mr. Kane.”

JD's eyes met mine. He shook his head silently, indicating whatever it was, it was bad. Really fucking bad.

Charli took that moment to dart around me to see for herself.

“Don't—” I tried to warn her, but it was too late. I spun and braced myself. “Fuck.”

A woman's violated, butchered corpse was on display for all to see, splayed out, half-nude like a bloody doll on one of the hydraulic dance floors in the center of the room. Evidently, it had been hidden from view until the lift had been activated for the upcoming performance.

It was one of the dancers, but not just any dancer.

It was Jade.

Charli's best friend.

I immediately shifted my attention to Charli. It was obvious that she was about to break but trying valiantly to hold it back in front of a room full of people as tears quivered in her eyes and began to spill down her cheeks, over the shaking hand that covered her mouth. Maybe only someone as in tune to her as I was, or at least I used to be, would've noticed the fine tremor that was beginning to take over her entire body.

I looked to Chris again. “Get her out of here. She doesn't need to see this. And this time, don't fucking lose her.”

He tipped his head in chagrined acknowledgement and approached her like she was a wild animal about to bolt.

She glanced up at Chris, dazed, like she didn't recognize him at first, then let him lead her away to a dark corner seating area. She couldn't see the mess from there, but I could see her, which made me more thankful than I cared to admit.

I caught JD's eye and tilted my head toward Jade's lifeless body. He understood immediately and gathered up a few more of the guys, and they created a barrier around her, blocking her from the view of the gawking crowd until we could contain the situation. That was the thing with JD. He didn't speak much. Hell, he was basically mute, choosing his words very selectively, if at all. His silence was his business, and though I knew the reasons, I didn't pry into the dirty details. At the end of the day, he did his job, he did it well, and he didn't ask questions. And the fact that he was big as fuck and intimidated by nothing and no one, well, that didn't hurt.

The bouncers and I cleared out the immediate vicinity, then, knowing it was inevitable, I called the cops. Yes, we kept Cameo squeaky clean, legally speaking, with no trace of anything that could take us down, but still, the less badges around, the better, as far as I was concerned.

I caught Bailey's eye as she hovered in the doorway of Sizzle. She tipped her head to me, silently acknowledging that she understood my hesitance, but that she took care of any books or correspondence that might be lying around.

I nodded back. The Kane family ran a very lucrative liquor distributorship that supplied not only Cameo Gentlemen's Club, but several other high-end clubs all over Las Vegas. We made a nice, above-board profit selling alcohol and doing it legally. We made an absolute killing by selling guns, ammunition, and most importantly, manufacturing and machining after-market gun parts like suppressors and bump stocks totally off the grid. There's no money like gun money, and the Kane family had been rolling in it for decades. But I ran the show now, thanks to an ill-fated heart attack that had my father in early retirement.

“Mr. Kane?” One of Charli’s dancers approached me nervously, her silk wrap barely covering her breasts. “The police are here.”

I nodded. “Okay. Show them the way.”

A group of uniforms led by a couple of polyester suits that screamed *cop* headed in. The guy obviously in charge had the nicest suit, a beard that needed a trim, and hair too long for regular police. He offered me his hand, sensing I was a person of authority I supposed. “Detective Lucas Broussard. Homicide.”

“Gideon Kane.”

His dark eyes flared at my name, clearly placing who I was as he immediately began to take me in, assessing me in one quick sweep.

I did not flinch.

“You’re affiliated with Cameo,” he said, his voice slow and meticulous, coated with a slight Louisiana drawl. It was a statement, rather than a question.

“Kane Enterprises is the alcohol distributor and security,” I said. “But the owner, Charlotte Vaughn, is an old friend of mine.” I indicated Charli in the corner. “And the victim is a mutual friend.”

The detective’s face immediately softened. “Oh. I see. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks.”

Behind him, the uniforms and a CSI crew began to buzz around like busy ants, processing the scene and questioning people. It dawned on me how garish Cameo looked just then. The normally exquisite sensuality that filled every possible space and put your senses on overload now felt like a carnival ride that had malfunctioned. The lights were too bright, the sounds too loud. The big cameo pendant-like design between the stairways that usually lent an elegance now looked cheesy.

It just felt . . . wrong. What was once beautiful was so terribly ugly.

Oblivious, Charli's pansy-ass assistant came bounding down one of the grand staircases, phone in hand, mid-text. He froze mid-step at the bright lights and lack of music, his gaze darting over the crowd of people so obviously not the norm for Cameo. Then he spotted Jade. I almost felt sorry for him when it looked like he either wanted to shit his overly pressed Chinos or puke right there on the stairs.

His eyes met mine for one solid second, then he searched the area frantically until he spotted Charli across the room looking like she was directing traffic. She had people going off in different directions, her face drawn into an intense frown as she gave orders. Her caramel-colored hair was falling loose in places, making her look more vulnerable than she probably wanted to. At least to me. Of course, she couldn't just stay in one place and be quiet—she wouldn't be Charli Vaughn if she did. Her assistant reached her and crushed her into a bear hug that she almost looked like she wanted to wilt into.

Once upon a time, I was the one she wanted to hold her when times were dark. I was the one who knew what her hair smelled like and what stupid thing to say to make her feel better.

I spun away.

It wasn't once upon a time anymore.



IT WAS NEARLY dawn before the police finished their work at the crime scene and got Jade's body out of Cameo. While they were busy, I went to the bar to call my brother and second-in-command, Marcus, to update him on what had happened.

"Should we call Dad?" he asked.

"No. Why?" I barked.

"Because he's Dad," he barked back. "He may be retired, but he's still a Kane."

I took a breath to hold back my bite. I was goddamned exhausted, and it served me no good to bite off my brother's head. "I know that, but there's nothing he can do. It's been taken care of. I'll call him later." I would also give Marcus's twin and our head of finances, Phillip, a courtesy call just in case there was any blowback to the Kane books.

"Yeah, okay. What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing right now. Business as usual. Just wanted you to be aware. I'll keep you updated."

"Sounds good. Get some rest, brother."

"Maybe."

He huffed out a laugh, and we hung up. I was beyond tired, but my mind was spinning. Who the hell would do such a thing inside of Cameo? Surely, they knew this place was wired to the hilt with security and that the Kane family served as protectors and enforcers. Did they have a death wish?

One answer screamed out to me above all others—the motherfucking Petrovs. Things had been heating up between us and the Petrov family for months now, including us eliminating a certain Roman Petrov just a couple of weeks ago after he was caught trying to steal a shipment of suppressors and ammunition that was headed for the border. Something like that could've killed our dealings with the Cubans, and he had to die. It was business, pure and simple. We didn't even torture the poor bastard, though I knew JD was chomping at the bit after Roman hurled some particularly colorful insults his way about his mother.

Still, I thought after meeting with their leader, Josef, it was done.

Maybe not.

But why Jade? Why like this?

I raked a hand down my face, recalling the sweet girl with big brown eyes that used to joke with me and Charli about

being the Prince and Princess of Cameo back when things were uncomplicated—back when we were in love.

Someone cleared their throat behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to face JD.

“They’re finally finished?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Good.” I spun my glass on the bar. “Are all the other girls accounted for and safe?”

Again, he nodded.

Relieved, I sighed. “Good. That’s good.”

My phone buzzed on the bar with a text. I lifted it with a weary hand.

***Chris:** Miss Vaughn is refusing to let me take her home. She’s pissed off. Says she has work to do and doesn’t need a babysitter. Told me to go fuck myself when I said you insisted.*

I rolled my neck and bit back a curse. Typical Charli. Wouldn’t let anyone take care of her, especially me. Couldn’t she see I was trying to do my job and protect her ass?

I felt JD hovering behind me, waiting for further instructions, as I texted back.

***Me:** OK. Tell her goodnight and head home. I’ll take care of it.*

***Chris:** You sure?*

***Me:** I’m sure. Thank you.*

***Chris:** Yes, sir.*

I set my phone down and picked up the crystal tumbler of whiskey, studying the amber liquid before tipping it back and carefully placing it back on the mahogany bar. “Make sure she gets home safely,” I spoke to JD behind me. “And make sure she doesn’t know you’re there, same as always.”

I refilled my glass as I felt him go. I might be going to hell, but at least I could sleep soundly, knowing she was safe in her

castle tonight.

CHAPTER THREE



Charli

THE SOUND OF my breathing, in and out. That was all I heard once I saw her. No music. No screams. No Gideon. No anything. It was like everything stopped and picked up again at some later point when people with badges mixed with scowls and dark suits began to ask me pointless questions.

I didn't have answers.

I didn't even have words.

Until Vi showed up, shoving her way in and nearly getting arrested in the process, tears streaming down her face in resolute horror and anger, I was numb. Not even Jonathan, who held and petted me and kept looking into my face like I'd fallen down a well, had any sound.

Vi did.

She woke up the noise.

A million questions, photos, and hours later, after everything had long been shut down and employees sent home with security escorts, after Jonathan took off to do damage control and ensure our VIP senator was discreetly out of the building, after copies of footage from every possible angle had been given to the badges and a Detective Broussard with kind eyes that appeared to note everything, including the napkins on the tables, I finally took the stairs back up to my office.

It felt like a lifetime since I'd descended them.

And I knew damn good and well who was watching.

Let him.

Mr. Fucking Kane. Let him watch. Mr. Fucking Kane who swooped in and handled everything tonight like he was king, who was supposed to make sure Cameo was protected and safe and beyond all reproach, in exchange for all the unmentionables they'd done here since Gram made a deal with the devil.

And for what?

Jade died on their watch.

On mine.

Tears caught in my throat and burned my raw eyes as I hit the office light switch and gazed down from my ugly-ass window, just realizing that—that I'd been up here in this horrible overwatch office, doing mindless paperwork and watching the clock while Jade was experiencing her worst possible nightmare.

I couldn't look away from it. She wasn't there anymore, but that spot—that fucking spot—it would never, *ever* not be where Jade died. Where she was butchered and left horribly blood-soaked and mangled, her eyes staring, unseeing, at the ceiling in perpetual terror. She died afraid.

“What do we do now?” Vi asked from behind me, making me jump. I'd already forgotten she'd walked up with me. Her pretty face, free of makeup and all the accoutrements she normally wore as an escort, was red and tear-streaked, her bright-blue eyes swollen like mine. “Are you going to open tomorrow?” She glanced at a giant clock on the far wall. “Today?”

I just shook my head. “No idea,” I whispered, my voice gravelly and hoarse from crying. “I can't think. Probably not. Hell, maybe not ever.”

I couldn't imagine watching anyone dance on that stage again. Clients sure as hell wouldn't want their names attached to it. Cameo had survived a lot of things, but a murder?

“I can’t believe this,” she said, sinking onto the couch, wiping at her face. She pulled her ponytail down and yanked it back up again, securing it tighter. “Who would want to hurt Jade? Why?”

I shut my eyes hard. “And how?” I whispered. “With our security, how did anyone get in here with a knife and then get downstairs?” I took a deep breath and listened to it leave as another, happier yet bittersweet, memory came back to me. “Did I ever tell you how Jade and I became friends?”

She buried her face in her hands. “Something about balls and castration?”

I smirked, fresh tears spilling over my cheeks. “Fifth grade. She kneed Stefan Bradshire in the balls for grabbing my crotch and stealing my lunch money in the middle of the cafeteria. His dad had told him the Vaughn women were all whores, so he was checking for himself. I spent most of my time trying to be invisible, so that was pretty much the most mortifying thing I’d ever experienced at that point.”

“Prick,” Vi muttered.

“Jade was quiet, too, but in a badass way,” I continued. “Nothing like me. She—she had a hard childhood. She had to learn to be vigilant and alert, but she was still the kindest—” My words threatened to choke me. “—the most amazing person I’ve ever known.” I blinked two more tears free. “Anyway, she had never even spoken to me before that, but she appeared out of fucking nowhere and took my money back, brought him to the fetal position, and told him she’d chop it off next time.” I cleared my throat. “Then she told him only pussies had names like Stefan.”

Vi laughed through her tears. “It is a pussy name.”

“Fifth grade,” I said, shaking my head slowly. “We looked out for each other ever since.” My eyes fluttered closed as my stomach threatened to rebel. “Until tonight.”

“Hey,” Vi said, her kick-some-ass tone coming back as she rose to her feet. “Charli, this isn’t on you.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Fuck no, it’s not,” she shot back.

“It’s my business now,” I said quietly, hearing the tremor coming back into my voice. The one that had taken root in my core. “My employees, you, Jade, everyone—it’s my responsibility to keep you safe.”

“You aren’t God, Charli,” she said, grabbing my arms. Vi was a compact little package, but she had a powerful presence, and at that moment, the fire in her eyes could have fueled the city. “You can’t control everything. What you *can* do now is tell Jonathan to check on clients and call the press and spin for sympathy instead of fear, close Cameo for a day or two, and find the motherfucker who did this.” Her chin trembled, and angry emotion spilled over her dark lashes. “And have him gutted like he did her.”

Leave it to Vi to think on her feet.

“You can count on it,” I whispered through my teeth.

“Speaking of motherfuckers,” she said, swiping under her eyes. “Did *Mr. Kane* ever leave? And where *is* Jonathan?”

Vi hadn’t cared much for Jonathan since he came. Said anyone with scruff that soft-looking couldn’t be trusted. I couldn’t care less what texture his body hair came in; he was an organizational beast. And if I was honest, he wasn’t a big fan of hers, either.

As for *Mr. Kane* . . .

“I sent Jonathan to take care of some things,” I said. “I don’t know where Gideon is.”

It was an outright lie, and she knew it. She knew my history with him, and how much I avoided him, but both of us were too exhausted to push it.

Violet Reed and I had hit it off the second I came back to town, bonding over the marvels of a vanilla espresso at a coffee shop off of Harmon. She asked what I did for a living. I told her I managed a five-star restaurant in Green Valley. She

told me she did odd jobs and also hooked to make ends meet. I'd never been so blown away by someone's honesty before, and she didn't even know who she was telling. I remedied that, and the rest was history.

Vi, Jade, and Amy—they were my only friends. One by one they were disappearing. I was almost afraid to let her go home, but one of us needed to sleep. Things were about to get crazy, and I felt guilty for worrying about it, but I prayed that business wouldn't suffer for this. Or that it didn't spur copycats. My ladies needed to pay their bills just like anyone else, and if we were blackballed, it could be catastrophic. Girls like Vi would have to hit the streets again, and that thought made my skin crawl.

“Why don't you go home, Vi,” I said, rubbing at my eyes. They felt like the Sahara had blown in. “Try to sleep. I'll call you later. Get Gideon's dogs off me and have one of them follow you home.”

“I won't argue that,” she said, wrapping her arms around my neck.

Emotion burned behind my eyes again as images of Jade laughing mixed with the one of her lifeless body assailed my brain. I breathed in Vi's sweet smell and prayed that she'd stay safe. “Be vigilant and alert and—”

“I know,” she said, pulling back and swiping at her own eyes. “Trust no one. Promise.” She squeezed my hand. “You either.”

I laughed bitterly. “Never.”

She left, and I stood watching the monitors with the remote, flipping back to the earlier timestamp we'd already covered twice.

Nothing. Fucking *nothing*.

Glancing around me at pictures of my family, at photos of former employees all through the years as they smiled and laughed and existed perfectly fine under the leadership of Gram and my mother. Why Jade? Why here?

I began to pace the office, wielding the remote like a weapon, finally letting the rage and pain and horror flood over me. Why the fuck did they have to go and leave this all to me? Anger flashed through me, hot and fast, sending my heart pounding into overdrive. I was a goddamned restaurant manager, not a club owner. Certainly not a madame.

I left here for a reason all those years ago. I left heartsick and broken, not knowing where I was going or for how long, only that I needed to be somewhere else. Somewhere that neither Cameo nor Gideon Kane could reach.

My mother had always been hardcore about me taking over the business like she did, but Gram always understood my desire to do something else.

Not a place for family, she told me once when I told her that Gideon and I were making long-term plans. We'd been dating in secret for almost two years since there were obvious work strings between our families to complicate matters. *This is not a place to make plans like that.*

What am I, a puppy? I'd countered. *You had Mom. She had me. We're fine.*

We were the only family she had. She'd had a twin sister, Georgia, that she was estranged from decades earlier, and Gram never spoke of her. It was as if the very thought of family outside of me and my mother was painful.

This place—it will break ties like that, she'd said. *If that's what you want, you need to leave.*

It was one of the few times I ever saw Gram look sad.

And, a week later, it didn't matter.

Because the prick downstairs calling me *Miss Vaughn* now, with the thousand-dollar suit and eyes hard enough to liquefy steel decided, even back then at the age of twenty-one, that I wasn't worth his time. Nineteen may have been stupidly young, but passion like that—*love* like that—had never come again. He'd broken something in me. I had relationships and lovers over the years, but nothing had ever claimed my heart

like he had. And never would, I suspected. I'd given my whole heart, and he'd walked away and screwed someone else with it.

Fuck him.

I whirled around at the stupid, useless monitors, showing me nothing, and suddenly the professional mask I'd had to wear downstairs was choking me. I wanted to scream, to rage, to break something and feel it bleed.

"Fuck all of them!" I spat, picking up a nearby vase.

I swung for the nearest monitor, my aim stopped short by a band of heat wrapped around my wrist. I sucked in a breath, fear and rage battling in my chest as I spun around. Straight into the wall of muscle that was Mr. Fucking Kane.

"What are you doing up here?" I hissed, his nearness sending all my nerve endings into a frenzy of high alert.

Foreign and familiar hit me at the same time, as the body I once knew so well loomed so close. The face I used to touch, those impossibly sexy lips I used to kiss.

The eyes, though.

They'd never be the same again.

"Stopping you from destroying assets, it appears," he shot back, his tone equally dark, his eyes fiery. "Why are you still here?"

"I own the place," I said. "Why are you?"

"I protect it."

A bitter laugh threatened to choke me. "That's rich," I breathed. "Where were you tonight?"

"That's not fair, Charli," he said through his teeth.

A real laugh bubbled up that time, and I yanked free of his grip, instantly feeling the loss and hating myself for it.

"Oh, I'm *Charli* now, am I?" I said, poking him in the chest with a grin and relishing the sparks that shot through his

eyes. “You remembered.” I replaced my smile with a sneer. “I’m fucking touched.”

“She was my friend once upon a time, too,” he said, grabbing my hand roughly as I poked him again.

“Don’t,” I choked, feeling tears prick at my eyes again. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to play that card.”

“I’m going to find who did this,” he said, leaning closer, his head dangerously close to mine.

“Do you know that she was here at Cameo because of *me*?” I said, feeling the hot tears spill over and not caring. The guilt was drowning me. “She came with me after you fucked me over.” I pushed back against the wall of Gideon that didn’t budge. “She tried college because *I* was there. She came back here because Camille and Chanel Vaughn were the closest things to mothers she’d ever had, and *Mama Vaughn* made her feel safe.” I pushed my face so close to his, I could feel his breathing quicken against my skin, his heat pouring over me. “*Safe*,” I hissed, my voice breaking, my breath hitching.

“Charli.” The word was a warning, heavy and gritty. Laced with anger and passion and everything I should run from.

Too bad for him I stopped running a long time ago.

“Fuck you,” I whispered.

I was off my feet before I could register that I’d moved.

CHAPTER FOUR



Gideon

I PICKED HER up, and in two big paces, I had her back pressed to the huge floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked her kingdom below. It was empty and pale, much like my life had been since I pushed her away all those years ago.

Her nails dug into my neck as her dress hiked around her thighs, her breath fanning hot against my throat. I shoved her harder against the glass with my body, then grabbed both of her wrists in one hand and yanked them above her head.

“No. Fuck *you*, Miss Vaughn.”

She should have just gone home like a good little girl, and JD could have made sure she was safe, so I’d be safe from this raging need for her that had been licking through my veins, eating me alive for weeks. There was a reason I’d stayed away, damn it. No, instead, she’d insisted on staying for the duration, which meant I couldn’t fucking walk out that door either. And now, here we were.

I sunk into a savage kiss, not bothering with any of the niceties I might have once upon a time. I raked my teeth and tongue across her like a man starving, because that’s exactly what I was. What I had been since the moment she spun back into my orbit the day her mother and grandmother died.

She fought being pinned, bucking like a hellcat on fire and nearly biting my tongue in two, but I kept up my assault, intoxicated with the taste of her after all this time apart. I

moved to her cheeks, tasting the salt of her tears. Her eyes. Her jaw. Her throat.

Lust and pure animal need roared through my system like a livewire. I typically prided myself on being the one in control, a man of restraint. With Charli, it was nearly impossible. It always had been.

Her fighting became writhing. Her curses, moans as we found our old rhythm. It was like we'd lost no time. Our heartbeats found their echo.

I released her wrists and cupped her round hips, tracked down her thighs, drawing her skirt up to feel thong and bare flesh. God, her skin was still impossibly soft, like fucking velvet. I traced a fingertip around to find her bare and already wet and needy for me, but I pulled back, even as she pressed forward, her breath catching as she sought more.

I drew back, and her eyes fluttered open, showing me entirely too much, though I knew she never intended to. Not my Charli.

My Charli?

Fuck, this woman was going to be the death of me.

Or I would be the death of her.

Either way, we were going down in flames. It had probably been inevitable since the moment we met when we were kids, our families forging our futures without our consent.

Even then, however, I'd known there was something special about Miss Charlotte Vaughn with those wide, icy blue eyes and innocent smile that spoke of a million pretty promises.

Promises I was too tainted to deserve.

"Miss Vaughn," I murmured, bringing the fire back into her eyes.

Yes.

I needed to see that because I couldn't bear to see any more of her pain. I was suddenly desperate to wipe it away.

Slowly, I let her find her footing, then spun her around so she faced the window behind her. She averted her face, tilting it toward the ground, as if it were too much to look down at the empty club below.

I pressed my chest to her back and cupped her chin. "Look."

"No." She shook her head vehemently.

"Look," I commanded with every bit of the *Mr. Kane* authority I possessed.

"Fuck off, Gideon." She tried to pull away, but I caged her in with my arms so she was trapped.

I leaned in, my hardness against her, my erection unmistakable at her ass. "This is your kingdom, Miss Vaughn. It's your right, and I'd even insist your *duty*, to fucking *look*." I took her chin between my fingers a bit more forcefully. This time she let me move her head until we were both facing out the windows of her office to the empty club below.

I took both of her dainty hands and flattened them on the glass. "Your kingdom," I repeated. I cupped my hands over hers, engulfing them. "But I fucking protect it." I leaned down until my mouth was at her ear and lowered my voice to a growl. "I *will* fucking find who did this," I swore again. "And I *will* fucking end him." My lips brushed her throat. "And it will be *painful*." I bit her pulse point, making her breath jump. "That, I can promise you."

I already had Tony, my tech guy, looking into all of Cameo's surveillance to make sure nothing was missed or altered. I also had every one of my soldiers, as well as our allies, with their eyes and ears open for any word on the street. If this was the Petrovs, or any other street hit, I would hear about it, and justice would be served swiftly with cold, hard vengeance.

I slid my hands along her stomach, feeling the silky material of her blouse, then ripped it open in one vicious yank, sending buttons rattling all over the white marble floor.

I raised my eyes to the dim reflection in the glass and feasted my eyes on crimson lace that barely covered breasts that were bigger than I remembered.

She glared at me in the glass of the window, our eyes locked in a sort of dare. We couldn't go back to what we once had. We had no hope of a future.

What we had now was precarious at best.

I dragged a bra strap down her arm, letting one pink nipple pop free. "And *no one* will lay a hand on you," I swore, my voice gravelly. "Ever."

I thought for a moment she might tell me to go fuck myself again. Instead, after a tense moment of staring each other down, dark eyes to blue, she sucked in a breath and slowly pulled off the rest of her bra, letting it drop on my Salvatore Ferragamo Oxfords.

Challenge accepted.

I may never be her knight in shining armor, hell, I never was, but I could take some of the ugliness from her world for just one moment and assuage the beast inside of me that had been begging for another taste of her at the same time.

Win-win was what Gideon Kane was all about.

I snaked a hand up her belly and cupped a breast.

She closed her eyes and leaned back into my chest. I pinched and rolled her nipple, just the way I once knew she liked.

She groaned. Loudly.

"I'm going to make you come," I mumbled into her ear. "Then I'm going to take you home, and you're going to get some sleep. Then we're going to talk."

She opened her mouth to argue, but I squeezed her nipple harder, making her cry out in pleasure and exquisite pain. “Come. Sleep. Talk. No arguing, Miss Vaughn.”

I used my other hand to hike up her skirt and find that thong again, shoving it unceremoniously out of the way to find her wet pussy. *Fuck*. I slid two fingers along her seam, forcing a moan from her as her hips bucked against my hard-on.

“Fuck, Gideon, you don’t play fair.”

“Nope.” I licked her throat as I allowed her to ride one finger.

“But . . .” Her breathing picked up the pace. “I have . . . I have shit . . . to do . . . *fuck*.”

Shit to do? I had my hands on her again, and the woman was thinking of work?

Oh, I’d show her *work*.

She had no idea the man she was dealing with now.

No. Fucking. Clue.

The Gideon Kane of her memories was long dead and gone, and in his place was a shell of a man, full of regret and darkness. She’d never understand the things I’d done. The things I hated myself for. The things I’d do again and again and again, a thousand times over, to save her soul at the expense of my own.

“Gideon . . .”

It was barely a fucking whisper, like she forgot her anger for one moment, whipping me from the here and now and kicking me in the gut with memories. My head spun.

No.

I fought to take back control, slamming the iron curtain back in place over my soul. Her hips rolled seductively so I added a second finger, rammed harder, as I moved to her other breast and gave that nipple equal attention, pinching and rolling. I said nothing. Pumped harder. Added a third finger.

Rolled her nipples faster, pulling and pinching. Sucked her throat hard enough to leave a mark. She was groaning and rocking hard on my hand, her scent filling the air and making my mouth water. I could feel her orgasm building. Building. Building.

Even as I felt everything inside my chest fighting to spiral out of control.

Control. The need for it nipped at my heels.

I drew away and took a step back, the air suddenly a very needed cold between us. Slowly, her eyes slid open and focused on me in the glass, her eyes still red from grief, her gaze hazy with lust, her cheeks flushed pink.

I watched as a hundred emotions flashed across her face. Confusion. Hurt. Anger.

Yeah, there it was. Raw fucking rage.

Better.

I channeled *Mr. Fucking Kane* and raised a brow. “I believe I said, *come.*” I lifted one finger, still soaked with her juices, and sucked it clean. “Sleep.” The second finger. “Talk.” The third. With my gaze locked on hers, I let her know that I held all the fucking cards here, but I gave her the illusion that the choice was hers. “Did I not, Miss Vaughn?”

“But—”

“No buts.” I loved that she still stood facing away from me, her hard gaze locked on mine through the reflection of the glass. “You are no good to anyone here if you’re exhausted. It’s my job to take care of you and this place, and I will fucking do it, including forcing you to get some rest.”

That defiant chin came up, and she started to turn around.

“Don’t move.”

I watched her inner fight flare, her need for that same control struggling against desire.

Mine won.

“Fine.” Her voice was quiet.

“Fine?”

“I said fine, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.” I let my eyes roam down her curvy backside. The dip of her small waist, her ample ass. Those perfectly thick thighs. The calves showcased by her fuck-me heels. I yanked off my jacket and tie and began to loosen the top button of my dress shirt. “Take off everything but the heels.”

Her eyes flashed up to mine. “Why?”

“I told you why.”

“You’re serious? After all this time, I don’t think we—”

“Charli.” She snapped her mouth shut and glared at me, her gaze dropping to my hands as I unbuttoned the second button on my shirt, giving myself room to breathe. “Stop thinking and take off your fucking skirt. Now.”

Two shaky breaths passed before she spoke. “Take it off yourself.”

“Jesus.” With a growl, I yanked her skirt much as I had her blouse, ripping it from her hips, taking her panties with it, until she stood before me in only thigh-high stockings and heels. Good enough.

I pressed up against her again, cupping her belly in one hand, my lips to her ear. “Tell me what you want.” Some sadistic part of me wanted her to admit she wanted me. That she felt even a fraction of the need that was consuming me alive.

“To hurt something,” she hissed. “To scream.”

I could work with that too.

“I can give you half of that,” I growled. “Are you ready for me?”

Before she could answer, I whipped around in front of her and dropped to my knees in worship.

She gasped when I forced her legs apart, grabbed her hips, and dove in, tasting her, licking her up and down, lapping up her sweet wetness like honey. God, I'd fucking missed this. I circled her clit with the tip of my tongue, gently suckled, circled again, over and over, until she was writhing and weak-kneed. Her fingers twisted in my hair as she held me close, silently urging me to suck harder and faster.

I used one hand to squeeze and hold on to her ass, the other to slide up and find a breast and roll and twist a nipple.

Her moans filled the air.

Her taste filled my mouth.

The moment jarred my sense of déjà vu again, feeling dangerously close to emotional, though I slammed that thought behind a wall of lust.

Her hips bucked in wild abandon as she fucked my face shamelessly, wordless pleas falling from her lips. She needed to come. Now. She needed it from me. Only me.

And I needed to give that to her.

I pulled back and kissed her inner thigh. "Open your eyes, Charli," I murmured against her flesh.

Her hazy gaze slid open and met mine.

"Hands on the glass," I commanded softly.

She hesitated only a moment before she did as she was told.

I kissed her other thigh. "Good. That's as far as the ugliness that was out there gets inside this room. Keep your eyes on me now. Only on me when you come. Understood?"

She nodded, soft tendrils of hair falling from her fancy twist, making her look so vulnerable and sexy. "Only you."

I kept my gaze locked on hers as I licked her once more, slowly. So slowly. I could tell she wanted to close her eyes, but she fought it, so I rewarded her with a long, gentle suck on her clit.

“God . . .” she groaned.

“Just Mr. Kane is fine.” I smiled against her hot flesh but kept up my assault.

She didn’t seem amused, her hips moving in rhythm to my movements, our eyes never leaving each other’s, as I fucked her with my mouth.

I worked a breast with my fingers, and she cried out.

“Gideon, I’m—” She breathed huskily, her beautiful mouth halting in a silent gasp as her eyes glazed over, her fingers tightened in my hair, and words left her.

“Scream,” I commanded as I pumped two fingers into her soaking wet pussy as far and as hard as I could, shooting her off like a rocket.

Her entire body went as tight as a bow string, then began to shake with the most beautiful orgasm I’d ever seen in my life as she screamed out my name.

My name.

Her hands slid down the glass, leaving a streak, as she wobbled on her feet.

I uncoiled to stand and caught her easily. Blue eyes lifted to mine, and a soft, unguarded smile played about her swollen, pink lips.

“You always were good at that.”

I fought my own answering smile. “I’ve never had any complaints.”

Her smile fell. “Lots of practice, huh, Mr. Kane?” She ripped herself out of my embrace, icy Charli back and in full force. “Never mind. I’m sure, given your *profession*.” She shot the last word at me like a poisonous dart.

I leaned against the window, arms crossed, and watched her pick up the tattered remains of her clothes and try to salvage them, yanking on her ripped blouse and frowning at her skirt.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I asked, genuinely curious.

She pulled the skirt up and over her hips, but I’d pretty much ruined it. She shot me a dark glare. “Oh, come on. You and your . . .” She circled her elegant, red-tipped nails in the air as she searched for the right words. “*Men* protect my club.” Her brow rose as if the rest of the puzzle was obvious. When I didn’t take the bait, she sighed. “My *gentlemen’s* club. Full of Vegas’s most beautiful women. No doubt you’ve sampled your fair share over the years. Not to mention you’re basically a professional criminal.” She reached for her purse. “I’m sure plenty of them find that ridiculously sexy.”

I didn’t bother to correct her assumption as I quirked a brow. “Do you?”

She barked out a laugh that was a little too loud. “Me? No. Don’t flatter yourself. You forget I knew you before you were Mr. Badass, head of the Kane Mafia Family.” Her eyes narrowed. “I knew you when you were actually sweet.”

“Sweet?”

“Yes. Sweet. Kind. My—” She shook her head. “Never mind.” She spun toward the door. “I’m going home.”

I grabbed her arm. “Your what?”

Her head dropped. “It doesn’t matter. You’re not my anything anymore.” She lifted her eyes, and the sheer pain in them was enough to gut me. “Right?”

I released her arm like it was on fire.

“That’s what I thought.” She strode to the door. “Goodnight, *Mr. Kane*.”

Oh, hell no. I grabbed my jacket and tie off the chair and rushed after her, draping my jacket over her shoulders as she

hit the threshold. She slowed but didn't acknowledge me as she locked up and we headed down the staff elevators toward the parking garage. I felt JD's watchful presence, but he kept his distance as instructed and had already texted that he'd verified her home was secure.

Charli stomped along, as far away from me as possible, but my longer stride kept up easily.

When she reached for her keys, I yanked them from her, and she shot me a glare.

I lifted a brow. "I said I would take you home."

"I can drive myself." She held out her hand and tapped her toes.

"I'm aware of that. All the same, after the events of yesterday, I'd feel better if I see you home myself."

Something in the depths of her eyes shifted and softened as Jade obviously came to mind. She didn't argue anymore, letting me lead her to my black Tesla.

We drove silently, my engine's humming the only sound between us, until I pulled up in front of her apartment building. "Get some rest," I said, my eyes on the horizon.

She started to shrug off my jacket, but I held up a hand. "Keep it."

She glanced down at her abused clothing. "I'll bring it back to you."

"No rush. Just call me when you're back to work, and I'll stop by for it. We can talk."

Suspicion floated across her face. "Talk about what, exactly?"

"What else? Business."

She reeled back slightly. "Business? Don't you usually handle the particulars with Bailey?"

“Yes, when it involves Kane Enterprises.” I stroked the steering wheel with my thumbs, much as I had her flesh just minutes ago. “But this is different. Someone killed one of your employees.” I met her eyes. “Our friend. This is personal. And it’s business. I’m sure I don’t have to explain to you the possible implications of a murder to Cameo, much less to the Kanes if we have cops snooping around. And, like I said, I intend to catch the motherfucker who killed Jade. But, depending on what information I find, we’re most likely going to have to work together to save both of our businesses and protect our own.”

She raised an eyebrow as she opened the door quietly and stepped outside.

Unable to help myself, I glanced over and caught the vision of her outlined in the morning sunshine. Her hair was like liquid gold mixed with honey, her skin glowed. Even exhausted, she looked like a fucking angel.

“Think you can put aside our tangled personal history and do that, Miss Vaughn?”

CHAPTER FIVE



Charli

I WAS UPSET, half delirious, and swimming in all the what-the-fucks of the past six hours, but I certainly didn't need the direness of the situation mansplained to me. I knew what had to be done. And what it was going to cost me.

Right at that moment, my pussy still basking in afterglow, it felt hugely expensive.

“Don't mistake my silence for ignorance, Gideon,” I said, my voice just as tired and gritty as the rest of me.

His eyes narrowed. “I never said you were ignorant.”

“My assistant is already working on a spin with the press and our clientele,” I said. “I have to set up an all-employee cheerleading event *today* to convince them of something I'm not at all convinced of myself, when all I really want to do is tell them to run like hell.” Grief, fresh and unbidden, washed over me, flushing my skin with a clammy cold I knew would never be warmed. “I lost a sister last night,” I said. “Six months ago, I lost the only two people I had left in my life, so you're damn right it's *personal*. I'll do whatever it takes to bring Jade justice. I'll fuck the devil himself if I have to.”

Something in his expression hardened to stone—cold, hard, deadly stone—reminding me suddenly of his father. His keys jingled eerily as he switched off the engine and uncoiled from the driver's seat.

No, no, no, get back in the car. Get back in the—

“So, I’m the devil now?” he asked, slow-strolling around the hood, tieless, his shirt still untucked. His hair sticking up in spikes from my fingers clawing through it.

Fuck.

“Interesting that you assumed I meant you,” I said, lifting my chin and pulling his jacket tighter around me.

There was a long pause in which our tired eyes locked in some last-ditch effort at battle before he conceded and stopped just out of touching distance. “Is that what you think it was up there?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. Good arms. *Stop looking at his arms.* “Some sort of payment for services?”

“No,” I said on a bitter laugh. “I was told earlier that I’m too proper for that.”

One eyebrow raised. “Whoever finds you proper didn’t see you half an hour ago.”

I licked my lips, ignoring the heat that memory sent through me. “I don’t know what that was, Gideon,” I said. “Anger. Grief. Letting off steam.”

“Lust,” he quipped.

“Closure.”

“Closure,” he echoed, drawing the word out as the surprise played through his features, circling something almost real before landing back on arrogance. “Interesting that *you* assume it won’t happen again—Miss Vaughn.”

I crossed my arms as well, letting the jacket drift open. Letting his gaze slide over what was left of my clothing and everything he’d filled his hands with earlier. My inner muscles tightened as tiny fires ignited along my flesh. Part of me wanted to slap that smug look off his face so hard that he’d choke on that *Miss Vaughn* comeback of his and forget my name entirely, but I could still smell him on me, and it was maddening.

When his eyes came back up to meet mine, they were darker, glazed over, and all that was stupid inside me couldn’t

help but wonder if his cock was hard again.

I was fucking doomed.

So, I stepped closer.

“Well, I can promise you this much,” I said, trailing a finger down his torso and tugging on a shirttail. “Keep calling me that, and it definitely won’t happen again.”

I caught the slightest hint of a tug at his lips as I turned and sauntered up the sidewalk.

Yeah, game on.

Unless he followed me, but I wasn’t about to turn back around.

Ten steps. Fourteen. Nineteen steps I counted until I entered the building and walked in, shutting Gideon Kane on the other side.

I sagged against the door, blowing out a breath.

“Fuck, Charli, what are you playing at?”



A SHOWER, SOME coffee, and four Little Debbie snack cakes later, I sunk onto my couch on the twelfth floor, completely spent. My eyes burned, and my face and neck still stung from his stubble rasping against my skin. I touched my lips, still feeling his bruising kiss.

Hard. Arrogant. Violent. Very different from the Gideon I used to know. Very *like* his father.

I remembered Gregory Kane, Gideon’s dad, before his heart problems took him out of the day to day business. He was still an ass now, showing up at the club in limos at random times to get himself off in a VIP room, or ordering the best escorts to come to him with no reservation and no payment because he was King Kane on high. Still a first-class dick, but a shell of what he once was, physically speaking anyway.

He was harsh, mean, ruthless, and allowed nothing to stand in the way of what he wanted back then. No one got a free

pass, least of all his children. Gideon despised him growing up. He respected him because he was his father, and he knew better than to cross him, but there was no bond. No relationship. It was sad. My mother was a pretty closed person, and we had our own challenges, but I still always knew she had my back. No one ever had Gideon's. Except me.

Until he was done with that.

Gideon really was sweet once. Always intense and passionate, driven like now, but he was also loving. Funny. A deep thinker, wanting to leave all this behind, go to college and make something of himself. Let one of his brothers pick up that Kane family cross that felt chained to his ankle from birth.

Once he reached legal age, he was leaving for anywhere that wasn't Vegas, and I was going with him. To something not affiliated with either of our families, where we didn't have to sneak around and hide our relationship. The Kanes and Vaughns were too intertwined in illegal enterprises to ever bless our union, so we kept behind the scenes and waited for that day.

I was okay with that because I knew he loved me. Deeply. I knew it in my bones. I knew it every time he touched me, every time we kissed, every time we worshipped one another's bodies in stolen moments, but mostly every time he looked into my eyes. The way he'd look at me—it was breath-stealing. I knew. There was no doubt in my mind where our futures lay—together.

Until his twenty-first birthday, in a hotel room he'd gotten for us, when he shut that down and told me he didn't love me anymore. Probably never had. And then to nail the coffin shut when I called him a liar in a haze of tears and wouldn't leave, he went downstairs to the bar and picked up a woman, brought her up to the room, and began to fuck her in front of me until I ran from the room.

I was nineteen and broken, and I just kept running. I was around, but gone. Available for my family, but elusive.

Running in my own head from everything here until the night of *my* birthday. My thirtieth. When the three of us had gone out to celebrate, it seemed like a full circle of life. How far we'd come, three generations of kick-ass women. I had an awesome new job, and I was happy, and for once, both Gram and Mom were happy for me.

We never saw the van that ran the light, slamming into the driver's side at full speed, nearly cutting Gram's car in two. Killing my mother instantly. Giving Gram an extra tortured moment or two to look into my eyes and say her last words as I screamed and cried and begged her not to leave me, too.

It's on you now, Charli. Your turn.

It was ruled a simple traffic accident. Brake pedal malfunction. Accidental vehicular manslaughter. Like the word *accidental* made it okay. Like the world wasn't forever changed.

It was. For me, it was. For Cameo, it was. And now . . .

Now Cameo was rocked again, this time nothing accidental about it. This time, someone had set out to hurt, to mangle, to make a fucking statement and brutally destroy a sweet woman that had done nothing on earth to deserve it. This time, I had a phone call to make to people that didn't deserve her in life and certainly not in death, but I had to do it anyway. I insisted. I owed her that. This time, I couldn't curl up in a ball and just hurt and feel and cry and rage until there was nothing left. This time I had to turn it off and take care of business and be a robot until—until Gideon made it okay for me not to be.

Shit.

I closed my eyes.

Once upon a time, I'd have spit in his face and never let him touch me again. But it wasn't once upon a time anymore.

My gaze landed on the other side of the couch where Gideon's jacket lay right next to a framed photo of Jade, Amy, and me. We were young, early twenties, smiling at a party for

some schmuck we sweet-talked into taking our picture. Amy smiling crazily, Jade laughing.

My eyes filled as I absorbed Jade's laugh. Her easy way. She was hardcore and sweet at the same time. Intensely private in spite of her job—or partially because of it—it took a lot for her to let people in, to trust them. Once she did, it was for life.

Being left on bloody display like that—it was the most hideous insult to the person she was. I glanced at Gideon's jacket then back at her, blinking the hot tears free.

“I can't trust him, Jade, that's for sure, but I need him,” I said, my voice catching. “His *help*, not him. I need his connections to find out who did this to you.” I leaned over and moved his jacket and the smell—oh, my God, the woodsy, earthy aroma mixed with that thing that was uniquely Gideon—it invaded my senses, and I pulled it to my face, inhaling deeply. My eyes darted right back to her. “I did not just do that,” I said, chuckling through fresh tears. “You would kick my ass for that. I'm not that woman who—oh fuck, who am I kidding?” My stomach clenched as the realization and the loss clamped down on me with a giant wave of pain. I buried my face in the fabric and curled myself around it as I sank into a pillow. “God, Jade, I miss you,” I choked.



A BELL RANG from somewhere, echoing on repeat. And again. Bouncing around in my head, pulling me from somewhere deep and warm, invading the sweet—

It rang again, and my eyes struggled to open. *Why do my eyes feel like bowling balls?* The room came into focus, as did the expensive man's suit jacket wadded up in my arms.

Something's wrong.

Then, everything came rushing back in a chest-crushing wave as the doorbell rang again, startling me into the present. I pulled my knees to my chest and willed it away, but the responsible adult in me kept poking.

Damn it. The only people that ever came to my place were now either dead or knew to text or call first. That's when another interesting tidbit tapped on my tired brain. Gideon had driven straight here. I'd never told him where I lived. Huh. I'd definitely never told him what apartment.

Thinking it might be him, back to reclaim his jacket or—*yeah, just that*—I finger combed my still-damp-on-one-side hair, winced, and quickly yanked it up with a hair tie from my wrist. I padded to the door in my ankle leggings and oversized t-shirt. He'd have to deal with it. Peeking out the peephole, I paused and took a deep breath as I opened the door.

“Detective Broussard?”

Kind eyes looked up from something in his hand. “Miss Vaughn?” he said. “Do you mind answering a few more questions for me? I'll be fast, I promise.”

I frowned and stepped back, opening the door wider.

“I'm sorry,” he continued, smiling apologetically down at me. “Did I wake you?”

“Evidently,” I said, the fog still holding me in its clutches. “I don't even know what—”

“It's noon,” he said. “I just have some gaps that I wanted to fill, and I saw the club was closed.”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “My car's not here. How'd you know I'd be home?”

He shrugged. “A hunch.” I raised an eyebrow, and he nodded. “Okay, I had someone watch to make sure you got home okay, and they reported that Mr. Kane drove you home.”

Someone was watching me, but I sincerely doubted that it was for my safety. “Uh-huh,” I said. “Well, come in, I guess. The faster you get your gaps filled, the faster we find this psychopath.”

He walked in, his eyes scanning the room casually, but I had the feeling he could take a test right now on the contents of my living room and probably ace it, down to the random

pen on the end table and the worn copy of *If Tomorrow Comes* on my bookshelf.

“I won’t keep you,” he said. “I know this is a rough day. Can you tell me more about how you knew the victim? Outside of work, I mean.”

The victim.

“*Jade* was one of my best friends,” I said, grabbing the photo of us and carrying it back to him. “We grew up together.”

“And then she worked at your club,” he said.

I nodded, looking at the picture in his hand. “She’s danced at Cameo for years. She and I went off to college together, but school wasn’t her thing, so she came back. My mother hired her as a waitress.”

“How old was she when she started there?”

I met his eyes. “Nineteen. No one dances at Cameo until they’re twenty, and escorts have to be twenty-one.”

“Other clubs’ dancers are eighteen and up,” he countered, as if trying to catch me at something. There was nothing to catch.

“Other clubs aren’t us,” I said, hearing the possessiveness in those words. “It’s not about what’s legal, Detective. My mother and grandmother believed in the power of a mature mind and dependability, and I agree. Anyone with ‘teen’ in their age description still has some growing up to do and experience to gain. Even on a pole.”

“Sexual experience?”

I tilted my head. “Ever driven a stick shift?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes.”

“You know how it takes you a minute to get the feel of it?” I said, letting my voice go soft and slow. “You slide the stick around, *really* feel the sweet spots as it slides just right? Feel

the pressure of the clutch with your foot and learn *just* when to push. Just when to pull back?”

He kept his eyes neutral, a practiced negotiator for sure, but the involuntary lick of his lips was the tell.

“That’s experience,” I continued. “Before you’ve done it, you have no idea what I just said.”

Humor tugged at his lips, and he averted his eyes. “Or how to sell it.”

“Precisely.”

“And the escorts?”

“Twenty-one, as I said. Preferably older, as they—”

“Need experience, too?” he interrupted.

I smiled. “They go on some very elite dates,” I said. “With highly educated, professional businessmen, celebrities, politicians—the list goes on. These men pay top dollar for a plus-one who can play a part, yes, but our escorts are hired for more than just arm candy. They need to be up on politics, world events, socially proficient, able to hold an intelligent conversation on any topic, in any crowd, and make their client look better than he really is. That’s their job.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize.”

“Most people don’t.”

He glanced down at his phone as if there were questions there. “You told me earlier that Jade wasn’t seeing anyone that you know of,” he said. “Are you sure?”

“As sure as I can be,” I said. “Unless she had some secret lover she didn’t want to cop to, I don’t think so.”

“Did she have any problems with customers?” he asked. “Any potential stalkers that could have flipped on reality?”

“I doubt it,” I said. “Cameo isn’t a walk-in-off-the-street kind of place. Reservations are vetted. I believe my assistant provided you with last night’s list.”

“Yes, he did, thank you,” he said, his Louisiana charm and accent more noticeable when the manners came out. “So—your mother passed away in a car accident earlier this year,” he said, his eyes narrowing as if the subject change was random. It wasn’t.

I blew out a breath. “Yes.”

“Sorry about that, Miss Vaughn,” he said, pocketing the phone. “Losing your mother and grandmother, having to give up your management position at Chez Paris to take over for them. Now this. You’ve had a rough year.”

He’d done his homework in the last few hours. I crossed my arms and resisted the urge to wrap them completely around myself and crawl back onto the couch. “I’ve had better,” I said. “But I’m still here. They aren’t. Jade isn’t, and she should be.” My chin trembled, and I hated the weakness. “She was thirty years old, Detective. She was funny and bright and intense about life, and she ended up like—like that.”

“I know.”

“No, I don’t think you do,” I said, my voice going hoarse. I snatched the picture out of his hand and placed it back on the table next to Gideon’s jacket, which I knew he’d picked up on as well. “Asking questions about Cameo’s employment policies isn’t going to find who murdered her. You need to find this guy. Girl. *It*. Whoever did this to my friend needs to pay, and I honestly don’t care how that happens.”

Detective Broussard nodded, sliding his hands into his pockets. “I understand,” he said thoughtfully, moving toward the door.

Good. Leave. Go do your job.

“Just out of curiosity,” he said, pausing as I opened the door for him. “What *is* the nature of your relationship with Mr. Kane, if you don’t mind me asking?”

And there it was. The real reason he was there.

Did I mind? Well, before yesterday, I didn't. *Mr. Kane* was a ghost from my past and a name on a contract. Now, we—

No. There was no *we*. No *us*. There was that thing that just happened, but that was extreme circumstances mixed with a— what did he call it? A tangled history. That was all.

Interesting that you assume it won't happen again, Miss Vaughn.

Arrogant asshat.

“Miss Vaughn?” he prompted.

“Kane Enterprises is our liquor distributor,” I said. “And they provide our security. Gideon Kane and I also have a personal history. But I get the feeling you already know these things.”

“You were involved?”

“When we were young, yes,” I said. “Over a decade ago.”

“I'm sure you're aware,” the detective said, scratching his too-long beard. “of the Kanes' alleged illegal activity here in Nevada, as well as outside the state?”

“I believe *alleged* is the key word in that sentence,” I said, avoiding the question.

He held up a hand. “I'm just establishing a baseline.”

“You're establishing that I'm friends with Gideon, and therefore would be likely to protect him as he would protect me,” I said. “Don't let the blonde hair and family business fool you, Detective. I'm smarter than I look. I can promise you that the Kanes have nothing to gain by murdering a dancer in my club. A woman that Gideon has also known since we were teenagers. If I thought he was capable of that, I'd crucify him myself.”

The detective smiled. “No insult intended, Miss Vaughn,” he said. “I'm just concerned about the circle of people dropping in your radius.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Jade,” he said. “Your mother and grandmother.” He shrugged. “Have you stopped to wonder if it might be about you? About *Cameo*?”

Cold crept into my spine. “The car accident was—”

“Accidental, I know,” he said. “I’ve read the report.”

“I was there,” I said. “I could have died, too.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Who could have gained from that?”

Gained from that? I shook my head. “No one.”

“You run your liquor business through the mob, Miss Vaughn,” he said, his tone losing patience as he raised an eyebrow. “You have high profile clients that can’t afford scandals or bad PR, who pay high-end prostitutes for sex through your establishment.”

“Excuse me?” I said, propping my hands on my hips. “We are not a prostitution ring. I just told you what our escorts are paid to do. Sex is not part of the deal.”

“Not on the books maybe,” he said, a small smile softening his expression. “Don’t let the beard fool you, either. I’m sharper than I appear. And you might want to start looking a little closer at who you’re in bed with.” My gaze shot up to meet his, and he gave a head tilt. “Who *Cameo* is in bed with.”

“Thank you for your advice,” I said, my mouth feeling like I’d been sucking on sand. “Is there anything else?”

“Watch your six.”

“My—watch my what?”

“Your six,” he said, opening the door. “Basically, watch your back. Tell your employees the same. You live in a building with no real security. I Googled your address and walked right on up. With all the muscle and security you have at work, you live wide open, and even with all that at *Cameo*, someone still managed to not only be there with a weapon, but be backstage. Conveniently not caught on any camera. Alone

with your good friend.” He gave a small shrug. “What does that tell *you*?”

I stared at the door for a full minute after he left before I grabbed my keys off the entryway table, slipped my feet in some sneakers, and called an Uber.

I twisted my wet hair up in a high ponytail on the ride over, groaning as I caught sight of myself in the guy’s rearview mirror. No worries about turning anyone on today.

Ten minutes later, I was patted down by mountains in suits at a nondescript, stone two-story building just past Fremont.

“Jesus, are you looking for weapons or trying to knock me up?” I said, giving one of them an elbow. “Enough already.”

The other one mumbled into a radio, and off I stomped through a door, down a long, dark hallway that snaked into the inner sanctum of Kingdom Kane.

I threw open Gideon’s door, and he glanced up from behind the biggest mahogany desk I’d ever seen. And I’d seen it before. When it was his father’s.

Gideon had brought the place into the twenty-first century with gigantic twin computer screens on the desk and an entire bank of at least a dozen monitors lining the wall to his right, on what was apparently a live feed of their liquor warehouses and other important locations, including multiple shots of Cameo.

On the opposite wall was a small wet bar, complete with crystal decanters and glasses, and what I was sure was premium Kane liquor. Two dark plush burgundy leather chairs faced the desk, where the only concession to anything personal were two framed family photos—one of his entire family right before his mother died, one more recent.

Behind him, a huge window framed the Vegas skyline in the distance, Fremont Street peeking between buildings toward the left, and the rise of the distant mountains hazy toward the right.

The office still held the commanding, austere, masculinity that was all Kane, but Gideon's presence added a certain danger I couldn't put my finger on, and the air smelled of him—all him—making everything below my stomach clench.

"Charli?" he said, rising and rounding the desk. He had on a fresh shirt and slacks and looked like he hadn't missed a wink of sleep. "What the—?"

"We need to talk."

"I believe I said that earlier," he said. "But I kind of meant tomorrow. Why aren't you resting? Or eating something."

"Did someone kill Mom and Gram?" I blurted out as I slammed the door shut behind me. "Is someone targeting me?"

A deep frown burrowed between his brows. "What?"

"You heard me," I said. "Do any of your connections have a vendetta that could swing my way?" I pushed forward into his space for the second time in less than six hours, chest to chest, watching his eyes flare and not caring. "Could they have killed my family to get at your business, Gideon? Could they have killed Jade?"

"You are off the rails, Miss—"

"I'm fucking serious," I said, grasping his face with both hands, my voice going hoarse. I needed him to hear me. "*Could* they?"

Gideon sucked in a breath at my touch, either in anger or surprise. He stiffened but didn't pull away, something dark glazing his eyes as his focus dropped to my mouth.

"Where is this coming from?" he growled.

"Detective Broussard stopped by my apartment a few minutes ago," I said. "He had a few opinions about things."

"Shit," Gideon muttered, pulling my hands from his face.

"He knows about everything, by the way," I said. "The guns, the girls, all of it."

“Of course, he does,” Gideon said, still holding my hands. A ridiculous piece of me reveled in the feel of his large warm hands on mine. The piece that wasn’t sleep deprived and beaten down and freaking the fuck out. “They’d be idiots not to know. It’s been going on for sixty years. It’s not a secret; the point is never letting them prove it.”

I pulled my hands free, pressing them against my suddenly throbbing temples.

“And now they’re all over us, investigating Jade and thinking—” I wheeled around, pacing the room. “We need a plan.”

“You need to calm the fuck down,” Gideon said. “You’re running on empty.”

“I’m running on *panic*,” I retorted. “You should be, too!”

“I don’t panic,” he said evenly, raking his fingers roughly through his thick hair. Even after all these years, I recognized the stress, the keyed up and tight muscles in his neck. “I act. I’ll go run later and work out the stress.”

“Stress?” I echoed incredulously. “This is just a little *stress*?”

He leaned against the front of his desk, crossing his arms slowly in a production of *show the crazy woman you’re in control*. “You need to go home and let me do my job, Charli.”

To hell with this. He was talking. There were words, but my heart was pounding, and my delirious mind was shooting off on all cylinders.

Jade.

The accident that might not have been one.

Cameo.

Ever think they might be targeting you?

I marched to the door and locked it, kicking off my shoes.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

I shoved my leggings off and stepped out of them as I walked back to him without missing a step, my bottom half bare and shaved clean, peeking out from under the t-shirt.

“De-stressing us,” I said through my teeth, grabbing his hand and putting it where I wanted it as I unzipped his pants unceremoniously.

“Fuck,” he growled, his fingers stroking me even as he glanced behind him toward the computer screens.

“What, you have work to do?” I managed as I pulled his already hard cock free and stroked it as he cursed me more. “Yeah, so did I, and it didn’t stop you, so hold on, Mr. Kane.” I grabbed the back of his neck and climbed him like a fucking tree, straddling him so that my clit slid along the length of him. “It’s gonna be a rough ride,” I breathed, trying to maintain my own control as the sensations shot through me. He sunk his fingers into my ass cheeks, and I sunk mine into his hair, pulling hard.

Dares arced back and forth between our eyes as control met control, but I was too far gone to submit to anything. “What was that three-fingered little game you played earlier? Well, we’re about to get to the talking part, but first you’re gonna—”

“I need to get a cond—”

I sank onto him. I didn’t care. “Come,” I finished.

I bottomed out, taking every inch of his hard length inside me, inhaling sharply and clenching my inner muscles around him as I slowly milked back up.

“*Fuck*, Charli,” he groaned loudly. “Jesus—fuck, you feel good.”

“Haven’t had any complaints,” I whispered in his ear, smiling as I watched his jaw twitch with anger.

Good. Let that piss him off. I'd waited eleven years to feel that rush.

He dug his fingers harder into my flesh. Moving me like he needed to. Using my pussy to jack off his cock. Showing me what he needed. I angled to match him and rode hard, rolling my hips against him, feeling him swell thicker as we moved in sync.

"That's right; stretch me out," I moaned. "*Fuck* me, Gideon."

I pulled his hair harder, staring into his wild-eyed gaze as he grew impossibly larger, fucking me like there was no tomorrow. Bruising my flesh, my insides, ripping me apart as he slammed me up and down like I weighed nothing until the build started to curl my toes. Oh, fuck, the pain was glorious as it traveled up my legs to my core and . . .

"Gid—oh, God—*fuck*."

"Charli!" he roared, my name shoving through his teeth, his body, his bones, as his orgasm slammed into him.

Primal noises escaped my throat as everything burst inside of me, and all I could do was hang on. The world rocked into me over and over, waves of sensations that were at once familiar and yet so different.

We'd always had good sex. But we were young then. Still learning. Our first time had been in a practice room at Cameo, as "Unchained Melody" played in the background and defined us.

This was on another plane. Hard. Raw.

And probably the stupidest thing I could have done, especially with no condom.

We clung to each other, gasping for breath, and the memory of what I was there for came swimming back into focus. I needed answers. I bit the bullet and leaned my head back first, meeting his gaze, prepared to make some quip like *Well, we got that out of the way* or something similar. What I

saw, however, stole the words from my mouth, along with any semblance of good sense.

For maybe three seconds, hardcore Gideon was gone. The years fell away. Walls were dropped. Real was everywhere. And I did the second stupidest thing of the morning.

I brushed my lips against his and kissed him.

CHAPTER SIX



Gideon

I KNEW I loved Charlotte Vaughn the moment I met her.

Tall and willowy, just blossoming into the stunning creature she was destined to be, she already had that light inside of her that drew me like a moth to a flame. There was no other way to describe it. Probably because everything in my life felt so dark and desperate after we'd lost my mom that summer.

Expectations had always been high for me as the eldest Kane son, and my dad was never the warm, fuzzy type, but my mother bridged the gap. With her gone, I had nothing.

Until Charli waltzed into my life like a ray of sunshine one day. I was grudgingly forced to come along with my dad for business at Cameo only weeks after burying my mother.

“You’re going to take all of this over one day, son,” he’d lectured me in the car on the way over. “So, man up, take notes, and learn to look the fucking part, alright?”

I had no interest in the business, but that day I found a new reason to tag along and pretend I did. After that, my life was forever altered in ways I could’ve never imagined.

Now, here we were again. Full circle, yet nothing was the same.

Her body wrapped around mine, desperate and sweet, was heaven. Perfection. I could have died a happy man right then.

Then she kissed me.

Like she used to.

I sunk into it for a few dizzying moments, tasting her, allowing myself to touch that elusive something that was *us*, for the span of a memory.

Then reason kicked back in.

I drew back and gently placed her back to rights, stepping away and putting some much-needed space between us.

“Gideon,” she began as I tucked myself back into my trousers.

I shook my head. “Don’t. There’s no need.” I glanced up. “Feel better?”

Some of the fire shot back into her brilliant baby blues. “Tons.” She reached down and yanked her leggings back on.

I walked over to my bar to give myself a second to get my head together. I poured a whiskey. Poured a second for her. I moved back and handed her the crystal tumbler, which she took with a calm hand. “Sit.” I nodded to one of the burgundy chairs across from me as I leaned against my desk.

Thankfully, she didn’t argue and sat down, taking a slow sip of the liquor.

I took a big swallow and let the burn consume me. Our eyes met. “Do we need to talk about this?”

“No.” She was emphatic. Almost offended.

Thank fuck.

I nodded once. Set my tumbler down. Crossed my arms. “So, your earlier questions.”

“Earlier questions?”

“About someone targeting you to get at me and my business.”

“Oh.” She sipped again, her face growing a shade paler. “Right.”

“I won’t sugarcoat this, Charli. Anything is possible. You know who I am and what I do. What my family does.” I waited until she looked back up at me, and thankfully the Vaughn backbone was firmly in place. “But I keep a tight rein on my business dealings, and I pride myself on knowing the moves of all the players involved in the game at all times. Both on my team and my opponents. And, as of right now, I haven’t found anyone with a solid reason to hurt Jade.”

I didn’t bother to add that I’d already dug deep into Detective Lucas Broussard since he was investigating the crime. I needed to know if he was a bumbling cop or if he would do his due diligence. If he would simply try to pin it on me. Shocked the shit out of me when I found out he was loaded, his one of those old, genteel, wealthy families that helped establish Louisiana. They made their fortune in the textile industry and established their power in politics. Apparently, Broussard wasn’t cut out for any of that and decided to set his course for something more adventurous and joined the military just out of high school, did his time, then joined the police force. He worked his way up, and was now a Las Vegas homicide detective with a spotless ninety-two percent success rate on solving his cases. I was impressed, except that I didn’t want him thinking he could chalk any more wins up on the Kane name just because it was easy.

“What about me? Mom? Gram?” Charli asked, ripping me back to the present.

“What about you?”

“Your family is closely tied to mine. To Cameo. There would be plenty of reasons to hurt us.” I saw the pain, the doubt, swimming on her face.

The same doubt I felt the day I confronted my father about the accident that killed her mother and grandmother, calling him on his veiled, decade-old threat. He swore up and down he’d had nothing to do with it, and I’d let it go, trusting him at his word. Maybe one of my father’s rivals had orchestrated it. Maybe it truly was an accident. Maybe I’d never know.

“Could be.” She flinched at my dark tone. “But I don’t think so. If any of them wanted you dead, why not take a hundred free shots on the nights you stay late and kill you then? Why Jade?”

“Jesus.” She cradled her skull like she had a headache. “Maybe you’re right. I’m just so tired. And pissed off.” Her voice quivered as tears welled in her eyes, but she valiantly held them back. “Why Jade?” she echoed. “She was so special.”

I relented and sat next to her. “She was.”

“So, what now?”

“I keep my guys on it until we figure it out. We’re hunting every dark corner, I swear to you, Charli. You probably don’t need to know more than that right now, but I promise I’ll tell you the minute we find out anything. I need you to do the same if you hear anything at the club, okay?”

She nodded, her eyes drifting toward my bank of monitors on the wall then slowly over to my desk and the work she’d interrupted. “Were you busy?”

“Always.”

Not only did I have our liquor business to run, but I had several large ammo shipments due to go out to the border the next day as well as a couple of orders in from the Irish and our new allies, the Chinese, for assault rifles and suppressors that I had to get to our machine shops to make happen. All while keeping up with intel about Jade’s murder—which at this point, was precious little. I hated to admit even the Petrov assholes were looking clean on this one, as much as I wanted to hang one of those bastards for it. But Tony and I weren’t done scouring Cameo’s servers, and JD and Chris weren’t done working up every lowlife scumbag who might have a lead. I would find out the truth if it killed me.

Charli’s gaze roamed over the photos of my family, then paused. “Your sister sure grew up.” She looked back at me. “How is Sophia?”

I'd forgotten how Charli had adored my little sister and her melodramatic, girly ways. With Marcus and Phillip still around and part of the business, she saw them, but she hadn't seen Sophia in years. "She's good. She does hair and makeup at a salon in California."

"Of course, she does." She smiled. "That makes sense."

I chuckled. "It does."

"Ask her to look me up the next time she comes to visit."

My smile fell. That wasn't likely. Sophia and my father had had a falling out because, as a female, as long as he was alive, she was not allowed into the family business. She'd not come home since that fight.

"I will."

Her gaze drifted from mine as she ran a hand down her thigh. The scent of sex still hung heavy in the air. She suddenly stood. "Well, I should—"

"Have lunch with me."

Wide eyes met mine as if uncertain she'd heard me right.

That made two of us.

What the ever-loving hell was wrong with me?

"Lunch," she said, her tone flat.

Shit. Well, we had to eat, and I was duty-bound to take care of the woman. Two birds and all that.

"Why not?" I raised a brow. "You still like those greasy tacos from that little place off Fremont? We can walk from here."

She seemed surprised that I remembered. "Yeah."

"Perfect." I rose and patted my pocket to check for my wallet. I moved toward the door, but she stood frozen. I turned back. "What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Let's go eat, Mr. Kane."



CHARLI WAS QUIET, almost broody, on the walk there, but once we mingled in with the crazies on Fremont, she visibly relaxed. We ate tacos and drank Mexican soda and managed to talk about things other than Jade's murder, business, and our sordid past.

Looking at her there across from me, fresh-faced without a stitch of makeup, fuck if I didn't want to run my tongue up and down every last inch of her body.

But when she laughed at something I said . . . it almost felt like a date.

Almost.

Other than the fact that I could still taste her on my tongue and feel her wet heat soaked into my constantly semi-hard cock, and the fact that I hadn't been on anything resembling a date since her. There was no point. Nobody ever could or would touch my heart in the same way again, so why bother?

Enough playing around, Gideon. You're a man now with responsibilities, and the Vaughn women are poisonous to us, son. Do whatever it takes to end it with her. Tonight. Or I will.

My father's words from all those years ago were still coiled in my brain like a cobra ready to strike.

Whatever it takes . . .

I'd seen the kinds of things he was capable of when he wanted to "end" things, so I'd single-handedly taken my destiny, doused it in gasoline, and torched it by doing the one thing I knew she could never forgive so she would walk away and never look back.

I couldn't risk it.

Not with her.

My own soul was a small price to pay to save hers, and I'd do it again, no questions asked because, whether she knew it or not, her safety was the cross I bore willingly and would die a million times over to protect.

“Gideon?”

My head shot up, and I realized I’d been staring at the remnants of my last taco. “Sorry. What?”

Charli tilted her head with a puzzled look on her face. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

She sat back in her chair, the doubt and earlier chill returning between us. I could see her gears turning. “Ready to go then?”

I nodded, and we started back to my office in silence. There was a twisted déjà vu about this walk. Part of me wanted to give in to my body’s need for her and pull her closer, but I knew that was dangerous. She already fucked with my mind too much, kept me off balance, and killed my concentration. I had a job to do, and I needed to get it done.

Her footsteps slowed, and a resigned determination tightened her features as I turned in question. She stopped and looked up at me, her chin defiant. It was coming, damn it, as I knew it would. It was only a matter of time.

“Gideon, I deserve—”

To know why I fucked us both over that night all those years ago. Yeah, I knew it. I just wasn’t prepared to go there. Not now. Maybe not ever.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Thank fuck. I had too much on my plate right now to go hurtling down that ancient hellhole, whether she deserved it or not.

Charli’s hands curled into small fists as she walked past me, her shoulders stiff.

I yanked out my cell, hoping it would be the news I was waiting on about our latest shipment of ammo.

***JD:** The lead with Miss Vaughn’s ex-bouncer is a bust. He’s married with a kid in Henderson and his alibi sticks.*

***Me:** Thanks, man.*

JD: I cruised by the club to make sure everything is secure. Looks good. Only Goldilocks there talking to a woman. Small. Brunette. Pretty. Looks nervous.

I frowned. Goldilocks was our moniker for her pansy assistant. But I'd never noticed JD make mention of a woman like that before. He was always strictly business. Sometimes I thought the man lived as a monk.

Me: Pretty?

He ignored that.

JD: Never seen her before.

I glanced at Charli's back, a full twenty yards ahead of me at that point. "You expecting anyone at your club today? A woman?"

She turned and frowned. "No. We're closed. Why?"

"JD says someone he doesn't know is there talking to your boy wonder."

"Jonathan?"

I simply lifted a brow in question as she circled back.

"Why would Jonathan still be there?" she asked. "Damn it, I told him to go home after he ran those errands." She shook her head. "I have no idea. After everything last night, it could be a reporter."

Reporter or not, given the recent events, I could take no chances. I turned back to my phone and texted him one word: *Investigate.*

JD: Yes, sir.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Charli

WHAT THE HELL was that?

The question played on a long loop in my head for the past week as I went about the task of putting my business back together. It applied to *so* many things. For starters—me.

The sex. Yeah, we had sex. Amazing, mind-blowing, fuck-me-stupid sex. I'd come to the realization, however, that Gideon and I were just two forces meant to bang things out that way. Talking wasn't going to be our forte this time around.

Not that this was a *time* for him and me.

No.

Not like that.

We were just working together toward a common goal, and our natural chemistry just—well, it did what it did. But then I did *that*. I kissed him. Like a *kiss* kiss, not the bruising assault-while-you're-fucking kind. The kind that makes your insides go liquidy, and your skin go tingly, and every soft, intimate sensation makes your head spin in a way that rocks reality.

And then, good God, he kissed me back.

If that wasn't enough clusterfuckery to muck up the mix, he invited me to lunch.

To lunch.

After making it damn clear we didn't need to talk about any of it, and then cutting me off mid-question when I finally grew the lady balls to bring up what had been strangling my heart for a decade.

Then he hadn't bothered to come back around for the past week. Six days, in fact. Not that I was counting. He hadn't been around for the past six *months*, and now six days was pissing me off.

Shit, the man was exhausting.

I was no delicate flower, however, and I had too damn much to do to waste energy trying to figure him out. That ship sailed a long time ago.

I called a meeting with my entire staff on day one, not holding anything back. Every single employee, from escorts and dancers, to waitstaff and janitors, to the casino workers below and the sound and light guys up top—*everyone* was to not only account for every single moment that night, but a card swipe system was being installed at the employee entrance that day and it was non-negotiable. Every lady would be escorted out at the end of her shift, and security would double backstage. Privacy was over, sorry. Safety was more important. And if by chance the threat *was* from the inside—the very idea of which made my skin crawl though I didn't mention that to the masses—hopefully this would take care of that.

On day two, I did nothing but scour security footage and annoy the guys Gideon sent over to protect me. They claimed to be there to sweep the place and look for anomalies. The muscle he sent, however, struggled with the pronunciation of the word, so I was pretty confident in my assessment. And irritated. What was his beef, and why was he avoiding me *now*? And why the living fuck did I care? He crushed me back then when I never saw it coming. Why would anything be different now? Seriously, I was an idiot.

Day three was spent being pissed off that there wouldn't be an official memorial for Jade. Her family didn't want attention

drawn to what she'd done for a living, and they wanted none of us there for their grieving. *Their* grieving. The people who'd thrown my friend away years ago didn't want the ones who loved her there to taint the oxygen.

I could barely breathe through the private little gathering Jonathan put together at the club the next day, just for us, and anyone else that wanted to come. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. She deserved better, and it only fueled my ire more to find the son of a bitch who'd ended her world. Vi and I shared stories and laughed through our tears at ones shared by the other girls, and I caught Jonathan's eye once as he nodded with what I guessed was approval.

I was bonding with them.

Jesus, how fucked up was that?

And for all his talk of her being *his friend, too*, Gideon didn't come. The asshole didn't come. Not for Jade. Not for me. Not even for himself.

Done. I was done.

I woke up on day six of not-a-peep-from-Mr.-Fucking-Kane and decided that normal needed to return. I wasn't a pining teen. Sex was sex, business was business, and all that. I dressed to the nines in four-inch Gucci heels, went to work, prepared my interview questions for the new singer for Sizzle, and put out a press release all by myself—without Jonathan—that the club would be reopening on Friday night.

Go me.

My phone rang thirty minutes later with a call from the lobby. With no one manning the desk, all I had down there was Gideon's men, and—

“Miss Vaughn?” a husky female voice asked when I answered. “I'm Brady Rose, here to meet with you, is it still a good time?” She lowered her voice to almost a whisper. “There's—there's no one here but a big, tattooed guy in a suit.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “That’s JD, one of my security team members.” I figured that rang more appealing than *one of the mafia hit men guarding the murder scene you want to work in*. Then I imagined how frightening JD could be, even under the best of circumstances. The man was bigger than a house, his hazel eyes so intense it was like he could see right into your soul; he was covered in tattoos, and the man had never uttered a single word in my presence. Ever. “Uh, he doesn’t speak much, but he’s harmless.” A tiny lie, but whatever. “My assistant put you on the approved list; just let him know you’re here for an interview, and he’ll send you up.”

Two minutes later, not only was Miss Rose gracing my doorway, but JD towered behind the petite, waif-like woman as well. She knocked on the open door, glancing back up at him with huge, expressive, dark-brown eyes and an easy smile, seemingly unaffected by his hard, scary body language.

“I’m good, JD,” I said. “You can go.”

He glanced down at the woman once more, almost as if she confused him, then slowly backed away.

“Thank you,” she said softly to him, a light flush coloring her skin as he paused and tilted his head to her before walking away.

She turned her head to watch him go, then smiled back at me, her hands folded in front of her as she took a deep breath and let it go slowly.

“Charli Vaughn,” I said, rising to round my desk and hold out a hand.

Her handshake was firm and dry, her eyes kind and clear with minimal makeup, but she carried a wall so palpable, I swear I felt the bricks.

That was okay. We all had some version of one.

“Brady Rose,” she said.

“Beautiful name, Miss Rose,” I said, leaning back against the desk so that we were closer to eye level. “Is that real or a

stage name?”

Her lips curved into a smile, and she returned her hands to their folded position. “It’s the only one I use,” she said on a chuckle, her voice holding a sexy, smoky quality. “And please, call me Brady.”

It didn’t escape me that she hadn’t answered the question, but that was okay, too. Jonathan would check her out, and Gideon’s minions would do their due diligence, so I wasn’t worried about names. I *was* worried why she’d still want to come here after all that had gone down.

“So, normally, my restaurant manager, Bailey, would be interviewing you,” I said, indicating for her to take a seat. “But she’s out of town till Saturday.” I narrowed my eyes. “You do know what happened here last week, right?”

Brady nodded, her movement minimal. “I was here the next morning,” she said. “Your assistant told me. So horrible.”

The memory of Gideon’s words after our lunch flickered through my head. The woman Jonathan was talking to. She’d had an appointment with me and Bailey, and he’d rescheduled her for today.

“That’s right,” I said, tapping my pen. “Sorry. It’s been a hell of a week.”

“I can imagine,” she said, her eyes going soft. “I heard she was your friend, not just an employee?”

She heard. People were talking.

I swallowed down the pain that tried to choke me as Jade’s laughter filled my ears. I averted my eyes with a polite smile.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sitting forward, touching the desk with her fingertips as if it were my arm and she was consoling me. “That was callous of me. I wasn’t thinking.” She closed her eyes and gave a little shake of her head. “I’ve been kind of all over the place myself this last month.”

One of the first things my mother watched for in employees was problems. Secrets. Hiding. A strip club job

wasn't typically anyone's top career choice (raising my hand), and a singer in Vegas had a hell of a lot more options than our restaurant. And she'd been persistent.

Even after a murder.

I took a moment to take in more details. Definitely petite, no more than five feet, if that. Shoulder-length, whiskey-brown hair. Huge, beautiful eyes. A calmness and serenity that belied a strength I could clearly see underneath that tiny exterior. She reminded me of a badass fairy.

“Bad month?” I asked, crossing my legs.

The hands folded again. “Nothing I can't handle.”

“Is there something I need to know?” I asked.

One eyebrow quirked. “Like?”

“Like—are you running from the law, the IRS, a past employer, or anything else someone in a suit is going to come give me grief about?”

She chuckled and her face relaxed, although I noticed something still troubled around the eyes. It reminded me of another troubled girl. “Nothing like that,” she said, holding up two fingers. “Scout's honor.”

I studied her for a moment. I liked her. I knew next to nothing about this woman, but something rang familiar about her. To hell with the questions. “Let's go see what you've got,” I said, standing.

We went down to Sizzle, and I unlocked the door and propped it open. The restaurant—like the rest of Cameo—had a weird, cheesy vibe to it when it was empty with all the lights on. Like it needed the dark and the ethereal lighting to give it magic. Glancing over at Brady, I watched her move around slowly, taking it all in and running her fingers over the keys of the baby grand piano. She needed some magic, too. So I went behind a podium to the light panel and ensconced the small stage in darkness and the sexy, jewel-toned lighting that Sizzle was all about.

“Mic is on. Do you have music?” I asked. “There’s a music system back here.”

She shook her head minimally and closed her eyes, rolling her neck and shaking out her fingers as she sat at the piano and took a deep breath.

Okay, then. “Well, then, I guess whenever you’re ready.”

I wasn’t ready for what came next. For what came out of that tiny woman.

Husky-sweet notes filled the room as she crooned a slow, sexy version of “Wicked Game” from her core as if all the pain in her world could be wrapped inside her whispered words and sent away. The power and the gut-wrenching emotion in this woman—I had no words.

When she was done, she opened her eyes, and I felt something on my cheeks. Tears. Jesus, fuck, she’d made me cry.

Brady gasped, her gaze landing behind me, and I turned to follow it.

JD was standing in the doorway, looking like he’d been struck by lightning, transfixed on her. Gideon stood behind him, oblivious to it all. Staring at *me*.

Fuck.

My own version of lightning shot through me at the unexpected sight of him, and I cursed the reaction. *Damn it. Stop being a girl.*

Stop all of it. Feeling his hands on me from across the room. Wanting to be wrapped up in the taste, the smell, the very essence of the man who broke me. With no explanation. Not even now.

I swallowed it all back and focused on the task at hand.

Miss Rose, now standing in front of me, whoever the hell she was.

This woman could go anywhere. *Anywhere*. She had no reason to bury herself in a club restaurant. She needed to. She needed this. Something deep inside me—something sounding a lot like *Gram*—told me to take the chance, regardless of the background check and employment history both Jonathan and Gideon would have my head for dismissing. Because I already knew there wouldn't be one. Brady Rose wouldn't have a history.

“Can you start tomorrow?” I asked.

Her startled blink was followed by a huge wash of relief and gratitude. That said it all. “Yes, ma'am.”

I shook my head as I grasped her small hand. “Call me Charli.”

Yeah, it was unconventional. I had no explanation. Bonding.

When I looked behind me again, the doorway was empty.



ALMOST EXACTLY AN hour after the press release went live, I felt a presence at my office door and braced myself for the force I hadn't been able to stop thinking of since he'd shown up downstairs. Except it wasn't him. It was Detective Broussard, looking irritated, although not half as much as I was.

“Miss Vaughn,” he said, walking in, one hand in the pocket of his slacks.

“Detective,” I said, rising from my chair. “What's going on? Do you have a lead?”

“No, I don't,” he said. “And you're reopening tomorrow, I see. Inviting the killer over for dinner was too boring?”

“It's my place of business, Detective Broussard. That my family kept going long before me, and—” Gideon appeared in the doorway behind the detective, and it was all I could do not to curse aloud. He leaned against the frame, hands in his pockets, a casual pose, but the tightness of his body language told me otherwise. *Fuck*. His body language had no business

telling me anything. “And I’ll be the one to lose it if I stay closed any longer.”

Those words echoed in my head. It was the first time since Jade’s death that being given an out waved its hand. I’d never wanted this role. I *could* just lose the club, close the doors, and be done with it. With him. With the mob. The Kane family. I could go anywhere and do anything and be rid of the guns and the drama and the obligations and the secrets.

So many people would lose their jobs. But maybe no one else would die.

You have to take charge now, Charli.

If Gram would just shut up and rest already.

The detective ran a hand over his beard and then through thick hair, opening his mouth to say something. He looked over his shoulder at Gideon then and sighed an impatient breath. “Mr. Kane.”

“It’s been six days,” Gideon said. “What are you doing about the case?”

“I’m doing everything in my power with all the forces at my disposal,” Detective Broussard said. “From what I hear, your people are at every turn. Getting in my way with your street justice just slows things down.”

“I’m not in your way,” Gideon said. “My men are looking where you’ll never tread.”

The detective turned slowly, matching Gideon’s hard gaze. “You have no idea where I’ll tread, Mr. Kane.”

There was a deafening pause as the two men sized each other up before Gideon spoke. “We’ll see about that,” he finally said, his voice low and even.

The detective focused back on me. “I think opening so soon is asking for trouble, Miss Vaughn. We still don’t know motive or angles, whether Jade was the focus or a consequence. I’ll have men here, but a full house trampling in will make security difficult.”

I rubbed my temples, walking behind my desk to glance at the very bleak bookings screen. “Detective, at this point, I can assure you my bookings are not trampling anything. I’ll be lucky to get a slow crawl. Remember, Cameo operates by reservation, not open to the public. Dancers only this weekend. No escorts. I’m not taking any chances on psychos, but I can’t do that indefinitely.”

I did that for Vi. I couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to her. I even offered to give her some money to make up for it—something completely unethical for the owner to do, but I didn’t care. She was my friend, and I was running low on those.

He gave a side-eyed glance Gideon’s way and then back to me. “Do you remember what we talked about?”

“Vividly.”

“Well, we can’t protect you like this,” he retorted.

“That’s *my* job,” Gideon said, booming like God in a megaphone.

“No, it’s *mine*,” I said. “I’m so tired of everyone thinking I’m helpless. I pay security. I pay *you*,” I said, gesturing to Gideon and watching the twitch that gave him. “I have cameras everywhere, and no one does anything alone.” I leaned on my desk, my fingers splayed. “He’s not the problem, Detective. Quit worrying about him. We open tonight so my employees can work and make a living. Focus on finding who did this heinous thing, protect *them*, and quit worrying about *me*.” Decision made. Folding my laptop down, I walked around my desk and past the detective. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m leaving for a bit and locking the door so no one sneaks in to lie in wait for me.”

Detective Broussard sighed a frustrated goodbye and left, muttering *Kane* under his breath as he moved around the mountain that was Gideon.

“You always make such good friends?” I said, locking my door.

I turned, knowing Gideon was still too close. Knowing he was toying with me, that it was the danger zone, the heat coming off him already pulling at me like a super magnet. His gaze moved with me, the perpetually pissed off norm giving way to something hotter. His nearness was delicious, his smell was intoxicating, but thank the fucking gods, I still had brain function. Gideon Kane had some talking to do before—*no*, not before anything. We were done with that. Sex might just be sex, but it came with too many bad memories.

“I don’t need friends,” he said.

“How sad for you.”

“Where are you going?” he said, his voice little more than a growl.

“Out.”

The growly, frustrated sigh he gave as I walked away made me do a double take over my shoulder. He was following me.

“What are you doing?”

He typed something into his phone as he walked. “Clearing a meeting so I can go wherever it is you’re going.”

My feet halted. “I don’t remember inviting you.”

“Well, you *pay* me,” he said, his lip curling on the words. “So, in keeping with your ‘no one leaves alone’ rule, I’m earning out.”

Damn it.

“I don’t—”

“It’s not up for negotiation,” he said, sliding a hand up to the nape of my neck and guiding me to the elevator.

Fuck if that hand didn’t shoot fireworks down my spine and light every nerve ending in my body. All my breath left.

I wanted to be indignant. To tell him not to touch me and shrug off his touch. Truth be told, however, I would have paid money to keep that contact for the next twelve hours. It was

better than a drug, being skin to skin with him. The other times had been in the throes of insanity, and sensations had been pretty singularly *focused*, but this was just curl-up-in-a-ball-and-meow delicious. Warm and frighteningly normal.

Normal. With Gideon.

Yeah, *frightening* was a good way to describe that.

And the elevator was too cozy.

“I take the stairs,” I said, pulling free of his touch and hitting the stairs. “It’s more interactive with the staff.”

I was so full of shit.

Especially in four-inch heels.

I felt Gideon’s steps behind me as Jonathan came up from the bottom, curiosity widening his eyes.

“We’re opening tomorrow night,” I said as we approached each other.

“So I saw,” he said, glancing behind me at Gideon. “Mr. Kane.”

Mr. Kane didn’t speak.

“And Brady is hired; she starts tomorrow, too.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows lifted even higher. “Aren’t you just a productive little bee today? Where are you going now? To build a house for the homeless?”

“Never say never,” I said, moving past him. “I’m hungry, grabbing a pretzel at the corner. Bailey won’t be back till Saturday, so set one of the assistant managers up. And see who is available to dance tomorrow since it’s short notice and make a schedule.”

“You know the divas are going to balk at that,” he said. “They design their own schedule around whoever’s on. They don’t follow what’s posted.”

I stopped and turned. “Lily was dancing for Jade that night; she wasn’t supposed to even be down there. Why was

she?”

Jonathan shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I shook my head. “Find out. And who’s the newest?”

“Stormy.”

“Headline her.” I continued to make my way, step by step, down to the bottom. “If the others don’t like it, they can take it up with me.”

“Bonding, are we?” Jonathan said. I reached the floor and turned back again at the sarcasm in his voice. “Yes, ma’am,” he added at my likely bitchy expression, jogging up the rest of the way.

“Always make such good friends?” Gideon said under his breath from behind me.

Cute.

Just keep walking.

I felt every amp of his gaze burning through me as I headed out into the lobby, past JD, and out the front door. As long as I kept moving, I wouldn’t be too close. I wouldn’t be pulled into that fucking Gideon magnet that was hell-bent on sucking me in.

He said something in a low voice to JD and followed me out.

“You know, you could speak to people,” I said. “Be a little less scary.”

Gideon looked wary as he settled his eyes on me. “I just spoke to JD. I’m talking to you right now.”

“And why is that?” I asked, stopping in spite of my better judgment. Much better judgment, considering how close he loomed. “You didn’t come around personally for months, and now you’re around every corner, except this past week.”

“Miss me?” he said, the hint of amusement tugging at his mouth as his gaze dropped to mine.

I felt that touch on my lips as viscerally as if it had been his fingers. “Don’t flatter yourself,” I managed.

“I don’t have to.”

“Ugh,” I scoffed, pushing at his chest and turning, but he grabbed my hand.

“Charli,” he laughed. He actually laughed. “I’m kidding.”

The change and the pull on my hand tugged me both physically and emotionally back to a time where that was normal.

There was that normal shit again.

He pulled me against him, one hand still holding mine while the other pressed against the small of my back. His smile faded as his expression filled with as much doubt and confusion as I felt swirling through me. Like someone else had made that move. Thrown me into his arms where he’d had to catch me. It was good and it was bad. His mouth was inches away, and my mind instantly soared on speed mode through all the things that mouth could do, how we used to be. When this *was* normal. When we were in love.

When he stopped loving me.

“Stop,” I whispered, pushing against his chest with my free hand.

“Sorry,” he said under his breath, letting go of me.

My fingers curled around his tie all on their own, however, tugging him back, and the sheer feel of his body resisting behind that simple piece of cloth made my head swim a whole different direction.

What are you doing?

My breath caught as Gideon’s hand closed over mine, and our eyes met. Trouble met trouble.

I shook my head. “Why?”

The word grated from my throat like I was a twenty-year smoker. It said it all. It asked everything. I watched his face tighten into a grimace, his jaw hard before the sound of wheels on gravel echoed behind us, and his gaze went dark.

I pushed away as once again my answers were blocked. This time by a Lincoln Town Car pulling up next to us. Gideon gave an angry groan behind me, and I looked up in question.

“What—?”

The driver got out and opened the passenger door, and a much older, menacing-looking version of Gideon glared up at me.

Gregory Kane’s almost-silver hair was still peppered with some rebellious black, but the rest of him looked like he had one foot in the grave. His eyes were watery and jaundiced from a lifetime of liver abuse; he lived with an oxygen tank attached to his face, and his skin looked waxy and thin, like the wrinkles were almost too much to hold up. With all that, you’d think he’d appear frail. Not the case with Papa Kane. It just made him look more sinister.

“Am I interrupting something?” he rasped.

I laced my fingers together and smiled politely. He’d never liked me. That was no secret. He and Gram had despised each other, and he and my mother had a tenuous tolerance at best since she never catered to his advances. Gideon’s father would have hated me just on principle because I was a Vaughn, but the fact that I’d snagged his son just cinched it.

“What are you doing here?” Gideon asked, his voice hard and cutting.

“You don’t ask me questions, boy,” the older man spat. “Why did I have to find out on the *news* about a murder going down in the club that our organization fucking protects?”

“It’s being handled.”

“That’s not the point,” his dad said. “Just because you sit behind my desk, that doesn’t make you king. The deal was—”

“The deal was to keep you alive, old man,” Gideon barked. “Take the reins. Keep your stress level down. That means not calling with every little fucking thing. It’s being handled.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” his dad growled.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Gideon repeated. “Cameo is closed.”

The senior Kane eyed his son and then me. “Same as you from the looks of things,” he said. “I just choose my whores more carefully.”

I felt the movement behind me before the shock of the words could penetrate, and I turned into it. “Don’t,” I hissed, pushing back. “Gideon, he’s not worth it.”

I stared up into the same face I used to see after every one of their fights. At the anger and indignance and hurt. The absolute hatred living there now was a new development.

“Gideon!” I said, pushing my body against his with all I had in order to protect a despicable old shit that didn’t deserve it.

“Listen to your little hellcat, boy,” said the nasty, rattling voice behind me. “You don’t want a piece of me. Go fuck your snatch since you’re obviously too weak to walk away from it.”

I whirled around and shut the door in his disgusting face. “We are closed!” I yelled through my teeth.

“Get him the fuck out of here,” Gideon seethed at the driver.

“Permanently,” I added, flailing my arms as the car drove away. “I know it can’t be permanent,” I said, lowering my voice as I paced, “but damn, I wish it could be.”

“That man needs to die,” he growled under his breath.

I stopped short, looking up at him. “Gideon.”

“If you wouldn’t have stopped me, I would have yanked his foul ass out of that car and shot him in the head.”

The buzzing from my fingers moved up my limbs. “He’s your *father*,” I said, bringing his glazed-over gaze to mine. “I mean, yes, he’s horrible. He’s god-awful. But he’s still—”

“You have no idea, Charli,” he said, his jaw clenched, his words tight. “Let it go.”

It wasn’t a request. I saw that. It also wasn’t Gideon looking back at me.

It was Mr. Fucking Kane.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Gideon

NO, SHE HAD no idea what my father was truly capable of. None.

I took a deep breath through my nose, bottled that shit deep—just like I always did where my old man was concerned—and faced her again. “You said something about a pretzel?”

Those wide blue eyes were disbelieving. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“I said to let it go, Charli.”

“No, you *ordered* me to,” she said, her lip curling on the word.

“Char—”

“I’m not one of your thugs,” she hissed, her voice low, her eyes blazing with angry tears. “You don’t order me around; I don’t care who you are.”

My blood ran hot. “You’re forgetting—”

“No, *you’re* forgetting that you aren’t *him*.”

It was like acid to my gut. I hated that she knew me well enough to push that button. I couldn’t let her. “I know damn good and well who I am,” I said, keeping my tone even, though rage was coursing through my veins like wildfire. “Someone willing to do whatever it takes. Someone you don’t know anymore.”

Her whole face twitched as if I'd slapped her. "And whose fault is that?" she whispered.

I kept my expression rock solid and unreadable—a practiced skill.

Charli nodded, and I watched some of the fight leave her as pieces of the old pain trickled in. She tried to hide it, averting her gaze to stare at a random spot beyond me, but I knew her buttons, too.

"You still refuse to give me the dignity of an explanation," she said, sounding resigned. Her eyes came back up to meet mine, her own version of a glazed-over shield firmly in place. "You can fuck me, but you can't be honest with me?" she scoffed with a shrug. "I have whores for that."

I clenched my jaw so hard it hurt as she stormed away.

I counted to ten, then followed her. Partly out of duty and partly to piss her off, but also—I had to. She was the first thing I'd thought of when I returned to town, and damn if my ass didn't land there at Cameo an hour later. It was dangerous, this need for her. Distraction was deadly in my business.

I wanted to keep her out of all of it. I hadn't been avoiding her for the past week for my health, but because I'd been working my ass off. Not only had I flown to Mexico to seal an arms deal that had nearly gone south (literally), but before that I'd been pounding the pavement with my guys day and night to try and figure out who was responsible for Jade's murder. I may sit in the big office now, but I wasn't above getting my hands dirty again. After all, my dad hadn't just handed me the keys to the kingdom. I'd earned that shit the hard way, with blood, sweat, and tears, including my first hit the night I'd driven Charli away, proving my ultimate loyalty to the family and the organization. I hadn't looked back since.

At least, not until she'd walked back into Cameo.

We waited in line, and I bought us both a pretzel and a Coke.

“Thanks,” she murmured, her face blank. I could have been a stranger on the street.

“No problem.”

I studied her face as we began the slow walk back in silence, and she picked at her pretzel. She was tired. Sad. Angry. All kinds of other emotions I was out of practice in deciphering.

We were approaching the entrance to the club, and I found myself reluctant to let her go, though I knew she was well protected. I paused, and she glanced up at me in question.

Those eyes. Christ, those blue fucking eyes had always been my Achilles heel.

I raked a frustrated hand over my head and shifted my gaze away toward the traffic. “Do you need anything? Can I help with anything when I come in tomorrow?” I managed to grumble out.

She was silent so long, I finally had to look back. “What?” I barked.

“Gideon.”

“Charli,” I echoed.

“Tomorrow?”

I shook my head. “Are we playing word games?”

Her jaw twitched. “Bailey isn’t back till Saturday, and you never come to the club otherwise,” she accused.

“That is not true.”

“Where were you this past week?”

I closed my eyes at another fucking question I couldn’t answer.

“Answer me,” she demanded, making me look at her again. “Did you find out something while you were gone? Is it safe? Do you know . . .?” She choked out her last words.

I gripped her arm and yanked her toward the cover of Cameo's portico. "What the hell are you going on about?"

Her eyes were blue flames. "Why tomorrow night?" she pressed.

I crossed my arms. Was she really going there? She was fucking lucky I hadn't called in every favor I was owed, then her precious little club would be crawling with more mobsters and criminals than the fucking Feds would know what to do with. But at least she'd be safe.

"Why *not*?" I growled back. "If I'm going to protect you and the people who work here, don't you think I should be here the first night you open after a woman was fucking murdered?"

I watched the reluctant logic gears turn as she struggled to keep up the fight. Damn it, I knew she was exhausted, emotional, wrung-out from trying to be so strong for so long, but honestly, I was worn out from battling her. She needed to trust me to do my goddamned job.

"Fine," she said thinly. "I guess so."

The door behind us whooshed open, and she snapped to, putting up her invisible shield of 'I've-got-it-all-together' as her boy wonder appeared with a suit bag on his arm.

"Oh, hey," he said, seeming surprised to see her.

"Hey, Jonathan."

He eyed me skeptically. I'm sure I was the big bad wolf in his mind, but I couldn't give a shit.

"I found Brady a stunning dress in wardrobe, but it needs tailoring before tomorrow," he said, holding up the bag. His gaze darted to mine then back to hers. "Bringing it to the seamstress. She's so tiny, they'll have to take it down a few sizes."

Charli nodded. "Right. I'm sure. But she'll wow everybody. Just wait. She's amazing."

He nodded. “Need anything else while I’m out? You know multitasking is my superpower.”

“No. Thanks.”

Once he was gone, Charli lifted her eyes to mine. “Don’t.”

“What?”

“No snide comments about Jonathan,” she said, looking away. “He may be a bit much, but he’s kept my shit together for me when I couldn’t lately. He’s been a godsend.”

“Actually, I was going to ask about that singer. She’s good.”

I nodded. “She’s very good.”

“She’ll bring in a lot of business.”

Not to mention JD had been acting pretty fucking weird ever since she’d arrived. But he always acted pretty fucking weird with his stony silence and deadly glares, in spite of the fact I knew his Spotify was full of jazz and classical music. The man was a goddamn mystery. It was no wonder women flocked to him, though you’d think he was fucking celibate.

“I hope so.”

Nothing like cryptic. Fuck.

I moved to open the door for her, but she was one step ahead. She opened it herself and pushed the door in my face, stopping me as she walked on by herself.

She was pissed and leaving me behind. It was fucking déjà vu.

Whatever it takes.



I HUSTLED BACK to my office to finish up some details that needed to be dealt with on some liquor deals that could not be ignored any longer, then drove to meet Jarod in the maze of underground tunnels that snaked beneath Vegas, hiding all her dirty little secrets. There, among the homeless and unwanted, we also networked and moved some of our products, as well

as took care of other business that needed to be kept from the public eye.

Tonight, Jarod had a low-life Petrov loser I recalled from the days I ran errands for my dad, who had a history of knocking women around and who we'd seen on the Cameo video surveillance the night Jade was murdered.

I left my suit coat and tie in the Tesla and rolled up my shirt sleeves as I casually strolled down the long, snaking cement corridor toward the whimpering, bleeding man tied to a chair.

Jarod stood over him with the pliers, having already worked a few of his fingers and toes over, but to no avail.

“Hello, Sergei. Remember me?” I crouched down in front of him, and he lifted swollen eyes my way. “Having a bad day, are we?”

He mumbled something through his gag, but I ignored it, fueled by my need to end this.

“So, here’s the deal, Sergei. We know you were at Cameo the night that girl was killed.” Jarod yanked Sergei’s head back by the hair when he tried to look away from me. “We also know you have a taste for violence against women.” He screamed behind his gag and began to fight his restraints. I tilted my head, cracking my knuckles. “What I don’t know, is why *her*?”

His eyes bugged as his screams got louder.

I stood and tipped my chin, indicating for Jarod to remove the gag.

“Fuck you!” Sergei yelled. “I didn’t kill that girl. I wasn’t there!”

“*Tsk, tsk, tsk*, Sergei.” I strolled over to Jarod’s table of instruments and picked up my favorite, razor-sharp blade. “I’ve been off the streets for a while, but please don’t think for one moment that I’ve gone soft and forgotten how to play the game.” I faced him again. “Surely, you remember me. And

surely, you remember that you should never, *ever* lie to a Kane.”

Jarod shoved the gag back in his mouth as his screams intensified, and I reminded him why I was Mr. Fucking Kane.



BY THE TIME I got to Cameo the next evening, reopening night was in full swing.

I strolled in through the employee entrance and made a quick round of the entire place, making sure all of my security measures were up and running and my men were at their posts.

All seemed to be in order, if a bit sedate without the escorts around.

I followed the husky notes of the new singer into the Sizzle restaurant and paused in the doorway, trying to let my foul mood dissipate. Sergei was a bust. He'd given me nothing but a headache from all his screaming yesterday afternoon, and I'd been ready to punch something ever since. What a fucking pussy.

The bartender glanced up from wiping down the bar and tipped his head toward JD, who sat at the bar, his hands wrapped around a water bottle, his gaze locked on the spotlighted sultry singer as if she was the biggest mystery in the universe.

He must've felt me watching him because he looked my way and nodded, silently letting me know that all was well. Then he pointed across the dark restaurant.

I tracked the direction of his finger toward the tucked away booth I already knew Charli frequented. Around the corner from the bar, away from customers' eyes, I knew she liked to hide in there and escape sometimes. In the dark, when the house lights were down for the entertainment and the only lighting was the candlelight on the tables, she could disappear.

She didn't know I knew that.

She didn't know a lot of things.

I made my way over and slid into the booth next to her before she could protest, letting her sweet scent fill me and wipe away the remnants of my shitty day.

Neither of us spoke as we watched the new singer belt out a tune, but I needed to say something. Not everything, but . . .

“I’m sorry, Charli,” I said, my voice low.

The silence coming off her was louder than the music, and it pulled at me. I turned her way and had to bite back a curse. Those eyes, shiny in the dark, looking up at me the way she used to. Wanting more than I could hand over.

“It’s all I can give you,” I said, the words feeling like they were shoved through gravel.

The longest five seconds of my fucking life passed before she even blinked, and then her hand rested on my thigh.

Enough said.

For now.

I rested my arm along the top of the seat behind her, my fingertips drawing circles on her bare shoulder. “How’s the opening?” I asked after a few minutes.

“Decent.”

“So, why the long face?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, her eyes catching mine in the darkness again. “It should be a good night, but it feels so—”

I stole the words from her mouth with a kiss of understanding, because I did, I got it. I tasted her and tried to tell her through the touch of my lips that even if I couldn’t be her white knight, I wanted to be, and I would soil my soul with the blood of a thousand Petrovs to protect her if that’s what it took.

She sunk into it, her fingers feathering through my hair as she opened to me as if she needed this. Needed me.

The music and Brady's voice wrapped around us as I deepened the kiss, and Charli slid over my lap, facing me, straddling my hips. "Gideon," she whispered against my lips.

"I know, baby," I whispered back, cupping a breast and pinching her nipple. "I know."

She whimpered and dove into my mouth again, our tongues lashing and dancing in a frenzy as her hips began to writhe in an erotic rhythm that matched the music.

Her hands fumbled with the buttons on my shirt. "Please," she whispered. "Please, I need this. I need you."

"Here?"

"It's dark. No one's looking." When I hesitated, she kissed me again. "I dare you."

Well. In that case. I slid her halter dress higher up on her thighs, finding her with no panties and wet and needy. "Holy Christ," I groaned.

I slipped two fingers in deep, making her gasp and buck her hips. I drew them out slowly and brought them to my lips for a long, thorough taste. Heavenly.

"Please," she repeated, reaching down between us to stroke my rock-hard cock as she kissed me, tasting herself on my lips.

Behind us, the song slowed to something familiar—Jesus, no damn way. Her body stilled, and she sat back as smoky notes sexily crooned the song I'd always see her face to. The song that played during our first time together. Her eyes met mine as "Unchained Melody" instantly transported us back in time.

I swept a knuckle down her cheek. "Charlotte."

She blinked, as if unsure what to do with the moment.

I made the decision for her.

Slowly, as the song moved around us, over us, through us, I unbuckled my belt, slid down my zipper, and freed my

aching cock.

Her eyes slid down to take me in, her tongue darting out to wet her bottom lip. God, this woman.

I shifted in the booth, giving us as much room as possible and aligning our bodies. “Ride me, baby,” I whispered against her lush mouth. “Take what you need. Take what we both need.”

The chorus serenaded us about love and undying need, about hungering for a lover’s touch, as she sunk onto my cock, then she fell forward on my chest, her mouth at my shoulder. She huffed out a hot breath as we both gasped, and she began to ride, milking my body for all she was worth.

I squeezed her hips with my hands to guide her, slamming her down as I surged up, going as deep as I could.

Our mouths found each other and fused as we found a fast and furious rhythm that was slightly sloppy, but all our own.

“Gideon . . . Gideon . . .” She gasped my name between kisses as she rocked her hips against mine, seeking her release and using my body like the vixen she was.

“I know, baby,” I rasped, clamping a hand over her mouth to cover the cries. “Come for me. Come now.” I grasped a handful of hair and yanked back so I could bite and suckle her throat, shooting her off in an orgasm so hard, it forced my own, sending white-hot flames through my body and behind my eyelids.

I sank back into the booth, and she collapsed against me, her breath hot against my chest.

“Fuck.”

She laughed weakly. “Yeah, fuck.”

The last notes rolled to a close, and the moment we’d lost ourselves in was gone. Charli’s face lifted to mine, and there was the quickest moment of something. Of sadness, maybe, before she shifted from my embrace and righted herself while I tucked myself back into my pants.

“There you are!” Jonathan, the boy wonder, bounded up to the table, out of breath and wide-eyed. “I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Shit, that was timing.

Charli immediately went into full-fledged businesswoman mode, her spine straight, eyes clear, all traces of the softness I’d just seen in her vanished. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Stormy.” He sunk into the booth opposite us, his eyes darting to me then back to her. “She never showed up to dance.”

“What?” Charlie squeaked.

He shook his head, his brow furrowed. “I’ve tried calling her cell and her home number. Nothing.”

“And you’re just now telling me?” Her tone was accusatory.

“Well, you weren’t in your office, and you didn’t tell me where you’d gone off to,” he said. “Then when you didn’t answer your cell either, I was starting to freak out.”

I already had my phone out and was texting my men to start looking for Stormy. I flagged down JD, who was over to the table in a flash, making me wonder if he’d also seen the previous five minutes. Didn’t matter. He’d never mention it.

“You seen Stormy? The dancer?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“She didn’t show up for her set tonight,” I explained, making his brow crease in concern. I turned to Jonathan. “Do you know where she lives?”

“Of course, I do.” He seemed offended by my question.

“Have you sent anyone to check on her?”

“Well . . . no, not yet.”

Charli huffed a frustrated sigh. “Jesus.”

I turned back to JD. “Go. Check on her there, then everywhere else you can think of. Report back ASAP.”

He nodded once then was gone.

Jonathan lifted a brow, but I ignored the twit and spoke to Charli. “You’re with me until we find her.”

“I—” she began, stopping as my look killed her argument. “Okay. Fine.” She faced Jonathan again. “Can you get Paisley or Sasha to dance in her place until we figure this out?”

He looked at me again, but I didn’t flinch. “You heard the woman,” I grumbled.

“Sure thing.” He stood and made his way out of the restaurant like he didn’t have a care in the world, fake-ass smile plastered in place.

Charli glanced up at me, valiantly trying to look unfazed, but I didn’t buy it for one second.

“I’ve got you,” I swore.

“I’m not worried about me.”

“And JD will find Stormy,” I added.

She nodded like she didn’t believe me, but she really didn’t have any other choice, especially when I was stuck to her side like white on rice for the rest of the night.

I got the message an hour later as we made our rounds with the second-floor dancers.

JD: Found her.

Me: Where?

JD: You’re not gonna like it, boss.

My gut turned to ice—cold, hard, and unforgiving—as I faced Charli.

“What?” she demanded. “Did JD find Stormy?”

I nodded and tugged her to a quiet corner. “Apparently.”

Before I knew her intention, she yanked my phone from my hand. She spun from my reach to see the next message that buzzed as it came up on my screen.

Her face paled, and she backed against the wall, sinking to the ground. “Oh, God. Oh, God,” she kept murmuring over and over, her hand to her mouth as if she might be sick.

“What?” I said, though I could easily guess.

I knelt next to her and gently pried the phone from her icy fingers to look for myself. “Fucking hell.”

Cold, hard rage boiled up in my chest as I took in the images of Stormy’s mutilated body, obviously posed for whoever found her, much like Jade had been. Her cameo pendant was all that was left on her body, her legs splayed in a brutally sexual manner. Her sightless eyes stared at the ceiling, her face contorted in perpetual fear, her torso and legs bruised, her throat slashed and gaping wide open.

But something else about the photo nagged me.

“Where is that?” I mumbled to myself as I started to text the question to JD.

“The—the gym in my building,” Charli breathed, making my head snap up.

“What?” I demanded. “What did you say?”

She blinked, and horror-glazed eyes met mine. “My apartment building. The gym’s in the basement. I work out there several times a week.”

“Does she live there?”

She shook her head. “No. None of the girls do. Why would she even—?” Charli’s voice shook, and she ran her hands over her face. “What the fuck is going on?”

My body began to vibrate with an all-new fury as this realization sunk in deep, and I texted JD to verify the location.

Me: Miss Vaughn’s apartment building gym?

JD: Yes, sir.

I took several deep breaths to gather myself before I shot him another message.

Me: *Call the cops. Make sure they call in Det. Broussard. Tell them Miss Vaughn is with me since they have failed to do their fucking job.*

JD: Yes, sir.

I faced her again, my mind made up. She could fight me all she wanted, play the Miss Independent bullshit, but I was not budging on this. Not this time. “Looks like you’re coming with me.”

“Coming with you where?” The shock was raw on her face.

“Home.”

“Home?”

I offered her my hand. “Yes. My home. Where I can keep you safe.”

She wanted to fight me. I could tell she did. But, ultimately, I think she was too fucking tired. Thank God.

She took my hand and let me help her up. I spoke briefly with my men, gave them strict instructions on security in my absence, then led her out to the Tesla.

I drove her back to my place in silence, fully aware that she had no idea where I lived, or what kind of man I’d truly become since I destroyed her that night in the hotel room all those years ago. But none of that mattered right now.

I walked her inside and flipped on the lights, trying to imagine what my state-of-the art home might look like through her eyes. Large and pristine, all white and stainless steel, but with very little to make it personal. Though it held all the technology anyone could want, I imagined that she would find it lacking. I slid the locks and armed the security system before leading her back to the master bathroom.

“There are clean towels and plenty of soaps and shampoo in there. Take your time. I’ll find you something to wear and get us something to eat.”

“I need to get things from my place, Gideon.”

“Not tonight,” I said. “Let them deal with this and check your place over.”

Puzzled eyes lifted to mine. “Why are you doing all this?”

“Because. I’m taking care of you. It’s what I do, Charli. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

CHAPTER NINE



Charli

THE NIGHTMARE WOULDN'T end. First Jade, now Stormy.

Guilt assaulted me as I tried to remember the last time I'd spoken to her. I didn't know her well. She'd only been with us a month or two, and—hell, I wasn't even sure that was her real name.

"I didn't know her, Gideon," I said, my voice sounding odd and echoey in the large, stark bathroom.

"You aren't expected to know all your employees on a personal level, Charli."

"She died in my building," I said, turning to face him, shaking my head. "She had no reason to be there, but she still lost her life in *my building*." The cold creeping through my body made me wrap my arms around myself. "Detective Annoying was right. It's about me."

"We don't know that," Gideon said, but the quick look away told me he agreed. That's why he was so insistent.

"Yes, we do," I said. "Jade was my friend. Stormy dies in my building the night we reopen Cameo. Who's next?" My stomach churned. "Vi? You?"

Gideon's dark eyes shot back to mine. "I already have two men on Violet. One she knows about and one she doesn't, just in case she sends the first one packing. And no one's coming after me." He crossed his arms like the cocky bastard he was. "At least not for this."

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m the last person you ever need to worry about,” he insisted, his voice deep and deadly serious.

“I’ll bet Stormy thought that, too,” I said under my breath.

I looked away from him and took in his personal space, my thoughts needing to be anywhere but inside my head. A long, spacious, black marble counter spanned one wall, his aftershave and cologne in the corner. A small jar held his toothbrush. A matching dish held designer soap. His large black robe hung on a hook. It was perfection, like a staged photo in a magazine.

“You can’t possibly be this neat,” I quipped, attempting light.

“I’m not,” he said. “I have a maid.” He pointed to one of the sinks. “When we get your things, you can have that side.”

When we get my things.

“How domestic,” I murmured.

“Don’t make this weird, Charli.”

“Don’t make it weird?” I said. “I’m pretty sure we’re already there, wouldn’t you say? People are getting slaughtered around me, and I’m scooped up and deposited in my ex—whatever’s home, like a twisted version of *This Is Your Life*. I mean, seriously, did you think we’d be playing house an hour and a half ago when we were fucking to our song?”

That song. Dear God, that had nearly stopped me cold. The words, the memories—what were the damn odds? If he hadn’t taken the lead at that point, I don’t know if I could have kept going.

Gideon closed his eyes and ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up in places. I had to clasp my fingers together not to reach up and smooth it.

“We aren’t *playing* at anything,” he said. “I’m just keeping you safe. If it makes you feel better, you can take my bed, and I’ll sleep in my office.”

“Wow.”

He gave me an exasperated look. “Do you have another idea?”

I shook my head and looked away, kicking off my heels and untying my halter dress. I was past caring, letting the simple sheath drop to the floor on the path to the open-concept, rain-style shower big enough for four.

I heard a long exhale, and I didn’t know if it was relief that I was shutting up or because I was getting naked. Maybe it was disgust that I was dropping clothes left and right in his pristine GQ bathroom, but I didn’t turn around to find out.

“Towels are—”

“I’ll find them,” I said, stepping naked into the shower and turning on the faucet, closing my eyes and letting the hot water scald the awfulness away.

I’m sorry, Charli.

It’s all I can give you.

It was more than I’d had in ten years, and somehow, it was temporarily enough. The way he’d looked at me, though. Touched me. Brought me here to his space—it was all more than I could process. I knew it was about *taking care* of me . . . Jesus, did I know that. He’d pushed that agenda every other sentence since he’d reentered my world. There was more there, however. Tonight, at least. I could feel it deep down in my soul. Exactly where I couldn’t afford to feel Gideon Kane ever again.

I startled at a movement behind me, but before I could turn, a big, hot body pressed up against me, and a large hand slid across my belly, clasping me tightly to him.

“Charli,” he murmured in my ear, his voice low, almost as if he were in pain.

I squeezed my eyes shut and let myself soak in his heat and his strength for just a moment. Let him soak in whatever it was he seemed to need from me. Slowly, I turned in his arms and reluctantly lifted my eyes to his.

“I just want to keep you safe,” he said, sweeping wet hair from my face and letting his fingers linger. “Why won’t you let me do that? Why do you fight me every step of the way?”

Something in his dark, steely gaze blazed for more than a simple answer, but I’d been begging for answers myself. If he wanted me to stop fighting, he had to meet me halfway. It was time we were both honest.

“I can’t trust you,” I said. “I need to know why you did that to me. To us. If you can tell me that, then maybe I can do what you need.” I shook my head. I wouldn’t promise him anything. “I deserve answers, Gideon. After everything, I deserve that.”

Our bodies hummed under the spray of the shower, his hot and hard against mine as we stared each other down.

He was silent too long. I pounded his chest with my fist. “Tell me, goddamn it!”

He shoved me against the wall of the shower, his body pinning mine, his eyes blazing. “You really want the truth? The cold, hard, dirty fucking truth?”

“Yes!” I hissed, my chest aching with the realization that I might not. “Yes.”

His hard-on raged against my belly, even as his glare burned me alive. “It’s not pretty, Charli. There’s no going back once you know.”

“I don’t care,” I seethed. “You were my . . .”

The inferno in his eyes softened to something all too familiar. “Your what?”

I wanted to cry, but I held it back, making my throat burn. I shook my head, refusing to look him in the eye.

He gripped my chin hard, forcing me to meet his gaze. “Your *what?*”

We stared at each other for a long moment. I felt his resistance crumbling, just as mine was. “My love, Gideon. My everything.” I sucked in a shaky breath. “You were the love of my life, and you broke me that night.”

On a gust of breath, his forehead dropped to mine. “You were my everything, too, Charli.” The words sounded as if they’d been ripped from him.

I clutched his waist, unable to stop myself as I felt this big, bad, unbreakable mob king *finally* breaking right in front of me.

“Then why?”

His lips brushed my temple. “To save you.”

I stilled. “To save me? From what?” The silence burned, radiating off him as the hot water sluiced over us. I leaned back to meet his eyes through the rising steam, and narrowed mine. “Or who?”

Dark, haunted eyes begged me to let it die.

That wasn’t happening. “Tell me, Gideon.”

His jaw clenched. “My father.”

No.

No.

“What?” The word was barely a whisper as my mind took off at double time trying to connect the dots.

“You heard me.”

I shoved at his chest. “What do you mean, your fucking *father?* What the hell, Gideon? Are you serious?”

His face went stoic. “Very. You know him. What he was capable of.”

“Of—of what? Hurting people?” I shook my head. “You thought he would hurt me?”

Gideon's eyes burned into mine. "I had no choice."

"You—" The rest of my comeback died on my tongue as it all became crystal clear. I saw it in his eyes. Goosebumps covered my skin as the cold, hard realization settled over me. What kind of monster gave ultimatums like that to his child? "You had to end us, or he would—?"

I couldn't even finish the thought.

"I refused to let that happen," he growled, the old anger gritty in his tone. "I still do."

I deflated, feeling the weight of it all. "So, you crushed me by fucking another woman? Why didn't you just break up with me?"

He closed his eyes. "Because I know you. You would have fought—" His face twisted in an angry grimace. "You would have fought for us. I had to make sure you wouldn't. That you'd leave me and never look back." His eyes opened, giving me a glimpse of sheer rawness wrapped in fierce emotion that I knew he never intended to show. "I needed you to hate me. I needed you to stay far, far away from me. I needed to keep you out of danger. I'd do it again."

"You'd do it again," I echoed. "Un-fucking-believable."

Hands came up on either side of my face, his fingers gripping my hair. Frustration emanated off him. "You're *alive*." His voice boomed through the shower like the god other people thought he was. "I'm sorry it hurt you, but there was no other way. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. We were inseparable." His voice lowered. "*I* couldn't stay away. I was twenty-one, Charli. A fucking kid. The only thing I could think to do was something you'd never forgive."

Around us, the water began to lose steam, so I turned away and began to wash, letting the tears fall and my thoughts settle.

Did I like his answer? Hell, no. Did it make perfect sense? Sadly, yes.

Was Gideon Kane an overprotective fucking idiot?

Yes, yes, yes. A thousand times yes.

Did he still hold my heart?

I wasn't sure.

Did it break mine to know the impossible choice he'd had to make at a ridiculously young age? What that must have done to him? Turned him into? A thousand *more* times, yes.

We were quiet as we finished showering and dried off. I waved off his offer of dinner, so he loaned me an extra toothbrush and one of his t-shirts.

I climbed up into his giant California King while he finished up in the bathroom.

A few minutes later, he reappeared in flannel pajama pants and a white t-shirt, his short black hair in wet ringlets, his feet bare, looking so different than the mob boss in his designer suits. He moved toward the door, his eyes dark and unreadable. "Are you okay?" At my nod, he gave a simple nod back and averted his gaze, turning to go. "Goodnight, Charli."

"Wait." I sat up.

He paused and eyed me from the doorway.

Something strange and forbidden burned its way from deep in my gut and overtook me. Maybe it was the horror of the night, all the crazy events of the last few weeks. Maybe it was his recent shower revelation that finally solved one of the biggest mysteries of my life, or the look in his eyes as he did it, but I decided to go for broke.

"Stay."

"Charli." His voice held a warning, but also something more. Something primal. Something real.

I threw back the sheet on the other side of the bed and silently met the heat of his gaze.

He took a breath then finally padded over to crawl under the covers, but he didn't cuddle up or lie on his side to face

me. He lay on his back, one arm behind his head, his gaze on the ceiling. I could practically hear his thoughts racing.

After a few minutes, I gave in first and placed a tentative hand on his chest. “Just one more question,” I whispered.

He sucked in a deep breath. “What’s that?”

“Did you ever really love me?”

He rolled his head toward me, our eyes meeting as his large hand clasped mine, interlacing our fingers in his strong grip. “More than my life.”



SOFT MORNING LIGHT filtered in through the blinds as a doorbell woke me. I groaned and rolled over, realizing I was alone. Memories of making love achingly slowly, then being held all night in Gideon’s arms, our limbs intertwined, filled my brain. My insides turned to goo against my better judgment.

How could the man do that to me after all we’d been through?

More than my life.

That’s why.

I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent still heavy in the sheets as the doorbell rang again. Who the hell could that be?

Oh.

It all came back in a rush why I was at Gideon’s in the first place. Stormy. Jade. The possible threats to me or those I knew and loved. It had to be the cops or Detective Broussard here to ask more asinine questions instead of pounding the pavement to catch the killer.

Logic told me to hurry up and get out there, but the bitch in me said to take my time. Let the alpha dogs swing their dicks for a bit.

Maybe I’d even avail myself of Gideon’s awesome shower again . . . just because I could.



BY THE TIME I strolled out of the master suite, my wet hair finger combed back, my body massaged with a pomegranate scented lotion I was quite sure wasn't Gideon's, and wrapped up in his robe, I was prepared to be grilled and bombarded with all the details about Stormy.

I was not prepared, however, for the sight of two hot men in black leather aprons, cooking. Well, working in brooding silence in a semblance of cooking. Gideon was working at the stove. The detective was chopping peppers and throwing them into a bowl.

"Good morning," I said, bringing both men's glances my way.

Gideon's gaze slid over me in his robe, and the appreciation was palpable. "Morning," he replied.

"You're cooking," I said, instead of the obvious question.

He looked at the detective and then me again, matter-of-factly. "Yes."

"You—cook."

"I'm a single man, Charli. Eating has to happen at some point."

I looked back and forth between them, trying to make sense of what was in front of me. He gave away nothing.

"Well, so does cleaning, but you—"

"Don't enjoy that."

"And you have eighty-five hair products in your shower," I pointed out. "Who *are* you?"

"A man with a sister that runs a salon."

"Ah," I said. Explained the lotion, too. Maybe.

"I like cooking," he said, focusing back on an effortless omelet flip. "It helps me wind down."

"I'm impressed," I said.

“Don’t be,” Detective Broussard mumbled, not looking up from his deft chopping. “He told me he can do eggs and meat, that’s it.”

“I invite you into my home,” Gideon said, giving him a side-eye, sliding the egg onto a plate. “Offer you food while you wait, and then you sell me out.”

Detective Broussard smirked. “Offer? You put me to work.” He wrapped the newly cooked omelet into a tortilla and took a bite. “That’s amazing.”

“That was Charli’s.”

I shook my head. “My stomach’s not—” I waved a hand. “I really don’t want anything.” Plus, the weird new vibe between them was giving me a headache. What the living hell?

Gideon narrowed his eyes at me. “You okay?”

I didn’t answer, choosing instead to curl up on the nearby couch, pulling my legs under me. Gideon’s smell wafted all around me as his too-large robe swaddled my body.

Detective Broussard took another bite before setting it down and taking the apron off, coming around to perch on a barstool.

“I’m not here to make your life more complicated, Miss Vaughn,” he said. “I know last night’s events have shaken you up.”

I looked up at him, wondering how much I could trust him. “My best friend was murdered last week, Detective. Now, a girl I barely knew, but trusted that she was safe working for me—died the same way.” I closed my eyes. “In the building where I live and sleep. Shaken up doesn’t even touch it.”

He nodded. “Do you know of any reason why—?”

“She would have been there?” I finished. “No. But as you pointed out the other day, anyone can come and go, so maybe she heard there was a gym in the basement.”

“I was going to ask you if you know any reason why someone would be doing this to *you*,” he said. “We talked about it the other day.” The detective’s eyes went serious, and I could feel Gideon’s attention shift.

“I thought it was kind of far-fetched then,” I said. Not far enough that I hadn’t gone straight to Gideon’s office and hit him over the head with it, but still. “Now . . .” I blew out a breath. “Now, I’m not allowed to go home alone, and my friends are under guard.”

“So I hear,” he said. “Glad to know you’re taking the theory seriously.”

“That still doesn’t explain why Stormy would be in the building gym,” I said.

“She wasn’t.”

I blinked. “Wait, what?” My mind flipped back over the horrid photos on Gideon’s phone. The background. The wallpaper. The fact that JD *said* that’s where she was. “Yes, she was.”

He paused a second. “She didn’t die there.”

Gideon turned from the stovetop, staring first at the detective and then at me. “Fuck,” he muttered, setting a spatula down.

“She—” I began.

“She was moved postmortem,” Detective Broussard explained unnecessarily.

My skin went cold, and my eyes went hot. Deep inside me, my stomach pitched dangerously, and I bolted to my feet, not even caring when the robe tie loosened. It was all I could do to make it to the pretty black and white toilet and drop to my knees before all that was unholy spewed forth.

Two hurls in, large hands swept my hair back.

I couldn’t catch my breath as my body rebelled again and again.

A month ago, I would have laughed in the face of anyone who suggested that Gideon would now be holding my hair while I wore his robe and puked in his bathroom.

“I’m so—sorry,” I gasped.

“I’ve got you,” he said.

“Detective—”

“Left.”

Couldn’t blame him there. I wiped at my face, now covered in a fine sheen of sweat, and glanced sideways.

“What *was* that in there?”

“Which part?”

I wanted to smile, but I couldn’t. I just pointed back toward the kitchen.

“Diversion,” he said, smoothing a lock of hair over my ear. “A cop comes into my house, I give him something to do so he doesn’t look too closely.”

I retched again and wished the toilet had a magic button to swallow me whole. “Doesn’t get sexier than this,” I choked, my eyes filling again with tears that had nothing to do with throwing up.

“Well, that’s true.”

I laughed, which quickly turned to tears, then to sobs. Jesus, I was a hot mess. He needed to run. He didn’t. Gideon wet a washcloth and wiped my face, then folded it up and pressed it against the back of my neck.

“Come here,” he said, sitting against the wall and pulling me into his lap.

Wrapping his robe tighter around me, he tucked my head under his chin and encircled me in his arms. I couldn’t fight it. I had nothing left. I’d never felt so safe, and yet so terrified in all my life. Everything was crashing down with brute force, all at once, and all I could do was grasp his shirt and hold on.



“How *IS* LIFE at the Kane Castle?”

Vi’s not so subtle eyebrow raise accompanying her snarky tone only set my already irritable mood on edge. She’d come upstairs to my office to have lunch with me, burying the lead about taking an appointment.

It had been three weeks since Stormy’s murder—twenty-two days, to be exact. And while I’d reapproved escort outings a week in, I’d kept Vi out of the rotation.

“I could say the same about this office being the Cameo castle, but I see you don’t mind eating up here in style,” I said.

“Okayyyy, back it up, girl,” she said, pushing back from her paper-wrapped burger. “If I wanted style, it would not be here, and not be at work, and what the living hell is chewing on you?”

“I don’t want you out there,” I admitted.

“I have to make a living,” she countered, holding up a finger when I opened my mouth. “No. You can’t keep doing that thing you do—dropping off groceries you just happened to get too many of, or leaving cash in my jacket pockets—yes, I know that was you.” She leaned over our little ottoman picnic to squeeze my hand. “I love you for it, but no.”

“People are dying around me, Vi.”

“And it’s awful and mortifying, but I’m not going out that way,” she said with a wink.

“What do you mean?”

Vi gave a little shoulder shrug. “Just—Jade was so private, you know? Being left all—like that.” She shut her eyes and shook her head. “So public and humiliating. And Stormy, it’s just so sadly ironic. A girl with an eating disorder, who was obsessed with her body, found dead in a gym. Really?”

I reared back, shocked. “She what? Stormy had an eating disorder?”

Vi’s face softened. “Yeah.”

“How come I didn’t know?”

“And what would you have done?” At my gaping expression, Vi reached over and gripped my hand. “She didn’t want you to know. She didn’t want anyone to know. She was trying to get help, but . . .” She shook her head sadly. “She was so intimidated by you, so in awe, you know.”

“She—*what?*” I asked, truly confused. And here I thought all the girls hated me.

Vi met my eyes with a look and a small smile. “You knew that, right? Stormy played for both teams, and I think she had a little crush on the boss lady.” My mouth fell open, both surprise and renewed guilt washing over me in a wave. Vi’s eyebrows rose, watching me. “Okayyyy, maybe you didn’t know. Sorry, girl. You hear a lot of things in the dressing rooms.”

“Jesus,” I breathed, rubbing the back of my neck. “So, if someone knew that . . .”

I couldn’t finish that thought.

“You’re saying this is about you?” Vi asked, narrowing her perfectly lined eyes. “Like somebody targeting you or the people close to . . .” Her words trailed off as her expression cleared and my concern suddenly made sense. My eyes filled with tears as I looked into hers.

“I can’t lose you, Vi,” I said. “I can’t gamble that this freak won’t go after you.”

“Hey,” she said. “If that’s what someone wants, then they’ll get it regardless of the big grunts flanking my ass day and night,” she said. “That’s not on you. I’m not going to live in a bubble. I refuse. Besides,” she continued. “I don’t buy that that’s all that’s eating you. You’ve been weird since last week.”

I buried my face in my hands. She was changing the subject to lighten the air, and I got that, but she had a point, too. One I’d been ducking. “I know, I’m sorry. I’ve been a bitch lately.”

“Have a fry,” she said, shoving half of hers at me. “It’s been known to cure that.”

I shook my head and pushed them away, bringing me another look.

“Since when do you turn down fast food?” she asked. “Or any food?”

“My stomach hasn’t been right since all this started,” I said. “The stress. The drama. Or maybe it’s Gideon’s apartment. He has this fancy filtered air thing. I think it’s too clean for me.”

Her big blue eyes narrowed. “Uh-huh.”

“What?”

She lifted a sculpted eyebrow. “We’ll see.”

I scoffed. “We’ll see what?”

“What else is going on with you and Voldemort?”

We shared a meaningful glance as we both automatically thought of our friend, Amy, who had a borderline obsession with Harry Potter.

“You heard from her lately?” she asked softly, our minds going in the same direction.

I shook my head. “No. Not since she left to go home. I’ve left messages, but she hasn’t returned them. I miss her,” I admitted.

“Me, too. I know she was desperate to get back in touch with the fam, but I don’t understand why she wouldn’t have at least kept in touch. We’re her best friends. Hell, she talked like we were her *only* friends.”

I shrugged. “Maybe she’ll reach out soon.”

“Maybe.” Though she didn’t sound convinced. After a moment, Vi narrowed another look at me. “So?”

“So?”

“You and He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?”

“Are you for real right now?” I said but averted my eyes anyway. She was too sharp to fool.

“I knew it,” she hissed, leaning over into my line of vision. “You aren’t just staying there. You’re *staying there*.”

“I am *not*,” I bit out. “It’s temporary, and he’s stubborn and —”

“And you’re totally getting it on.”

I opened my mouth to deny that in some witty way, but the pause was too telling. “Oh, my God,” she whispered, her jaw dropping. “I was kind of kidding, but holy fuck, Charli.”

“Shhh,” I admonished.

“You’re living with him.”

“Temporarily.”

“You’re living with him,” she repeated, annoyingly. “This is a big deal.”

I ate one of her nasty fries and forced myself to swallow it. “Only because you’re making it one,” I said, not really believing my own hype.

The intimacy between Gideon and me had hit a weird new level since I’d moved in. What had just been “sex and business” had become blurred with the cooking together, and falling asleep on his chest, and long, leisurely lovemaking in the early mornings when one of us would wake to the other’s warm, willing body.

Blurred didn’t even describe it. It was easy there, away from being the mob boss and the madame. Like the rest of the world could fall away and we were just us.

Easy was dangerous.

And every time I walked out of that building and into this one, I felt it. I felt the investment my heart was trying to make, and just how deadly that could be. It was the one thing we both wanted once upon a time, and the last thing we needed now.

“Okay, I don’t care if you gave it up, Charli,” she said, then shook her head. “Yes, I do. But just tell me you *covered* things.”

I blinked a couple of times to look nonchalant and then met her eyes.

“Charli Vaughn.”

I tilted my head and matched her tone. “Violet Reed.”

“Have I taught you nothing?” she said, her voice rising two octaves. “Jesus, you are at least back on the shot, right?”

I glanced away, dread blanketing me as my mental calendar logged the date. “I am, but it’s overdue,” I said under my breath. “Oh, my God. With everything—I—it slipped my mind.”

Vi was on her feet in a flash. “I’ll be right back.”

“But—”

I knew where she was going. The escorts had a prep room with all kinds of products and props, and certain tests were always stocked. Because nothing was one hundred percent.

“This can’t be happening,” I whispered, watching her leave. I blinked at the empty doorway and then stared down at my flat belly. “No, no, no, no. That’s crazy. I’m just—”

Just coming down with something. That was all. Not—not *that*. Children and babies and families didn’t work in our world. Look at us. Could you find two more fucked-up people?

Vi was back before I could even answer that question, holding out a box.

“This is—no, this is nuts, Vi,” I said, backing up a step with a laugh.

It had to be funny. We’d laugh about this together afterward one day. Me and Vi and Voldemort. How dumb Charli didn’t have her shit together like a grown-up, because

people were being murdered around her, and then had a panic attack that she might be knocked up by a mob boss.

“This is reality, Charli,” she said. “Be responsible and check.”

I stared at the box in her hand like it was a nuclear bomb. “Don’t I have to wait till first thing in the morning?”

“This one isn’t picky,” she said. “It can check your levels any time of day.”

I nodded, feeling lightheaded. “Of course, it can.”

Vi shoved the box into my hands. “Go. Now.”

It didn’t take long for the course of my life to change. My shaking fingers held the stick as I walked out, and Vi took one look at my face and teared up.

“Shit,” she whispered.

“Excuse me!” Jonathan bellowed, bolting through the door. “I tried to—”

Vi and I both jumped like we’d been shot, the stick tumbling from my hand. I kicked it toward my desk, but it didn’t quite make it, and neither Vi nor I could reach it without it being noticeable. Jonathan’s gaze, however, darted straight to it as he moved in like a charging bull.

“Move! Where’s my son?” came another voice right behind him.

My skin crawled as recognition tuned in on the evil incarnate that was Gregory Kane.

“I tried to stop him,” Jonathan said, looking flustered as he scooped up the stick and put it in his pocket.

Thank you, I tried to say with my eyes.

JD’s large form appeared in the doorway, a pissed off, questioning look on his face. He grimaced as an electric wheelchair slammed into the back of his calves.

“It’s okay, JD,” I said, swiping under my eyes and flexing my fingers to shake off the shock. I’d deal with that later.

“Where’s my son?” he rasped again, speeding into the room as JD stepped aside, looking like he wanted to snap the old man’s neck.

“Which one?” I asked, lifting my chin in defiance.

“Don’t get cocky with me,” he sneered. “You are nothing more than shit under my shoe.”

Nice.

“Wow,” I said. “Such charm. Gideon comes by it so honestly. And he’s not here, Mr. Kane. I’m guessing he’s at work. *His* work.”

“He’s not, and that’s because of you.”

I forced a chuckle, but my mind was moving at warp speed. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about my idiot son fucking with the wrong damn people, that’s what!” he yelled, spit spraying from his mouth. “He’s fucking up years of negotiation, blowing up shit he has no business messing with, over a cunt.”

I had no idea what he meant. Gideon kept his illegal dealings out of my world, and that’s how I wanted it. But I knew he was digging into the murders now, too. His own way. I didn’t ask what that way was, but if he was putting his life or his business in danger over it . . .

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, keeping my voice even. “But we have had two murders here, in case you’ve missed it, under the Kane security watch.”

Yeah, why not play that card?

“Only one happened here,” he said. “That’s the only one that concerns us.”

What a dick.

“Well, Gideon has been working on it,” I retorted. “So, I don’t know what you think that has to do with me. It’s business.”

The wheelchair whined as he moved closer, his rheumy eyes glaring up at me. “*Business* doesn’t drive a man to make stupid, reckless choices,” he snarled. “Pussy does. That stupid boy can’t see past his dick when it comes to you, and it’s going to get more than a few whores killed.”

“Get the fuck out of my office,” I hissed, curling my fingers into fists before he could see the shaking.

“My pleasure,” he said, hitting the reverse button. “You tell him I’m looking—” He stopped short, the wheelchair halting its backward lurch, his dark gaze zeroing in on something behind me.

I backed up, knowing in an instant of horrible clarity what caught his attention.

The box.

I’d opened it and read the directions with Vi, leaving the box and its giant PREGNANCY TEST letters sitting on the arm of my couch before going in the bathroom, and now that simple action was going to sink me.

Then again, no. This was my damn place, my world, my office, and he could kiss my lily-white ass. I glared down at him, refusing to look panicked or intimidated or terrified or any of the things this evil bully wanted me to feel.

This *grandfather* of my child.

My whole body broke out in a cold sweat as I realized that of all the what-the-fucks of this situation, *that* one was the most terrifying.

“You’re trapping him,” he hissed. “I knew it. You couldn’t trap him back then, so you’re doing it now, you pathetic—”

“I’m pathetic?” I yelled. “I’m not the one so riddled with insecurity that I terrorize my children to feel like a man.”

“Just wait,” he snarled. “You and your mother were both raised in a whorehouse. You want more of that spawn—”

Vi’s hands on his chair cut him off mid-insult, and he sucked in a rattled breath as she swung him around and pushed him toward the door before he could reach any buttons.

“Leave!” she screeched over his head as she shoved him through the door and slammed it shut.

I sank onto the couch, my knees knocking too hard to hold me up anymore.

Jonathan pulled the stick from his pocket with his thumb and forefinger. “Can I—?”

“Throw it away,” I mumbled.

“Thank you,” he breathed.

“Wait,” Vi said, pulling out her phone and taking a picture. She threw me a side look. “In case you need proof or something.”

“This can’t be real,” I said, letting my head fall forward. “I can’t—we can’t—”

“You can,” Vi said. “People do it every day. Or there are choices.”

I shook my head. “Not for me. My mom never knew her father, and I never knew mine. If either of them had made that choice, I wouldn’t be here stressing out right now, so no.”

“Me, either,” Jonathan said softly, turning both our heads his way. His gaze was somewhere else. “I never knew either of my parents. They bolted and left me with my Gigi.”

“Sorry, Jonathan,” Vi said, a rare moment of compassion for him crossing her face.

“I mean, my grandmother was crazy as hell, but she loved me,” he said, shaking his head, his normal smile returning. “She always said the same thing. That she couldn’t imagine if my mother hadn’t had me.”

“Yeah,” I said, distracted. “I just—I can’t imagine doing this right now.” Lightning shot through me, and I jumped to my feet, grabbing my keys off my desk. “I have to go.”

“Gideon?” Vi asked.

“I have to find him before that asshole does.”

CHAPTER TEN



Gideon

“JESUS CHRIST, GIDEON, will you get your head out of your ass? You have a business to run and a whole lot of shit you’re responsible for!” my brother, Marcus, fumed at me.

“He’s right,” Phillip, ever the uptight money man, agreed from his perch on Charli’s couch. “Word from Miami is that Diego Santiago was shot and robbed recently, and the Cubans are fucking edgy. The last thing we need is the head of our organization to drop any balls.” He lifted a brow. “In this world, that gets people killed.”

I’d been holed up in her apartment for the past week, ignoring everything but leads on Jade and Stormy’s murders, leaving Kane Enterprises to my brothers. It had been quiet with no distractions until Tony, my tech guy, gave up my hiding spot. I was going to beat his ass. But I wanted to be close to where the fucker had last been to see if I could figure out his motives, his mind. And honestly, being surrounded by Charli’s stuff grounded me somehow.

“I’m well aware of that,” I grumbled. “You’re handling things fine, and I’ve got other things to do right now.”

Marcus lifted a brow my way. “Other things? You mean a woman?”

I lifted my brow right back, silently telling him to back the fuck up.

“Whatever,” Marcus said. “Get your dick wet, I don’t care. But we need you back at work. The Petrovs have been sniffing around our latest deal with the Irish, and we need to move that case of suppressors to the Cubans in Miami.”

“So move it. That should settle them down after Diego’s mishap.” I cracked my knuckles. “Did the bastard die?”

Marcus shook his head. “Unfortunately, no.”

He knew how much I disliked Diego Santiago, even though, for business, I kept up the pretense of a cordial relationship. The punk was an arrogant cocksucker who wasn’t worth the grease in his hair, and the only reason I put up with his bullshit was because his old man was an old family friend who had always kept his word to Kane Enterprises.

“Damn.”

“It gets better,” Marcus said. “The old man benched him and brought up the little sister.”

“Isobel?” I asked incredulously. “Isn’t she Sofia’s age?”

“No,” Phillip said, giving me a look. “She’s pushing thirty and is more dangerous than her stupid brother. And hot as hell.”

“I’d fuck her,” Marcus said with a wink. “Just to knock the chip off her shoulder, of course.”

“I’d do her for free,” Phillip added.

“You two shut the fuck up,” I said, my patience already thin.

“Fine,” Phillip said, looking down at his phone. “So, the Irish?”

“I’ll handle the Irish. It’s fine.” I wasn’t worried. “Anything else?”

Marcus stared me down for several long moments, his dark gaze so much like mine it was like looking in a mirror. “What’s going on, brother?”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“That’s bullshit, and we all know it,” Phillip said. “Let us help you so we can get it done and get you back at the helm where you belong.”

I stood and started for the door, letting them know the conversation was over. “I’m good. See ya.”

They glared, but ultimately, I was the fucking king, so they knew better than to argue. They stood and made their way out.

“Whatever you’re up to, I hope it’s worth it,” Marcus said on his way out. “And I hope it doesn’t get you killed.”

I didn’t bother to answer.

I closed myself back inside and went back to the surveillance and notes Tony and I had collected, along with an inside source we had at the Las Vegas PD. Going over every piece of surveillance from Cameo as well as Charli’s apartment building, frame by frame, had led to a few viable suspects that we were running down one by one.

I glanced at the image currently on my computer screen. A retired college professor who happened to both live in this building and frequent Cameo. Bob Theiss had a spotless record, but we’d uncovered an arrest for attempted aggravated sexual assault that never went anywhere because his victim—an exotic dancer—dropped the charges.

Mr. Theiss had been unaccounted for since before Jade’s murder, but I would find him and introduce him to Mr. Fucking Kane’s vigorous style of interrogation.

I would get answers. I had to. At this point, I would do anything to keep Charli safe. I was beyond all reason where she was concerned; I could admit that to myself now. No more teenage love or childhood games. I’d brought her into my home; I’d finally told her the truth that had been weighing me down like a fucking anchor, and in the course of the past few weeks, she had found a way deep, deep under my skin and into my cold, thought-to-be-dead heart.

Oh, hell, who was I kidding? She'd always been there. As much as I'd tried to purge her and kill that part of myself, it wouldn't die. I could just never admit it.

Unable to help myself, I picked up my phone and texted JD, who was at Cameo, keeping an eye on things.

Me: Everything good?

JD: Yes, sir.

Then, as if reading my mind, he added, *She's in her office having lunch with Vi.*

Me: Thank you.

JD: Of course.

I tucked my phone away and got back to work. About an hour later and right on time, a knock sounded at the door.

Paulie, my father's old enforcer, greeted me at the door with a giant, toothy grin, belying how dangerous he really was. "Gideon, boy! How are ya?"

We clasped hands in a handshake and one-armed hug. "I'm good, Paulie. It's good to see you. Thanks for coming by." I stood back and let him in.

"No problem. You call, I come." He entered, and I closed and locked the door, then we made our way inside.

I took in the big man as he moseyed around Charli's apartment, taking in her décor and artwork. He'd just been released from prison on a racketeering and assault charge from his work with our organization, but he was still as loyal as they came, and my father had made sure to pad his bank account well for that loyalty, so he was well taken care of on his release. As far as I knew, Paulie had no real family, his true love being the Kane organization, which I hoped was still true.

He turned to face me. "How's the old man?"

I stifled my automatic anger. "He's alright. Hanging in there as long as he doesn't overdo it."

His smile was proud. “And you’re the boss man now? I can hardly believe it. Things change, don’t they?”

“They do.”

“Well, you know I’ll always be there for the Kanes, no matter what. No questions asked. So, what can I do for you?”

I took a breath and nodded. “I’m glad to hear that.” I spun the computer screen to face him, showing him Bob Theiss’s face. “I need you to track down someone and bring him back to me. It’s urgent.”

His eyes scanned the screen, then lifted to me. “Consider it done.”

“Thank you, Paulie. I appreciate that. You’ll have whatever resources you need.”

He nodded once. “Okay. Thank you.”

We talked shop and shot the shit for a few more minutes, as was the custom, before I knew he would take his leave to begin the job. That was fine with me, as long as he found Mr. Theiss, and I had every confidence he would.

Finally, as I followed him to the door to see him out, he slowed to take in the row of family photos that Charli had on the wall. He scanned the photo of her and her mom and grandmother, taken at the restaurant she’d managed. Their smiling faces close together, so similar.

Paulie’s confused eyes met mine. “You knew them?”

Something strange and a bit dangerous trickled down my spine. “Why do you ask?”

His gaze flicked back to the picture. “It’s just a shame, is all. That day. It was just supposed to be the old woman. The other two were just collateral damage.” He looked over at me again, oblivious to the white-hot rage coursing through my veins. “I had no idea anyone else was in her car. Your dad said it would just be the old broad.” He shrugged. “He got bad information, I guess.”

I said nothing more as he lumbered out the door and red filled my vision.

I counted to one hundred, giving Paulie a chance to clear the vicinity. I was a live wire about to detonate, and I didn't need him in the blast zone. I'd long suspected that my father had lied to me about that day, but now I had confirmation that he had, in fact, orchestrated the accident that had forever altered Charli's life. Without giving it any more thought, I grabbed my keys and raced to the car. It was time to get the truth from his lips.

I didn't knock. I didn't announce myself. I didn't bother with any niceties. I found him on the couch, watching the news.

"You killed Camille and Chanel Vaughn."

He turned to look up at me slowly, his glare giving nothing away. "Where the fuck have you been?"

"You *killed* the Vaughn women," I repeated, my words low and angry.

"Why haven't you been returning my calls?" he demanded, ignoring me.

I took a step in his direction. "Say it," I bit out, my tone a threat.

"I did no such thing. I told you that."

"You had Paulie do it. Same thing."

Something in his expression shifted, like an animal that knew it had been caught. He quickly stifled it. "So what if I did?" he roared. "The old cunt was threatening to back out on our deal and go into business with the motherfucking Petrovs." He spat out the words like they were shit-flavored poison. "I was not about to allow that to happen. Not on my fucking watch. No fucking way. A deal's a deal, and we had too many assets tied up in Cameo to let that kind of betrayal slide. We still do."

His nostrils flared as pride warred with rage. I'd always known my father to be a proud man, but this was something altogether different.

"You killed them because they wanted to do business with the Russians?"

"Damn right I did!" he nearly screamed. "It was a call that needed to be made, so I made it!" His gaze narrowed in near disgust. "I'm not sure that's something you're capable of."

I rushed him and got right down in his face, making him flinch. "Fuck you, old man."

"No. Fuck you," he shot back, his glare hate-filled.

I bit back a curse and shoved back to pace. "Jesus, Dad. Why didn't you just tell me the truth when I asked you before? Why lie?"

"Because you've had your head so wrapped up in that cunt, I couldn't trust you with the truth." He tilted his head. "I'm still not sure I can."

"What the hell does that even mean?"

"Don't you get it?" His grin was arrogant. Cocky. "I couldn't let the Vaughns go into business with the Petrovs because *I* was in business with them."

"Wait—What?" I raked a hand over my head. "What the fuck are you talking about? We don't deal with the Russians."

"No. *I* don't anymore, thanks to your little stunts with Roman and Sergei. Jesus, boy, you need to learn to stay out of dealings that don't belong to you. You made a mess of things that even I can't clean up."

"How the hell was I supposed to know you had deals with the Russians if you never fucking told me, Dad?"

"There was no reason for you to know until I knew I could trust you fully. And by your behavior, it's obvious I can't."

"My . . . my behavior?"

Anger began to bubble and simmer deep in my gut as I gathered where this was heading. My old man had always been a ruthless son of a bitch, but there were some lines even I wouldn't abide by with him.

“Yes!” His fist slammed down on the arm of the couch. “You’re going off half-cocked over that fucking Vaughn bitch—*again*, I might add—and it’s taking your focus off Kane Enterprises. It’s dangerous, and it’s stupid, and I can’t believe you let yourself be trapped like that. How dumb can you be?”

My heart double-tapped in my chest. “Trapped?”

He paused. Studied me for several long moments. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and slow, as if I was truly stupid. “She hasn’t told you?”

“Told me what?”

Something dark and foreign settled deep in my gut. He knew something big that was going to change my life forever. I could feel it. Then he laughed, making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Jesus, you are a fucking idiot. I told you that Vaughn women were poison. You should’ve walked away when I told you to. Now she’s got you right where she wants you. By the goddamn balls!”

“What are you talking about, you crazy son of a bitch?”

“I’m talking about that stupid little twat you can’t keep your dick out of,” he spat, his lips curling. “Typical fucking woman, she went and got herself knocked up so she could trap you and take you for all you’re worth.”

The blood rushed from my head, making me dizzy, but I fought to keep my shit together. “You’re lying. How would you even know something like that?”

He sneered at me. “Does it matter?”

He had to be lying. He was the king of liars.

Still . . . could it be true?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I paced and raked a hand over my head while he cackled behind me.

“Aw, the idea of fatherhood got your panties in a wad, boy? Trust me, it sucks. But don’t worry, I can have it handled so you don’t have to worry about her or the little parasite.”

I froze as it all settled on me with startling clarity.

He was serious.

I pivoted to face him as several things became crystal fucking clear all at once.

“You’d have Charli killed?”

Of course, he would. He’d threatened it before.

“We’ll call it finishing the job.” His tone was flat. Detached. Emotionless at the thought that she could be carrying his grandchild.

“The job,” I echoed.

“Yes. Taking care of this family.” His eyes were wrinkled and watery now, but they still held the steely determination that had always intimidated me growing up. Not anymore. “This family has to always come first, Gideon. You must remember that, or we’ll never survive.”

Yes, it was clear now.

He was absolutely right.

I nodded and reached slowly under my jacket for my Sig.

Let my palm caress the grip.

My finger released the safety, hooked the trigger.

“You’re right, Dad.” His eyes bulged when I pulled the gun from my jacket and aimed it at his head, right between his eyes. “It will always be family first.”

A flash of something passed over his expression. On anyone else, it would be fear. On him, it was just surprise. His

cackling laugh followed. One I'd heard from him a million times when he was torturing his prey.

"You don't have the balls, boy," he sneered, the words slow and drawn out.

His words didn't matter anymore. He couldn't bait me. Something primal, something beyond mere protectiveness, overtook me.

It was time.

It was over.

"Charli is my family now."

I pulled the trigger.



I CALLED JAROD and Michael to come clean up the mess then poured myself a long shot of whiskey. I glanced down and realized I was covered in my dad's blood, but my hands weren't shaking.

I glanced over at my father's lifeless body and tried to feel something. Anything.

Nothing came except relief that the bastard was finally gone.

I knew I'd have to explain myself to my brothers, but eventually they'd understand. Sophia wouldn't give a shit. In time, maybe I could make some real changes to Kane Enterprises that would be good for this family.

Family.

Fucking Christ.

Was Charli really pregnant?

Could my father have been telling the truth? How would he have known? Why would he have lied about something like that? He had nothing to gain from it.

I raked a hand over my stubbled face, trying to reconcile how the idea made me feel.

A baby?

God, I'd never even had a goldfish. Was I cut out to be a father? Was that even an option? We'd had a couple of good weeks with her living at my apartment, but that was hardly indicative of a future. She wasn't there because she wanted to be. She was there because she was under my protection. Nothing more.

My love, Gideon. My everything.

Her words, her touch, said so much more. But what kind of future could a mobster and a madame possibly have? What kind of life was that for a child?

“Jesus.”

I dropped my head as I realized I wasn't sure I cared. I'd spoken the truth to my father just before I put a bullet between his eyes. Charli was my family now, as fucked up as that was, and I had to know the truth.

Once Jarod and Michael showed up, I left them to their work, ignoring their shock and questioning glances.

I made use of my dad's shower to clean myself up and found some of my clothes tucked away in my old bedroom. I glanced at my phone and read the several texts that had been coming in from Charli all evening.

Where are you? We need to talk.

Seriously.

Hello?

Please call me!

Gideon Kane! Fucking call me!

To hell with the phone. After texting JD, I knew she wasn't at Cameo, so I headed home.

I let myself inside and was immediately assailed by the scent of freshly showered Charli. She loved my shower and all

the shit my sister gave me from the salon, so my place smelled of pomegranate and vanilla often now.

I locked up and set my keys down and followed my nose to find her in the bedroom.

She sat cross-legged on the bed in one of my t-shirts, no makeup, her hair wet and loose, the curls circling around the swells of her breasts. She'd never been more beautiful, and the sight caught me off guard.

She glanced up, her eyes red and puffy as if she'd been crying. "Gideon!"

"Hey."

"Where the hell have you—" She narrowed her eyes, taking me in. "Is everything alright?"

I leaned against the doorframe, afraid if I went to her, I'd grab her and never let her go. "Not really."

She looked alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"I—" I didn't normally care what people thought of me or how I conducted my business. But here, now, with her . . . I cared. And that was fucking dangerous. My fingers twitched into fists as I pushed the words out. "I killed my father."

Her face paled. "You did what? Why?"

Fuck it. I pushed off the door and went to her, kneeling in front of her as she unwound her bare legs. The adrenaline rush was crashing in and taking me down in a fireball, and I needed to touch her silky skin, feel her, absorb her.

"Why do you think, Charli?" I gritted out as I cupped her hips, dropping my head to her lap so my forehead grazed her still flat belly. "Why do you think?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Charli

HIS BOWED HEAD was against my belly, and all I could do was stare down in shock. Hot tears filled my eyes again as I let my fingers funnel into his hair. He reacted to my touch like a man starved, pulling me closer to him.

He knew.

I'd driven all over town looking for him—his offices, Cameo, any place I knew he might frequent, and I left a million messages everywhere. My mind had been racing for hours in panic, imagining every possible reaction from good to bad, and how to counter each one. I had a plan for every possibility.

Except this one.

The old man had gotten to him and told him. And Gideon *killed* him?

Gideon fucking killed his own father?

My tears fell into his hair as the horror of the situation seeped inside me. Icy cold pricked at my skin. In what universe was this normal?

And yet—he was here. Embracing me like he was one beat short of broken. I had planned for everything, but I had no plan for this.

“Gid—” I stopped and shook my head, trying to give all this some structure in my mind. But how? *Why did you kill*

your dad, Gideon? Did you shoot him? Stab him? Snap his neck?

Who had conversations like this?

“What happened?” I managed to force out.

He lifted his head and kept his eyes on my belly as he slid his hands around to stroke it. It was both endearing and terrifying, and I didn’t know which to invest in.

“I told you,” he said. “The end always justified the means with him. He wouldn’t stop until . . .”

“Until what?”

His eyes raised to mine, and the turmoil in those dark depths nearly gutted me. He’d hated that man with all that he had, but being the one to end his miserable life—that was something else entirely. Was that the pain I saw in there?

“Until he won,” he said, his words barely above a whisper. Tears tracked down my cheeks, but we both ignored them. “How did he find out?” he asked, his voice low and strained.

It felt so backward, this lack of an announcement. Not how I’d wanted to tell him he was going to be a father. I shook my head, bypassing his question for one of my own.

“Gideon, why?”

“How?” he asked again, his tone more forceful. “Tell me.”

“He came to Cameo looking for you,” I said. “Angry as usual. Going on about you ruining the business because of me.” Gideon’s eyes closed, and his jaw tightened. “Then he saw the box.”

His eyes shot open. “The box?”

My eyes filled again. God, it felt like I’d been crying for days. “The test,” I said. “I’d just taken it when . . .”

Gideon’s gaze went soft for the briefest of moments before he blinked it free and met mine square on. “That’s why.”

A frustrated choke escaped my throat. “What? He had to die because I’m—” God, I hadn’t even said the word out loud yet. I blew out a breath and forced myself. “Pregnant?”

Gideon pulled back, rising to his feet and pacing across the room before turning back to me. “Because he had no boundaries, Charli,” he said, swiping a hand over his face, rubbing at his eyes. “When it comes to this family, this business.” He stopped on the other side of the room, his gaze burning so hot, so intense, I knew instinctively that there was more.

“What?”

One hand gripped the dresser behind him as if to ground himself. As small a movement as that was, I’d come to know how screamingly out of character that was for him. Gideon didn’t need grounding. There was something he didn’t want to tell me. Something hideous.

“What?” I demanded again.

He inhaled slowly, not breaking eye contact, not blinking. “My father was going to have you eliminated,” he said, his jaw twitching on the last word. “I couldn’t let that happen. I would not let that happen.”

My hands went directly to my stomach, and I looked down. I’d known for less than a day, and already I felt protective of this life inside of me.

From a grandfather that wanted us to die.

I had no words.

“He—he’s the one that’s been doing this?”

“No,” Gideon said quietly. “He wasn’t responsible for Jade or Stormy or terrorizing you. That wasn’t his style. He’d have just gotten it over with. Clean and simple.”

“Gotten it over with,” I echoed. “Why? What kind of man does that?”

“The kind that had your grandmother killed when she threatened his business,” he gritted out. “You and your mother were just *collateral*.”

All the blood drained from my head as his words pinged around the room and encircled my throat. His image swam in front of me. I couldn’t breathe. The air was too thick. Too black. Too hot. I was on my feet and out the bedroom door before I realized I’d risen.

Gideon was right on my heels. “Charli.”

“Get away from me,” I choked, reaching the kitchen and blindly turning on the faucet. My shaking fingers knocked over the plastic cup I kept there, and he grabbed it, filling it and handing it to me. I knocked it out of his hand, slinging water all over the floor.

He grabbed my upper arms, turning me to face him. “I’m sorry for what he did, Charli,” he said, his voice gravelly. Frustration lined his brow, as if it were beyond his understanding why I was upset. “But I’m not sorry for what I did today. I had no choice.”

I looked up into his face—the face I knew I was falling for all over again, hard—and all I could see was Gram dying. My mother’s bloody, lifeless face, her unseeing eyes, staring at nothingness. The vision of Gideon murdering his own father in a thousand different ways.

“You *always* have a choice,” I hissed. “But you were raised to think you don’t. Believe it or not, the rest of the population doesn’t kill people just because they piss us off. Hell, he killed them for business, you killed *him* for *me*—it’s like a fucking game with you people. What would your mother think?”

His expression went a hundred shades of dark, and I knew it was a dirty line to cross, but I didn’t care. What was he going to do, kill me, too?

Bring it on.

“Don’t talk about what you don’t understand, Charli,” he seethed.

My chest hurt with the images that kept assaulting my memory. The truck slamming into us. The blood. The screams. It was on purpose.

On purpose.

“I understand enough,” I whispered. “You do the same things as him. He made you in his image.”

“I’m not my father,” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“You don’t kill? Play God?” I spat. “Really? What will this child grow up to say about *you*, Gideon?” I said, my voice dark and shaking. “Will he kill you, too? I mean if it’s some sort of family tradition.”

It was so wrong of me. Somewhere, far back in my mind, buried deep under the horror and the grief and the shock, I knew that. It was low and downright mean, and one day I’d probably feel shitty about it, but this wasn’t that day.

I waited for the reaction—the anger, the show of Kane power and intimidation. I braced myself, encouraged it even, relishing the adrenaline that would feel better than the pain.

It didn’t come.

Nothing showed in his face. It was as if a switch turned off in his eyes, and the system went down.

He slowly turned on his heel and walked away, the door quietly clicking shut behind him, eerily louder than if he’d slammed it in anger.

Another thing I had no plan for.

The silence rang in my ears, and the sudden halt to everything brought it all crashing in. Then my knees buckled, and I sank onto the cool white tiles.



CAMEO WAS IN full swing when I got there at almost ten, so I slipped in the back entrance, paying the muscle on duty a fifty

to not alert his boss, even though I knew they were loyal to a fault and would probably tell him anyway. I'd thrown everything of mine I could find in a duffle bag, pulled on a pair of jeans to go with his t-shirt, and tugged my wet hair up into a sloppy bun. Not looking much like the boss, but honestly, I wasn't feeling it either. I could have gone to Vi's, but I didn't want to be seen. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to interact with anything besides the quiet of my office under the subtle, muffled beat of the music downstairs.

How far I'd come.

I curled onto my couch and pulled my feet up, hugging a pillow and squeezing my eyes free of yet another round of waterworks. I needed to be where *they'd* been. Where they'd done their thinking. Where maybe my mother had stressed over me growing in her belly with no plan in place. Where there was no Gideon to fog up the clarity.

In our office. Not theirs anymore, but not just mine. It would never be just mine, with all the memories here. It was odd that just a few short months ago I hated this room. This space. In my mind, it was suffocating, and it represented being trapped. Trapped in a job I didn't want. Chained to a place that held bad memories. Even stuck in a corner of the room as a child, right by the big window, playing with pieces of sequins and tassels that I'd found swept away in dark corners where no one ventured. My childhood was here, and I was about to sentence another innocent kid to that same experience.

I'd hated it here, but tonight it was where I had come for solace. What did that say?

It said I'd become the job.

"It says you're fucked up, Charli Vaughn," I whispered, running my palm over my flat belly. "I'm sorry you have us for parents," I squeaked, letting all the everythings descend on me in one giant pity party. Mobsters and madames had no business doing this.

Job or not, obligations or not, the priorities had changed. Cameo was a place that required my attention, but this life growing inside my womb deserved all of me.

“I love—” I shoved a fist against my lips and choked back a sob. “Shit. I love your daddy, little one. God help me. I always have. But I have to protect you.”



“JUST LET ME in.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Vaughn,” the biggest of the gun-toters said, standing outside my uninhabited apartment like he was guarding the president. “No one goes in.”

I glanced around, wondering what my neighbors might be thinking. If I had any left.

It was after midnight, and probably not the smartest time to sneak into an apartment complex I’d been told to stay away from while people were trying to kill me. Even if certain parties had been nixed from that list.

Still, it was *my* place. I held up my key. And then went *there*.

“I’m pregnant,” I said, letting my eyes tear up. Hey, it came at will by that point, so faking it wasn’t difficult. “I need some of my things. And I have to pee. You’re welcome to go in with me if you like to make sure no one offs me on the toilet, but—”

“Go ahead,” he said, stepping aside. “You don’t need your key.”

I gave him a second glance, frowning. “Why not?”

When I opened the door, my question was answered.

“I’m sorry, boss,” the big guy said, looming behind me. “But she said she’s pregnant.”

I gaped at the sight of Gideon, leaning over my kitchen table, sleeves rolled up, papers and notes and diagrams covering the surface, a tumbler of something dark in his hand.

His expression as his gaze landed on me wasn't one of being happy to see me.

He looked exhausted. Possibly a little bombed.

Fuck, I envied him that.

“What the hell are you doing in my apartment?”

He tipped up a brow as if the answer was obvious. “Working.”

“At midnight?”

“Yes,” he said shortly. “Why are you here?”

I shook my head, opening my mouth and closing it. Nothing made sense anymore. It was like waking up in another universe where green meant blue and apples were elephants. I'd waffled on this decision fifteen minutes earlier, but now this.

I was done.

“I'm leaving,” I said, my voice raspy.

His eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“It means I'm packing up and leaving Las Vegas,” I said. “Shutting down Cameo, selling it, giving it away, don't care.”

“You have people counting on you,” he said, coming around the table, his eyes flashing. “For their livelihood, for our business. You can't just—”

“I can. And I am.”

“Charli.”

“I don't care,” I repeated, my hand landing on my belly again. “If Cameo's cover for Kane Enterprises is what's so important to you, *you* run it. Knock yourself out. I'm done. I can't raise a child here with serial killers after me and family taking out family when the mood strikes. I can't—” I shut my eyes and shook my head, pushing the images away again.

When I refocused on him, he was standing just a few feet in front of me, fire burning in his dark eyes. The silence was

deafening. Maddening. But the feeling behind his look was clear.

Betrayal.

Yeah, well, been there, buddy.

My fingers curled into my palms as the faint smell of earthy cologne, bourbon, and sweat reached my nose, fueling my anger instead of desire. “What—” I gestured wildly. “Are you doing here?” I asked again.

“It’s quiet,” he said finally. “Private.”

“And *mine*,” I said.

“Well, I left you in *mine*,” he retorted. “And sleeping isn’t an option, so I thought I’d be productive.”

“Productive,” I echoed weakly, looking around. At my things, my place, *my life*. My afghan on my couch. My collection of colored glass bowls. My pictures of *my* family and *my* friends. Where he now stood in the midst, *working*, after finding out he was going to be a father and then killing his own. “You—you—”

He gave me a two-second pause before he blinked and took a swallow from his glass, turning back to the table behind him. “I’m a chip off the old block; I heard you earlier,” he said, his back to me. “I came here to get some peace, Charli.” His voice was deceptively calm. “Go if you’re going. I won’t stop you.”

Something inside me—something deep within, where all the anger and rage burned white-hot just a few hours earlier—fizzled out at the hint of defeat in his tone. All the broken, painful things banging around in my head laid down to rest, the red haze calmed, and I saw the man that Gideon Kane never let anyone see. Heard it in the tone I’d never heard before.

The man who did indeed just find out he was going to be a father . . . and then *had* to kill his own. Just hours ago. To save his child. To save me.

That was a messed-up hand.

I opened my mouth to say something, but I'd said enough. Taking a deep breath, I went into my bedroom and clicked the door closed, leaving him and all the ugliness behind.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Gideon

I POURED MYSELF another bourbon and tried to focus on the papers in front of me that had been couriered over from Phillip, but I was just too lost in my own head to think about numbers.

I'm leaving.

That had been my end game all those years ago; I should be glad she wanted to get away to someplace safe, far away from whoever was stalking those close to her.

So why did the idea of being without her this time make me want to shoot myself in the head the same way I'd shot my old man?

"Jesus Christ." I swallowed back the liquor and let it burn down my throat to my stomach. Maybe if I drank enough, it would dull this roaring ache she'd created in my soul.

I had to let her go.

I had to.

"Fuck that." I jumped up to refill my glass, my eyes tracking to what I'd been working on when she'd barreled in here, surprising poor Chris with her pregnancy announcement.

Thanks to some inside information, we'd tracked Bob Theiss to Arizona. I'd have gone after him myself if I could've borne to be apart from Charli or trusted anyone else with her protection. As it was, I was owed some favors, and I was cashing in, and I had been assured that Mr. Theiss would be

hand-delivered to my doorstep within the month. I'd call in Detective Broussard if absolutely necessary, but only sheer desperation would lead me to call in the cops, and so far, I didn't deem it necessary. Bob Theiss was on Mr. Fucking Kane's radar, and his days as a free man were numbered.

I paused, the glass halfway to my mouth, Charli's words reverberating through my mind.

What will this child grow up to say about you, Gideon?

Was I like my father? Had I really become his image, as hard as I'd fought against it?

I swallowed back the entire contents of the glass then thunked down the tumbler as my mind whirled. I lifted my eyes and glanced down the hallway toward the closed bedroom door.

Without another thought, I headed down the hall and softly opened the door to peer inside.

Charli was curled on her side, her hair spilled over the pillow, painted in moonlight that filtered in through the cracked blinds. Her lips were softly parted as she breathed, finally relaxed after everything that had weighed her down these past weeks.

She was so beautiful it literally hurt to look at her.

And she was going to be the mother of my child.

My gaze automatically slid down to her stomach, where my baby—our baby—grew.

I slid my eyes back up to her face. She'd looked at me tonight like she actually thought I could lay a hand on her in violence.

Had I really changed so much that she could think that of me?

Yes.

Yes, I had.

Gone was the boy she once knew, and in his place was a self-made man who'd been forced to carve out a place for himself in this ruthless world of filth and violence.

Yet, I'd come to realize that she'd always been the light I held deep down inside of me. The light that I would wither up and die without. I was already starting to die these past ten years until she walked back into my life and jump-started my heart again.

God, how could one little woman tie me up in knots like this? I'd broken men before. I didn't break. Yet, here I was, ready to—what?

I'm leaving.

How could I let her go?

I was literally going to rip in two when she left me. When *they* left me.

But I had to let them.

Maybe I did play God, but this time it would be to save her from the monster in me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Charli

I AWOKE DISORIENTED, glancing around in the low light. The smell wasn't right. Gideon's big lamp wasn't where it was supposed to be, and the silver-toned print that took up most of one wall wasn't—

I wasn't at Gideon's.

My eyes settled on my antique dresser across the room, a single twinge of light peeking out from the nightlight in my bathroom. Reality came barreling in like a pissed-off bull, and I rolled over with a groan, sitting up. I hadn't meant to fall asleep. I'd just flopped back on the bed to ponder the pure fuckery of my life, and now it was—I craned my neck to check the clock on the nightstand—two fifteen.

I pulled my hair down from the jacked-up ponytail I'd shoved it into while wet and fluffed it out, breathing deep and letting it go. What were the odds he was still out there? Right now, I wouldn't gamble either way.

My door was slightly ajar when I reached it, and that told me one of two things. He either checked in on me or came in to off me and decided against it. It was pretty scary to think how possible either scenario was.

I found him sitting in my favorite chair, his gaze focused out the window at the night sky. At my footsteps, he looked my way and then back out the window again.

My stomach tightened. "You didn't leave," I whispered.

“No.”

I inhaled slowly. “I’m still going to.” He nodded once, and I moved in front of him and knelt at his feet. “I’m sorry, Gideon.”

His eyes met mine. “Me, too.”

I ran my hands along his muscular legs, my palms sliding up his thighs. I could feel the heat of his skin through his jeans. His eyes fluttered closed as if just my simple touch allowed him to finally relax. To sleep, even.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

The tiniest of smirks touched his lips, his eyes still closed. “Are you?” He opened his eyes slowly when I didn’t answer, letting his gaze rest on me. “I wish I could undo what he did,” he said softly. “Give them back to you.”

I nodded and looked down at my hands on him. “I know.”

“He wasn’t a parent, Charli, he was a tyrant,” he said, his voice gruff. Emotional. “I’m not my father.” Leaning forward, he lifted my chin so that we were almost nose to nose. “I will *never* be like him.”

I looked deeply into the eyes I’d come to love again, in spite of myself. “I believe you,” I breathed. “But Gideon—”

“I love you.”

My mouth fell open as all the words, the thoughts, and the world drifted away. He didn’t blink. Didn’t waver. The sound of our breathing was the only thing between us as my heart pounded faster in my ears.

We couldn’t.

“Don’t,” I choked. “Don’t do that. I’m not changing my mind.”

“I’m not asking you to,” he said, tracing my jaw with a finger. His eyes dropped to my mouth. “But I’ve been sitting here thinking for the past couple of hours.”

My heart did a nosedive. “About what?”

“About going with you.”

Boom.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Are you drunk?”

His eyes came back up to meet mine. “I’m serious.”

“You’re delusional,” I said, my breath catching as that wandering finger brushed under my bottom lip. “You think *I* can’t leave? Gideon, your family would hunt you down.”

“You’re my family now, Charli,” he said. “You and the baby.”

Was he really saying this?

“Had I known what he did,” he continued, a scowl roughening his voice, “I would have killed him a million times over. So, if you want to leave all this behind, I’ll take you out of here like I should have done ten years ago and protect you both with my life.”

The eyes I looked into weren’t those of Gideon Kane—ruthless, cold-hearted mafia prince. They belonged to the young man I’d fallen in love with all those years ago. The one I had wanted to run away and spend forever with. The one who’d just told me . . .

“You can’t,” I whispered, shaking my head. “It’s a beautiful dream, but—it’s not reality.”

“Then trust me,” he said, pleading with a whisper as he gripped my head between his hands, my hair spilling over his fingers. He pulled my face to his and pressed his forehead against mine. “I am with you wherever you want to be, Charli. I know we’re not a conventional couple, but we—we’re perfect together. Hell, we’ve always been perfect together, and I don’t want anybody else. I never will.”

“Are you serious?”

“Very. And I know you don’t *need* me to do this. You can do anything on your own, but let me be with you. Here, or on the other side of the state, the country, the fucking world. I don’t care. Just—”

“Gideon.”

“Please,” he said, his eyes burning into mine, the sound of our unsteady breathing filling my ears. “Do you trust me?”

That was a tall order.

Did I trust him?

Completely?

No.

But . . .

“Yes.”

It fell out of my mouth, and his entire body relaxed under my hands. He dropped a kiss on my nose, between my eyes, and on each cheek, as my eyes fluttered closed and I savored the sensation as a long-lost warmth flooded my heart. His lips moved over my jawline as I slid my hands into his hair.

“Good,” he breathed as his lips trailed along the pulse in my throat. “Because there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?” I murmured, my head lolling to the side.

“I am vowing to you, here and now, that I will never, *ever* hurt you.” He punctuated each word with an open-mouthed kiss to my flesh. “I will *always* protect you.” His tongue traced along my jaw. “And I will not rest until I’ve buried the bastard who’s terrorizing you.” He lifted his eyes to meet mine, his dark gaze sincere. “I swear it on my life, baby.”

“Gideon—”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “Just say you trust me.”

Our gazes locked for several long heartbeats. Finally, I nodded.

The taste of heat and bourbon filled my senses as our mouths met, and we dove deeply into each other. Everything else shut out. Murders and fathers and all things horrible faded away like a fine powder in the breeze. I knew it would all come back, and I had big decisions to make, but in that second, I needed this. I needed him.

I love you.

Jesus, he'd said it.

Hearing those words again for the first time in over a decade made my head spin as they swam around us, bouncing off the walls and making my skin tingle. His voice echoed again and again in my mind, and the subtle question in the depths of those dark eyes burned into me.

I love you.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him tighter to me, unable to get close enough to satisfy my need to touch him. His responding growl into my mouth set my skin on fire. Pulling me into his lap to straddle him, his hands moved up under my t-shirt, squeezing my skin, sliding down into my jeans and tugging me tighter against him.

Yes.

I moaned softly against his lips as I moved against the hard cock straining against his pants. He tugged at my hair, pulling it loose and burying his face against my neck, leaving hot, wet kisses on his way down.

“Shirt,” he breathed.

I lifted my arms, and he yanked it off, tossing it aside as he feasted on my breasts.

Fuck.

“Oh, God, yes,” I mumbled, letting my head fall backward as he suckled one nipple and then the other, and I moved against him in a mock fuck and twisted my fingers in his hair.

In one motion, he was on his feet, carrying me, my ass in his hands, my legs wrapped around his waist.

“Tell me,” he said, his voice gravelly with desire as he strode toward the bedroom.

“I want you,” I said, squeezing my thighs hard.

“Fuck,” he growled, stopping and shoving us against the door, pushing hard between my legs and stealing my breath as white-hot pleasure surged from my core. I lifted my legs higher as he ground himself against me. “What else?”

“I—want you in my bed,” I breathed.

Those weren't the words he needed, and I knew that. I saw it in his eyes. I'd given him my trust, but he wanted the rest.

Could I say it?

Pulling us off the door, he carried me to the bed and laid me down, coming with me and then backing off again as he slid my jeans down in one smooth move. But instead of letting him taste his way down in what I already knew would be a delicious tease, I kept my legs spread for him and teased myself.

“Jesus,” he whispered, his dark eyes going black with lust as he watched my fingers circle my clit, dipping in to find wetness and circling it again.

“Take your pants off,” I said breathily.

They hit the ground in less than a second, and he gripped that glorious cock, stroking it slowly as he watched me, hunger and need desperate in his face. “What else?” he said, his voice strained as he forced his gaze away from the show to meet mine.

The intensity, the emotion, the need, the everything of the day burned into me, so hot it was hard to breathe. To find the words.

But I had to.

I had to.

“I want you—” I exhaled and sucked in another breath as I raised up to stroke him, to cup his balls, rake them with my nails, and watch his eyes go wild with primal need. “I—”

It had been easier to keep it about sex. To keep it basic. But that ship had sailed. Offering to leave with me meant everything. It didn't matter that it could never happen. The fact that he was willing was game changing. It was no longer just the two of us; we were three, and we were one, and even if everything ended up exploding around us, I knew I loved this exasperating, infuriating man with all I had.

God help me.

His hands came up to cradle my face, his fingers getting lost in my hair. He pulled my mouth to his and kissed me. Hard and then soft, pressing his forehead against mine in one last plea.

“Tell. Me.”

The words were soft, filled with raw, gut-twisting need, but as loud to my ears as if they'd been accompanied by a sonic boom.

I pressed another soft kiss to his mouth and forced my gaze to stay on his. “I love you, Gideon.”

The surge of energy that washed over him was palpable. Physical. Visceral. The happiness in his eyes was real. I pulled him down on top of me, and he rolled us instantly so that I lay atop him, strong arms holding me against his body.

I laughed and realized I hadn't done that—felt that—since the last time I'd been in his arms. Things were as they should be when I was there.

My fingers went into his hair as I gazed down into the face I'd loved for most of my life. There was no way I could leave this. Leave him. Not again. And while the thought of disappearing with him for parts unknown sounded wonderful, we weren't nineteen and twenty-one anymore.

People's lives and livelihoods depended on us.

So did this little one.

“Promise me,” I whispered. His expression went serious, and I knew he got my meaning. “If we stay . . .”

“I swear on my life,” he said, his words barely above a whisper. “If anything comes close to us before I find this motherfucker—if there is even the slightest hint that you or the baby *might* be in danger—we are out of here. Immediately.”

“All of us?”

“All of us.”

I let a long breath go. “Okay.”

“I love you, Charli. I love both of you.”

Tingles warmed me again. “Even if there are three of us?”

One dark eyebrow lifted. “Three?”

I gave a little shrug. “Gram was a twin, so—it’s possible.”

He blew out a breath. “I’ll love fifteen of you if that’s what I’m handed.”

“Sweet Jesus, don’t jinx me like that.”

His gaze warmed as he leaned in to kiss me. “I’m telling you that I’m in, no matter what. I love you.”

Those words. They made my whole body hum. “I love you back.”

“So, will any of this hurt the baby?” he asked against my lips as he palmed my ass and pressed me against him.

“You’re asking me?” I said, chuckling. “I don’t come automatically equipped with the knowledge, you know, but no, I don’t think so.”

Hot hands roamed my body as he nibbled my ear. “Then grab the headboard, baby. It’s gonna be a rough ride.”

I smirked, gazing into my mafia king’s face. “My favorite kind.”

EPILOGUE



JD

AFTER A LATE workout and dinner, I strode into Cameo to make another round just as things were winding down for the night. Even though the boss man, Mr. Kane, said he was pretty sure he had things locked down tight with this Bob Theiss character in Arizona, something about it didn't feel right in my gut.

Security was extra tight tonight as there was a celebrity in the house. Some dumb dick football player who thought he was hot shit and was currently making a fool of himself with Paisley at the Oral Treats bar. Whatever. As long as he didn't cross the line and he paid his tab. I lifted my brow at Jarod to make sure he kept an eye on things and kept walking.

A soft melody floated out from behind the closed doors of Sizzle, reminding me of gentle ocean breezes, a woman's supple curves, and the unfinished canvas I currently had sitting at home waiting for me. On autopilot, I shifted and veered that way as I'd come to do every night *she* was there. I pushed open the door and stepped inside the darkened interior. I took a moment to allow my eyes to adjust to the lighting, but the rest of me was already captivated.

Brady Rose.

The singer that Miss Vaughn had hired was unlike any woman I had ever seen before.

Beautiful didn't describe her or do her justice.

Ethereal, maybe.

I wasn't even sure I could capture a fraction of her essence on canvas if I tried.

And her voice. Angelic. I could listen to it for hours. At this point, I think I had, sneaking in whenever I could when she practiced, and for as many shows as I could get by with without fucking up my job.

As if sensing my presence, her heavily lined eyes drifted to mine as she continued to sing, our gazes locking across the dark room.

She had her whiskey-brown hair up tonight, showcasing her long, ivory throat, and her body was showcased in a tight red dress that skimmed her thighs. She was tiny, but in my imagination, she could handle me . . . my darkness. My needs.

She'd only spoken a handful of words to me since she arrived a few weeks ago, and I knew my silence baffled her. Still, as she hit the chorus, her lips tilted up in a small, secret smile just for me.

I knew the Kanes were suspicious of her. She'd dropped in out of the blue, her talent, honestly, leagues above even Cameo, her background so spotless it looked faked. With the cops sniffing around after two girls had turned up dead, Marcus had floated the question if she could be a plant by the Feds to infiltrate our organization and the club.

Maybe.

I had vowed lifelong loyalty to the Kane family, yet as Brady finished her set and said goodnight in her sexy, throaty voice, I could not bring myself to believe it.

“Hey, JD.”

I glanced over as Cherry, one of Cameo's escorts, sidled up to me and ran a crimson fingernail up my forearm as she leaned in flirtatiously. I tipped my head in greeting. We'd never dated. Only fucked a couple of times maybe a year ago,

and she'd been clingy ever since. Being stupid was my only excuse. Stupid and horny.

“Busy later?” she purred.

I nodded once just as Brady slid up to the bar next to us and took a stool.

“Hey,” she said, glancing up at me with a careful smile that hit me square in the chest.

She had walls the size of the Grand Canyon, and they drew me to her like a beacon. I recognized the damage. Her questioning gaze darted to Cherry, then back to me as I turned my body to face her. I couldn't help myself.

“Later?” Cherry pushed from behind me, her mouth at my ear.

I shook my head, my gaze locked on Brady as she watched this interplay with interest. I saw it finally click, and she leaned forward, her walls dropping as her body came dangerously close to mine.

“Um, I don't think he's interested, sweetheart,” she said to Cherry over my shoulder.

Fuck.

Her sweet scent invaded my senses, the heat from her skin sending my heart rate through the roof. The push and pull from her was going to kill me.

Cherry huffed. “This isn't your business. He and I have history.”

“Really?” Brady's dark-chocolate eyes slid to mine, full of amusement and something a little playful. Challenging. “Looks like that history is over.” She sat back upright on her stool and gave Cherry a wink. “C'mon. You're a gorgeous girl. Don't waste your time chasing a man that isn't into you. Now, *him*, on the other hand—” She let her gaze track toward a businessman at the other end of the bar. “He's been eying you all night.”

I felt Cherry's energy shift. "He has?"

"Like a hot fudge sundae during Lent."

Cherry finally gave it up, made her way over to the man, and slid onto the barstool next to him with a silky smile.

"You're welcome." Brady smirked up at me as the bartender slid her a water bottle. "You can pay me back later," she added, taking a sip.

I couldn't help the half-smile that tilted my lips as I leaned both palms on the bar.

Oh, how I would love to pay that debt. I watched her throat work as she swallowed. Imagined putting my lips there. My teeth. Wondered what she'd do if I ever left a mark on her flawless flesh. I lifted my gaze and knew I'd been caught staring.

The fact that her eyes went impossibly darker in response—Jesus, *fuck*, that went straight to my cock.

"You don't talk much, do you?" she murmured after a breath.

I shook my head.

"But you do talk?"

I shrugged, indicating a maybe. Sometimes. Not really. I couldn't remember the last time I'd used my voice.

Words were cheap, so what was the point?

She cleared her throat and glanced back at the stage. "You like my music?" she asked, as if she really cared what I thought.

I nodded, hoping my expression told her how fucking amazing I thought she was, though somehow, I think she already knew.

"Good." Those incredible eyes bored into mine for several heartbeats before she blinked away and swallowed hard. "Do me a favor, JD?"

I nodded once, indicating with the tilt of my head for her to ask me anything.

“It’s late. Will you walk me out to my car after I change?”

Of fucking course I’d walk her out. Most times, I made sure one of the other guys saw her out so that it didn’t get weird. Or hell, so *I* didn’t get weird. I couldn’t trust my reactions or my self-control around this woman, and that was a first. But she was asking.

God help me.

I turned and held out a hand to indicate for her to lead the way. She smiled and walked ahead of me as we made our way to the back of Sizzle and down the stairs toward her dressing area.

I waited outside in the hallway while she gathered her things, and when she reappeared, she’d changed into sweatpants and a soft pink t-shirt that nested perfectly against the curves of her small body, washed off most of her makeup, and let her hair down. Those eyes, impossibly huge and dark against her fair skin, only made her look more fragile and tragically beautiful.

“Ready?” she said as she craned to look up at me even more now without her heels on.

Again, I indicated for her to lead the way to her car.

She made small talk about music and what songs she was including in her set the next week as we walked. It was oddly soothing to listen to a woman’s voice since I was always surrounded by men and violence. It was soft. A little husky. There was a breathy nervousness to her tone, too. Was that for me?

As we reached the door to the employee parking area, she paused and looked up at me. “Thank you, JD.”

I nodded and kept walking. Being alone with her, staring into those impossibly big eyes and listening to that breathy

voice was just asking for trouble, and I'd already crossed too many lines in my head.

Outside, the Las Vegas air was warm, but not stifling, as we made our way across the lot. There weren't many cars tonight as it was a weekday, and our steps crunched on the gravel as we neared a little red sedan.

I opened my mouth. Wished I could find my voice. My words. Anything to keep this woman—

Her gasp ricocheted through the night like a whip.

I twisted my head in the direction of her gaze.

Her car had four flat tires. No. *Slashed* tires.

Instinctively, I moved closer to her in a protective stance, my eyes darting around the lot as I moved her behind me. The dark night felt ominous as I turned in a circle, seeing nothing, but feeling the same heaviness I felt settle on me after each of the murders.

Every muscle in my body tensed. For someone to do this, they'd have to be watching for her reaction. Or lying in wait. I pulled her closer to me without even thinking about it, but her soft hand on my chest stopped me like a fucking wrecking ball. I glanced down, and she yanked it away just as quickly, as if she hadn't realized she'd touched me, either. Her expression changed from soft to fierce in a split second, her eyes glazing over in another coping mechanism I recognized well. Survival mode.

"It's—it's probably just kids," she said softly, fear lacing her tone, her breasts rising and falling faster with what was likely a spiked heart rate. She cleared her throat and lifted her chin, her eyes scanning the lot. "I'll call an Uber."

I shook my head and started guiding her to my truck on the other end of the lot, but she dug her heels in.

"No," she said firmly.

I frowned, studying her expression.

“I’ll wait till one of the other girls gets done and get a ride,” she added, crossing her arms protectively and looking around her again. She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Really, it’s okay.”

My instincts hadn’t led me astray yet, and every gut instinct I had was screaming that those slashed tires meant she was supposed to be part of the growing body count. I couldn’t let that happen. Why wouldn’t she let me take her home? I blinked as that question bounced off her stony resolve.

Then it slammed into me.

She didn’t want me to see where she lived.

Was she an FBI plant that had been outed?

Did she have some deep, dark, dangerous secret buried in that beautiful head of hers that she was running from?

Was she . . . afraid of *me*?

That last one kicked me in the gut more than it should have, but none of those options were good. Not good at all. Still, as I looked into the face of this mysterious woman who’d captivated me like none other, something else was crystal fucking clear to me—whatever the hell did this, whoever wanted to hurt her, would have to come through me to get to her.



Catch JD and Brady’s story in [My Songbird](#) next!



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