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VIOLET

SAVVIV

MY VIOLET



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*To those who love us in spite of—or maybe because of—
ourselves.*

My Violet Playlist

All the Good Girls Go to Hell – Billie Eilish

BLOW – Ed Sheeran (with Chris Stapleton and Bruno Mars)

Bring Me to Life – Evanescence

A Thousand Years – Christina Perri

Till I Found You – Phil Wickham

Shallow – Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper

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Coming in 2020

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CHAPTER ONE



Violet

*C*OFFEE.

Yes, please.

It fixes everything.

Or it could, if it were put on a continuous drip and then spiked with . . . hell, with anything at this point.

I rubbed my scratchy, tired eyes and dropped another pod in my Keurig.

I hadn't slept at all.

Sure, last night's appointment had been at a gala at the Park MGM that didn't begin until midnight, and I hadn't left my client's room until four, but that had nothing to do with my brain still pinging off the walls at—I glanced at the clock—eleven.

Late hours were normal in my business. Any other time, I'd be nearly asleep in the car before I got home, my body flipping a switch and shutting down the second I knew I was off the clock. Sleep wasn't usually a problem for me.

Usually, I wasn't still staring at the ceiling hours later, or pacing the floors, grazing on popcorn and chocolate-covered almonds, channel-surfing DIY shows. Okay, maybe the shows, because anything I could learn to do myself for my one-day future dream house brought me one step closer to fulfilling that dream. One day, when every check my body cashed

finally made it all worthwhile and the world of professional escorting was behind me.

Because, as lucrative as being a high-end escort for the most exclusive gentlemen's club in Las Vegas was—and as fortunate as I was to be one of Cameo's most requested ladies—well, let's just say that no little girl tells their mom they want to grow up to be me.

Also, it was kind of like sports, at least according to an actor I'd accompanied to the Oscars one year—not front row, but not balcony, either. He'd played quite a few sports roles and fancied himself the real deal, and he told me that thirty was old in his world, and he needed to *make it* before then, or it was over. As full of hot air and himself as that asshat was, he was right about that.

At twenty-nine, I was nearing hag status in the trick-turning business. Not so much in the upper echelon, with the wealthy men from all stretches of industry who were more interested in experience and worldliness than clueless dewy doe eyes, but still. I knew the score. And it entailed working my sassy ass off while I still had the ass to do it.

Mindlessly, I stirred hazelnut creamer into my coffee and let the aroma do its thing to my senses while I stepped out onto my balcony and took a large sip of the stout New Orleans blend.

I might not tout my past or my deep southern Louisiana upbringing like a flag, spouting Cajun-isms and comfort food like those with happier memories, but *coffee*—oh, now that could not be denied. The quarter did coffee right.

I sunk back onto the chaise lounge chair I'd been parked on for the last hour, trying to channel that slower, laid-back vibe, as I surveyed my non-view of the city. Wasn't much to look at back here. The backs of buildings, one roof, and the Nevada horizon in the distance. Windows that stayed dark and dirty and never knew the hungry curiosity of people peering out from them. At least not that I'd ever seen.

They hated me being out there. *They*, meaning my best friend, Charli, the owner of Cameo, anybody else related to her or Cameo, and my security detail. A detail that lately consisted of a never-smiling Chris and a new trainee named Stone—because, seriously? But they were pawns for the big, bad, scary-until-you-knew-him JD, enforcer for Kane Enterprises, AKA the Vegas mob, AKA Gideon Kane. It was too early in the day—well, too early in *my* day—to get into the other names I had for Gideon. I was trying to push all that aside for my bestie, Charli, who was about to pop out twin Kanes soon and loved the idiot for reasons I had yet to wrap my head around.

Anyway, they all balked at my going out on the patio in the open. Being exposed. Because as if life wasn't crazy enough, a serial killer was going after Cameo's women.

The Lady Killer.

Yeah.

My phone buzzed on the frosted glass tabletop next to me, the image of a tiny waif of a woman with her eyes crossed and her tongue sticking out filling the screen. A smirk tugged at my lips.

“Morning,” I said, answering.

“Morning?” came a husky chuckle. “It's almost lunchtime, Vi.”

“Go ahead with that, B,” I responded, pulling my knees up. “I'll stick with my morning coffee, thanks.”

Beth, the singer at the club steakhouse, Sizzle, had been my roommate for a bit. Well, to back it up, she had gone by *Brady* when she got to town, hiding from the Cuban mafia. At least until the Kane's enforcer, JD, fell for her and saved her life when The Lady Killer tried to run her off the road and drown her. Now she's back to being herself and shacking up with her giant enforcer teddy bear.

“Just checking on you,” she said. “You didn't come by the set last night. I thought we were going to go over the last-

minute details of the baby shower.”

I shut my eyes tight and ran a hand over my face. “I was going to. I had every intention of coming to your show,” I said.

“You had a meeting with Charli first, right?” she asked.

A bitter laugh fell out of my mouth. “Yeah,” I said. “A *meeting*. That was a whole new show called ‘Let’s Throw Vi Under The Bus And Watch Her Flail.’” I rolled my head on my shoulders until my neck popped. “It was great. After that, I hit the mini bar in the limo before my appointment.”

“What?” Beth said, concern changing her tone. “What happened?”

Calmness seeped into my skin, just hearing her voice. Beth was so good at that. Charli was my best friend, yes, but also my boss and the owner of Cameo. And in love with the head of the Kane mafia family that was our liquor distributor—among other things that didn’t make the official books. Things like illegal weapons trafficking and a lot of other shady shit. You know, mobster shit. So . . .

Sometimes I needed someone else to vent to about things. Beth was the only one to survive our serial killer’s attempts so far, so I understood JD wanting her close, but, man, I really missed my roomie sometimes.

Times when you just wanted a girlfriend to knock thoughts around with and possibly kick you in the head when you started thinking stupid. Times like that. But also when you’ve been asked to work a special, super-secret project as a long-term escort for an undercover detective who gets under your skin already, but now looks like he could be Bradley Cooper’s stunt double with eyes that make your clothes want to self-destruct. Yes, I needed someone to talk to about that.

“Holy shit,” she said when I was done telling her all about it.

“Beth, you can’t say anything to JD,” I urged. “I’m probably already in trouble for walking out, and they made it pretty clear that the only ones in the know were in that room.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s a Gideon thing. He still doesn’t completely trust me, and that’s okay. I get it. I’m an outsider.”

“Please, you’re as much of an outsider as I am.” I rolled my eyes. “He’s just a dick.”

“He’s protecting everyone,” she said, her voice even. “Including me.”

I huffed out a breath. She was so levelheaded. “So, I don’t know how they plan to implement this without Jonathan and Tony in on the surveillance,” I said. “But I take it they think it could be someone inside.”

“And you’re going to be the detective’s arm candy while he—”

“No.”

Her husky laugh filled my ear. “I’ve never known you to be so undone by someone.”

I barked a laugh of my own. “I’m not undone.”

“Excuse me?” she said. “You are completely untied, unzipped, and un-*everything* when you get around him. I saw you that day he tried to question you.”

I blew out a breath, remembering that day in Cameo when the good detective had me all flustered and fidgety, and all he’d done then was look at me and say my damn name. Back then, he’d even sported a full beard, shaggy hair, and a cheap suit. No effing reason for me to get so wiggly and clamp my thighs together every time he looked at me.

“Shit, you should see him now, Beth. I mean—even you would choke on your tongue. You’d totally buy that he owns fifteen yachts and lives in a penthouse suite.”

And fucks like a gold-encrusted stallion.

I physically jolted. What the hell did I just let cross my mind?

Because let’s make something perfectly clear.

No one enters my mind like that.

Sex is my job. I can do it blindfolded. I *have* done it blindfolded. I can do some major kinky shit while mentally ticking off a grocery list or planning things like Charli's baby shower. I don't have to be more than physically present to be fabulous at my job. I'm a talented multitasker, and my clients love me. I'm paid to make them feel special in the limelight and out of it, and I take that seriously. Orgasming is an art form. A role. And I perform it beautifully.

When I need that release for real, I don't need another person complicating the task. Not on the job, and not in my personal life. I can take care of it myself, thank you very much, and much more efficiently.

Because one-night stands—um, I do that for a living. And dating requires relationships. Getting settled. Roots. Rooted relationships make people get weird and personal and look too deeply when they look in my eyes, and just—no. No one needs to go falling down that rabbit hole. I don't even want to be in there, so no, I've avoided the guys with the deep, searching eyes for years because—hello, roots? And seriously, what guy could handle my job?

Charli and Beth talk about how Gideon and JD make their insides quiver and their palms sweat and set their lady parts on fire. I laugh at their stories because none of it has ever applied to me.

Until Detective-Fucking-Broussard put his eyes on me.

That was it. Just his damn eyes, scanning my soul.

And fuck. My nipples jumped out to say hello as his gaze raked over them, and I swear there was smoke coming from my little thong panties.

Even with his ruffled, unimpressive appearance, I'd be lying my ass off if I didn't admit that every time I *took care of things* myself after that, that it was imagining those eyes looking up at me from between my legs and that mouth

making love to my clit, that shot me off like a fucking volcano on Red Bull.

I couldn't look him in the eye after that as it was, and then yesterday—Jesus.

I set my coffee mug down and shook my head.

What the fuck was he doing getting a new face? With that sexy little smirk that showed now that all that beard crap was gone, replaced with a light dusting of deliberate scruff. Oh, and let's not forget the damn dimples. The expensive haircut, the tailored suit. The cologne. When I'd shoved my glass at his chest and his nearness had enveloped me—oh, sweet Jesus, he'd smelled good enough to devour.

But that voice . . . and those fucking eyes. That infuriating, hooded gaze that was exactly the same, taunting me, lighting me on fire like the heat from a million suns.

And I was supposed to be his perpetual plus-one, be his cover, so he could investigate the murders in-house. While remembering that he's really a cop, so nixing the full-service portion of the arrangement. For how long?

As long as it takes, cher.

“Fuck that,” I said under my breath, standing, suddenly feeling itchy.

“What?” Beth asked, reminding me I was on the phone.

Shit. There was a reason that the guys with the eyes were automatically off my radar. They made me crazy. The detective—damn it. He needed to be off the fucking planet.

“Nothing, sorry,” I said, clearing my throat as I paced the balcony. “I made it clear that they need to find someone else for their little sting operation.”

“I think you're the best one,” she said.

My feet halted. “*Et tu?*”

“I'm just saying you're the best,” she reiterated. “You have chemistry; it will be believable, and this is important, Vi. This

guy needs to be stopped before another girl dies.”

Our friend, Jade, was the first girl targeted, a dancer at the club, and a beautiful, funny soul that I missed every day. Then Stormy, another dancer. Then Cherry, an escort like me who was slaughtered in Beth’s dressing room.

That one scared me a little, I couldn’t lie, but damn if I would be put in a glass box and handled with kid gloves. My life might be dangerous, my job a little sketchy, but it was all a means to an end. I refused to stop living or *earning* a living just because a psycho with an axe to grind—ugh, bad pun—had it out for the ladies of Cameo for some reason.

“I know,” I said. “But *chemistry* is not necessary. Jasmine, Jezzie, Paisley . . . any of them could do just as well. Probably better, in fact, because they wouldn’t know he wasn’t real. They could be told it’s not to go sexual, to keep it aboveboard so that we don’t get into trouble. You know what? I’m going to suggest that to Charli today at the shower.”

Oh, my God, I felt so much better, like a weight had been lifted.

She chuckled. “Whatever you need to do, my friend. I have your back. So, are we ready for the shower? And how was the gala?”

I gave the basics before we hung up, which was all I remembered anyway. They were always the same. Smiling, talking about world events that leaned toward whatever the client was involved in, small touches on the men’s arms, eye contact with the women, selling myself in every way to feed every sense and fulfill every desire. The champagne was good and the sex fairly vanilla, so I hadn’t had to get very creative. Honestly, I thought more about the shower prep and the catering.

And how that scruff would feel . . .

Stop.

I busied myself for the next two hours getting ready and making sure that everything was perfect for our little shindig.

Jonathan confirmed the venue at the Hard Rock, and that the caterers were on track for a two o'clock delivery, laden with a beautiful cake and midafternoon grazing goodies. JD confirmed that his guy, Jarod, had already done a security sweep.

Charli deserved this. Whether or not I had mixed feelings about the love of her life was irrelevant. Gideon loved her, and she loved him, and Charli was over the moon about being a mom. I would do anything to keep her that happy.

Charli Vaughn probably saved my life. I met her at a Starbucks shortly after I left New Orleans. I'd hit up a few cities along the way, thinking Austin might be the ticket for a minute, but ultimately, Las Vegas was a better landing. Street hustling is a dangerous game, however. I'd done it in one way or another since I was a kid, and hooked since I was eighteen, so I knew the pitfalls and the odds of things eventually going bad. When Charli got me a job at Cameo with fancy appointments, wealthy, vetted clientele, and *medical insurance?*

Hell, yes. She saved my life. Gave me people, friends, a family. Back then, Charli was managing a restaurant, and her mother was at the helm. Our friend, Amy Todd, was the assistant running everyone's world, and we became instant running buddies, along with Jade.

Some people might take friendship like that for granted, but not me. I'd never had it before, and it was precious.

Amy left a few months ago for some family stuff, and I missed her, especially now. With Charli's grandmother, mother, and Jade now gone, and no one else to give her this new mom pampering, I was determined to give her the full experience. Who cared if we worked in the sin industry and knew next to nothing about babies or showers, and that nearly every guest there would be a stripper, an escort, or worked for the mob?

It was going to be fucking awesome.

The only damper on the day was the guilt that was stabbing me in the gut about leaving Charli in a lurch yesterday. I kept hearing Beth's damn words on repeat.

It's important, Vi. This guy needs to be stopped before another girl dies.

Why, why, *why* did it have to be me? I knew it was important, and yes, I would do anything for Charli, but, no, I just couldn't be the one to do this. My alternate plan for one of the other girls was much better. They would see.

I texted Chris to come pick me up, and then tried Amy's number. It was a half-hearted effort, as I knew it would go to voicemail. I'd left dozens of messages that were never returned, and I didn't get it, but today was worth trying again.

"Hey, girl, it's Vi," I said after the short greeting. "Again. Charli's baby shower is today, and we miss you. You know, the one we're having because she's pregnant? With Voldemort's babies? As in *plural*? The babies I told you about last time I left a message?"

I shook my head and hung up, excitement and anxiety warring within me until I saw Charli, Beth, and Sophia waiting outside the Hard Rock lobby. Charli looked radiant in an all-white lace dress, her blonde locks tumbling around her shoulders, looking the complete opposite of Gideon's sister, Sophia, who stood beside her in the tiniest of black dresses, her dark hair twisted up. Beth was the splash of color off to the side, in a brilliant-blue skirt and blouse. The only ones missing were Jade—God rest her sweet, snarky soul—and Amy. I knew Charli had to be feeling that, too, but it was up to me to keep this day positive for her. And gazing upon their smiles and nearly-toe-bouncing excitement made me feel like we could actually do this and be normal women today.

Go us.

"Okay, ladies, we ready to go be girlie?" I said, stepping out of the car when Chris opened my door.

“I’m so ready,” Charli said, palming her large belly. “It’s been hell holding myself off, but you should see Gideon. He’s chomping at the bit to buy these babies things, and I haven’t let him buy anything until now, so I can’t wait to open the presents and show him what we got!”

“You are such a little kid,” I said, hugging her close. “I just wish you’d break down and find out if these are boys or girls.”

“Right?” chimed in Sophia. “Try being an auntie with no idea what to buy!”

“Uh, I *am* an auntie, thank you very much,” I said, giving Sophia wide eyes and then a wink to show I was kidding. Sort of. “Don’t be playing that blood card.”

Charli rolled her eyes. “We want a surprise.”

“I think that’s great,” Beth joined her in ganging up against me.

I would never understand that, always being one to prepare, but I was just as excited. I’d gotten her a double stroller, and Beth had gotten two matching car seats. It felt so damn domestic, it had brought tears to my eyes.

“Well, everyone will be here in the next thirty minutes,” Beth said, looping an arm through Charli’s. “I hate that you’re not walking in as the guest of honor, but let’s go sit you down while we go make sure all is beautiful.”

We almost made it to the door when a weird, high-pitched cry came from inside and the hotel manager burst through.

Maybe it was the knee-jerk reaction to all that had happened lately. Maybe it was protectiveness of my friends. But one look at the horror on the manager’s face, and I had one arm out in front of my much taller, pregnant sidekick like a mini-Ninja.

“What’s wrong?” Beth asked, doom lacing her tone.

“You can’t—” the manager began, clamping a hand over her mouth. “I just went to check on—and—and—” She shook

her head as tears filled her eyes. “Someone did something horrible. I’m calling the police. It’s—you can’t go in there.”

“Stay,” I said through my teeth to Charli, letting go of her to push past the manager and her pleas for me to stop.

“Like hell I—”

We both stopped short as I shoved open the door.

Sickness washed over my skin, along with rage.

And absolute certainty.

In one split moment I was on-fucking-board. I would attach myself to anyone and anything, no matter what it cost me personally. I’d be Detective Broussard’s personal call girl for as long as it took to burn this motherfucker to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO



Lucas

I WOKE UP at sunrise and took a long ride on my Ducati through the north Vegas mountains.

Still, those blue eyes chased me.

I came home, changed into my workout clothes, and jogged two miles, while those lips of hers continued to taunt me.

I pushed my body through another hour of weight training in my home gym, hard rock screaming through my stereo system as loud as it would go, yet Violet Reed was still like a shadow in the room, teasing and tormenting me with her essence, her voice, her wicked words, and her even more sinful curves.

The woman was everything I shouldn't want, everything my family would sneer at, yet something about her drew me in. Maybe because I could sense something underneath that sex kitten façade she wore so well. Something sweet. Something vulnerable. Something utterly devastating.

I shoved that thought aside and raked a hand through my sweaty hair. I needed to quit these fucking thoughts. She was like goddamn kryptonite.

She was an escort.

I was a cop.

And, worst of all, she'd said no.

Now I'd have to go back to work on Monday and take more endless shit from the guys because I'd cut my hair and shaved my beard—all for nothing unless they found another escort that they trusted to do the job. It had already been hell, setting up this assignment. I'd withstood all the dumb jokes about keeping my dick in my pants from the few in my unit who knew and who'd also gone undercover with sex workers. I let them have their fun because I'd done the same damn thing.

But none of them knew the truth.

None of them knew how much I secretly wanted Violet Reed. Both on and off this job, while still simultaneously hoping she'd turn it down and stay far away because *job* was the key word here. It would be fifty kinds of torture keeping things professional with this woman. Something about her got under my skin, and that wasn't normal for me. My gut twisted in disappointment at the thought of working so closely with anyone else, but it was probably for the best.

No. No *probably* about it. She was smarter than I was, choosing to walk away. Now I could keep my mind razor-focused on finding this killer with no distractions.

I rose with a sigh and made my way toward my room for a shower. The only reason the brass had agreed to let me go undercover in the first place was because I used to work undercover in the Narcotics division. I'm sure my previous top-secret clearance with the Marines didn't hurt either.

Just as I was about to strip off my shirt, my phone buzzed on my dresser with a text.

Gideon Kane: *There's been a development. Can you come to my home?*

I frowned down at my phone for a moment. It wasn't often that a cop received a message on his personal cell phone from the known head of the Vegas mafia, summoning him to a meeting. At the mob king's house. Given the current murderous situation we were facing, however, there wasn't

anything normal about our situation. I had to shelve any biases I may have about Gideon Kane and his organization's shady dealings in favor of catching the Lady Killer.

Temporarily.

I glanced over at the folders of intel I'd begun to compile on the employees of Cameo, as well as Kane Enterprises. I was good at my job. Probably better than Kane knew. I was raised in a big business family, which wasn't much different than the mob, and could be just as blood thirsty, as far as I was concerned. Hell, I'd seen the ramifications of the things my family was capable of in the name of the almighty dollar, and I'd chosen another route, something my parents and my brothers never understood. Something only my sister, Sarah, and I shared.

While I'd gotten away by joining the military and then the police force, however, she'd chosen another more self-destructive path. Something my too-perfect family could never cope with and had chosen to simply ignore, cover up, and pretend had never happened because of their own embarrassment. It still grated that my sister was nothing more than an inconvenience to them. A problem to be dealt with. Brushed under the rug. Their little girl.

My baby sister.

I shook myself out of those thoughts and focused on Kane's message. I hated texting, but I thumbed back a response. *Sure. When?*

Gideon Kane: *Now. It's urgent.*

My frown grew as my sixth sense began to tingle. Something wasn't right. I hadn't heard of any more killings or attacks, yet . . .

Me: *Did something happen?*

Gideon Kane: *Fuck yes something happened. When can you be here?*

Me: *On my way.*

I knew the address. I'd been there before.

I skipped the shower, jumped in my Land Rover, and sped that way, wondering what kind of fresh hell awaited me this time.

I pulled into the large driveway and parked behind two black Cadillac Escalades then made my way to the door, where his not-so-subtle security was posted with their weapons. I decided to take my new persona for a test run.

"Name's Lucas," I said, instead of identifying myself as a cop. "Mr. Kane is expecting me."

The biggest one eyed me over, patted me down, then nodded. The relatively smaller one spoke into his headpiece then opened the door.

Okay, then.

I took in the place out of habit. It hadn't changed much since the last time I was there and ended up helping the man cook omelets. Still freakishly clean. Streamlined. Black and white everything. The touches of a woman were present now in the way of color. Pastel-colored pillows on the furniture, artwork on the walls, the faint scent of vanilla wafting in the air.

Everything else, from the multiple monitors that I knew were for security, the muscle in the corner not bothering to hide his weapon, the bold display of high-end liquor, and the not-so-subtle bite of testosterone that filled the room—all of it screamed organized crime.

I swallowed back the automatic cop reflex and stepped farther into the room as Gideon Kane stepped forward.

"Lucas." He offered his hand. "Thank you for coming."

We shook, and I took him in. Not in one of his custom dark suits, he was in sweats and tennis shoes, his hair disheveled, his face unshaven, his eyes tired, his expression haggard. Something was definitely off.

"No problem. What's up?"

Behind him, in the den, I could just make out his fiancée, Charli Vaughn, lying on the couch, her feet propped up, her eyes closed, her pregnant belly hidden under a blanket. I had a feeling more security detail flanked her than I couldn't see.

He shot her a look over his shoulder, then tipped his head for me to follow him down the hall, where we made our way to his home office. More computer screens, expensive liquor, and obvious security measures were in place.

An ominous-looking man who I'd come to know was his enforcer rose from the dark-brown leather couch when we entered the room.

"JD," Kane said, and the man nodded.

It didn't escape me that my being there, in his personal space, had to be Gideon Kane's worst nightmare. He wasn't an idiot. I'd watched him absorb a room in seconds, his hard gaze missing nothing. I had no doubt that he'd noticed me doing the same. There was no way he'd be inviting me back into his office without a damn good reason.

Kane rounded his desk, and without a word, drew out a business-sized envelope and handed it to me. I accepted it and opened the flap to peer inside. Photographs. I slid them out and flipped through them one by one, studying them carefully, though I wasn't quite sure what I was looking at.

Torn, bloody baby clothes.

Ripped up toys and stuffed animals with the heads half torn off.

A destroyed cake with a bloody baby doll's head stuck in the middle.

But the last ones—what the hell?

Two car seats, side by side, desecrated with—I flipped through the next three photos as it was documented close-up—mutilated *kittens* wrapped in baby blankets. One with a tiny rope noose around its neck. They'd clearly been tortured.

"Jesus." I glanced up at him. "What is this?"

His jaw pulsed as he clearly held his rage in check. “*That* was what the ladies found when they arrived for Charli’s baby shower.” He flexed his fists. “*Our twins*’ baby shower.”

Oh, fuck. I flipped through them again with fresh eyes. Whoever had done this had left this as a threat against Gideon, Charli, and their children. The message was as loud and clear as it could be. Well, not *whoever*. The Lady Killer.

I’d been piecing together the case for months. Yes, he or she was a murderer, but this was also a sadistic asshole who got off on terrorizing their victims. The Lady Killer had clearly escalated from slashing tires and leaving threatening notes to *this*, devolving fast. There was one hard fact I’d determined after the third murder. Due to the impossibly perfect timing, it had to be an inside job. Forensic testing and background checks were being doubled down and re-checked, but what Kane didn’t know was that I had a hunch. A sixth sense that didn’t make sense yet, but I’d learned over the years to trust my gut, so I’d also ordered DNA tests to be performed on every single blood sample from each crime scene plus collected from each employee who worked for Cameo and Kane Enterprises—secretly. Cigarette butts and drinking glasses pretty much did the trick. Foregoing the typical routine, as I did not have a typical killer, rather than presume anyone’s innocence, I presumed everyone was guilty and started there. Apparently, Charli or Gideon was the ultimate target, but why? And what was the end game?

“Did you call this in?” I asked.

He raked fingers through his hair. “Yeah. But we both know that’s shit. There’s only so much the cops can do since no one was hurt.” He tipped his chin toward JD, who left the room. “We need to go back to our original plan. I always knew there could be danger for me or my family, which is why I called you in in the first place, but this is a clear-cut threat.” His voice turned to steel. “Against my fucking unborn children. I will *not* let that stand. And as much as I’ve begged, even demanded, that my wife-to-be pack up and leave until this blows over, she’s stubborn and committed to her business

and friends.” His jaw clenched. “So, that being said, it’s my job to keep her and our family safe, at any cost. Period.”

I placed the photos back on his desk. I knew what he was saying, and he wasn’t saying it to the law. It was on me to keep that boundary in place. “I understand that. I do. I’m sure even without Violet, we can rethink—”

“No need. *Vi’s* in.”

I spun toward the sultry voice that haunted my dreams and found her standing with JD in the doorway. I had to work to contain my reaction at seeing her outside of the club. Dressed casually in form-fitting jeans, a plain, soft white t-shirt, her feet bare, her long, dark hair up in a high ponytail, her skin mostly devoid of makeup, I wasn’t used to her so . . . natural. She was always beautiful, but like this, she was startlingly, breath-stealingly gorgeous.

I tucked away my response and offered her a half-smile. “Hello, Violet. What changed your mind?”

She frowned at my use of her full name, which was why I insisted on using it. “You know why.”

My gaze slid to the photos. “I suppose so.”

Miss Vaughn sidestepped them to enter the room and wrap her arms around Mr. Kane’s waist, resting her head against his chest. She lifted troubled eyes to me. “Thank you for coming, Detective.”

“Absolutely, Miss Vaughn. I’m so sorry that someone ruined your day like this.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Ruined my day? That’s insignificant. A party can happen anytime; I just need these babies to be safe.”

I tipped my head in acknowledgment, my eyes sliding to Violet’s. “That’s my plan.”

Something in Violet’s expression softened. Just a tad. But I saw it. She loved her friend and was going forward with this for her sake. I could respect that.

“Well,” Miss Vaughn said, pulling away from her fiancée with a weary expression. “I don’t have it in me to hover right now. I need some normal, so you guys do what you have to do. I’m going to start lunch.” She pressed a kiss to Gideon’s jaw. “Catch me up on what I need to know?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be in there to help you in a second,” Violet said, squeezing her hand as she passed.

“Take your time,” she said, her voice stronger and harder than her tired appearance let on. “This is important. For all of us.”

Violet nodded.

She shut the door, and Kane sank into a plush leather chair. Violet chose the sofa and curled her legs under her, raising an eyebrow as JD went to the bar. “I’ll take a whiskey,” she said. “Neat. God knows, I’ll need it.”

I settled into one of the chairs opposite her, waving off the liquor.

“Would you like to lay out the plan, Detective?” Gideon asked, settling back with a tumbler of whiskey already in front of him.

I couldn’t help but notice Violet’s purple toenails and the way she licked her lips after she sipped her drink. I noticed every damn thing about the woman as she stared at me with those big blue eyes that threatened to drown me.

Fuck. *Get it together, man.*

I purposely looked away, glancing at JD then back to Kane. “Sure. It’s simple, really. To keep my cover easy for all to remember, I’ll be posing as Lucas Thibodeaux, a wealthy businessman from Louisiana. In town on extended business and in need of a long-term companion for appearances at business functions as well as personal reasons.”

Personal reasons?

Her eyes met mine as the words floated in the air.

No. There would be no personal anything.

“And nobody knows about this except those of us in this room, a select few at the Vegas P.D., and Charli,” Gideon clarified. “For security purposes.”

“And where are you supposed to be?” Violet asked with a sassy brow lift. “Won’t it be suspicious if *Detective Broussard* goes MIA for an extended period since we see you nosing around Cameo all the time?”

“Nosing around?” I echoed.

She sipped. “Yup. Nosy Rosy.”

“Vi—” Kane started.

I lifted a hand, letting him know it was fine. “*Detective Broussard* is sidelined with an injury. If another detective is needed, they will send in someone else with that story.” I shot Kane a glance. “Though, full disclosure, other undercovers will be in and out periodically to help me. You’ll never know they’re there.”

Gideon studied me for a long moment. “Noted.”

I turned back to Violet. “Any other questions, *cher*?”

Her lip curled at the endearment I used as part of the role, and I stifled a chuckle.

“Yeah.” She waved a hand in the general vicinity of my face. “I get that you nixed the Grizzly Adams vibe and all, but some of the girls are still pretty observant. What if someone notices the resemblance and starts asking questions?”

Yeah, I’d thought of that, too. Especially since I couldn’t really disguise my voice. “I don’t anticipate any problems, but if anyone asks, the detective is a distant cousin. Lucas is an old family name.” I winked. “Think that’ll work?”

She shook her head and glanced away. “Whatever.”

Kane tipped back the last of his whiskey, the ice clinking in his glass. “Well, that should at least get us started. We can meet again should any issues arise we need to address.” He pinned me with a steely stare. “It’s essential that we catch this motherfucker and that he does not touch one hair on Charli’s head, or any of the other women. The sooner the better.”

I noticed that he did not mention what would happen when we *did* catch him. Not that I expected him to. I was more than certain that Gideon Kane had plans for the Lady Killer that did not involve the due process of the justice system.

That was a conversation for another day.

“Agreed.”

He nodded once. “Awesome. You’ll have access to my files and my personal computer since our tech guys aren’t aware of the plan. JD can get you anything else you need. Just let him know.”

I clasped my hands over my knee and weighed what I was about to say carefully. “Just so you’re aware, I did find something interesting, but I’m not sure what it means just yet. If anything.”

Gideon leaned forward, his brow lifted ominously. “What’s that?”

“I had DNA tests run,” I said. “On all of you.”

His gaze thundered even though he did not flinch. “On us?”

“Every last one,” I said.

“What the fuck for?”

“A hunch,” I said. “It’s pretty clear it’s an inside job. I thought maybe I could narrow it down even more.”

He leaned back in his chair again. “And?”

“At the scenes, it was mostly just the victims, as you’d expect.” I took a breath and met his eyes. “But there was one small hair. Maybe an eyelash. Hard to tell.”

“I didn’t hear anything about a hair,” he said.

“Well, that would be because we’re the police, and you aren’t,” I bit back, ignoring his scowl. Here was where I had to decide just how much to divulge. Again, I went with my intuition. “DNA markers show a relation to Miss Vaughn.”

Gideon was up and out of his chair in a flash. If his desk hadn’t been between us, I had no doubt we’d be nose to nose.

“Are you fucking saying that—?”

“No,” I said, giving him an impatient look as I rubbed my eyes. “Calm the hell down. I’m not implying anything. I’m just giving you the facts. Period.” I held up a hand. “I know it doesn’t make sense. All of her kinfolk are gone. Hell, with the scenes being such a bloody mess, maybe the DNA results were skewed. That’s why I’ve tabled it for now. But in the interest of *teamwork* . . .” I made a circular motion at the room. “I’m filling you in.”

“Well, that’s just weird,” Violet said over her glass.

“Yes, it is,” I agreed.

“Vi, don’t say anything to Charli about this right now,” Gideon said, pinching his nose. “Both of you. Please. This has been enough stress on her—”

“Of course,” Violet said, looking at him like he was a giant idiot. I had to give it to her. She didn’t hide her feelings about him.

He blew out a breath and sat back down. “In the meantime, I think it would be a good idea for you two to get started tonight by being seen together at Cameo, so everyone knows the score.”

Her eyes flashed to mine with what I could only interpret as anxiety. The tiniest bit, barely visible behind the wall of bravado and snark. “Great.”

“Perfect,” I responded, rising. “I’ll be there at eight.”



I ARRIVED AT eight thirty just to piss her off. I handed my keys to the valet and strode inside slowly, wondering what kind of reception I might get. Would I get cool, detached Violet? Snippy, snarky Violet? Angry, abrasive Violet?

Honestly, I couldn't wait to find out, and I knew that made me fucking pathetic.

The one thing I knew I wouldn't get was happy Violet, and that was okay. We didn't need to really enjoy this. *I* didn't need to enjoy this.

I strolled past the first dancer on the hydraulic stage, Monique, I recalled from my previous staff interviews, gyrating her ample hips and ass my way, her dark, hypnotic eyes trained on me as I moved past.

I doubted my "date" would be near the Oral Treats bar or downstairs in the casino, so I continued toward the Sizzle steakhouse, somehow knowing she'd be inside.

I let my eyes adjust to the darkened interior as the sweet, husky sounds of their singer, Beth, wrapped around me. I gazed around at the couples cloistered at small tables and in booths, to the bar, where JD sat perched in the far corner. Then I spotted her.

Violet stood at a tall table near the opposite wall, her eyes trained on her friend as she appeared to soak in every note. I took a moment to study her while she was unaware of my presence.

Back in her Cameo escort armor, she was dressed to the nines in a dark-purple dress that wrapped around her curves like a second skin from throat to ankle yet left little to the imagination. Especially where it dipped down deep between her perfect breasts. Tall stilettos boosted her height, but I knew she would still only reach my nose. Her hair was up in a long, thick braid, high on her head, that made my fingers long to undo it and run through all that thick, dark silkiness. Her eyes were lined with dark shadow, her lips painted a dark wine, her

fingernails, even darker. She was a fucking goddess, and my instantly hard dick wanted to be her god.

Jesus, where did that come from?

No. No gods and goddesses tonight. This was a professional arrangement that both me and my single-minded dick needed to wrap our heads around.

“Dial it back, Broussard,” I mumbled under my breath.

She must’ve felt my eyes on her because she turned, her gaze locking on mine in the dark.

I didn’t move as those eyes looked me up and down in my black slacks, white button-down that was rolled to my mid-forearms, no tie tonight. I’d shaven my face clean and slicked my hair back.

She didn’t give any inkling that she liked what she saw or that she even cared I was there. She simply slid her gaze back toward her friend at the piano. I couldn’t help but smile. Fucking strong-willed woman.

I made my way to the bar, ordered myself a beer and a whiskey neat for her, then made my way slowly over.

I offered her the glass. “You look—”

She shot me a glare, her blue eyes sparking like live wires in the dark. “Any other client, I’d charge them an extra five hundred dollars for being late,” she hissed before taking the whiskey and shooting it back in one smooth swallow.

My cock sprang to life. Again. Making my slacks uncomfortably tight. How in God’s name was I going to keep my head in the game with this woman shooting barbs at me right and left and my own libido shooting into overdrive the minute she opened that sassy, painted mouth?

By treading carefully and avoiding her snarky landmines. That’s how.

I cleared my throat and sipped my beer, turning so that I could see the entire room before facing her stony profile. “Put

it on my tab, *cher.*”

CHAPTER THREE



Violet

OKAY, THAT HAD to go.

I might have lost a little something—or a lot of something—when I threw in on Operation: Kill-This-Motherfucker with the detective, but I still controlled my career, my clients, and my life. I decided what I was willing or unwilling to do in my job—for the most part. And this pretty much tossed all that out the window. In order for him to come inside Cameo and dig into its soft underbelly to find this asshole, to protect Charli and the babies, I had to give up my control.

But that *cher* thing . . .

Yes, it reminded me of my roots, my childhood, of a simpler time and place. When the slower, sultry rhythm of the New Orleans French Quarter shaped my life with its history and its culture and eventually its cruelty. Back where old souls threw that endearment around like candy, meant to be sweet as the *sha* sound rolled softly off their tongues, warm eyes falling on me with sympathy as they dropped their one-dollar bills in my hat. Other eyes leering at me like their fives should earn them something special.

I could still feel that sticky, brutal New Orleans heat as it stole the breath out of my chest, even after the sun set. Everyone else complained about it as they went home to their air-conditioned houses, while I just prayed that I'd scammed enough cash that day for gas to run the car my mom and I lived in.

Cher . . .

The way *he* said it though . . . the way his tongue wrapped around the word, nearly a whisper, like it was an act of rebellion—or seduction—from his more educated mouth. It both pissed me off royally, and sent goosebumps prickling over my skin, as I imagined him saying it while looking up at me from between my thighs, the word humming against my—

And *that* was precisely why it needed to go.

I pulled a black card from the small chained bag I held and flipped it over my fingers to him.

“What’s this?” he asked, one finger brushing mine as he took it, sending tiny bolts of electricity through my hand.

Jesus. Really?

All my parts had gone on full lightning alert when he walked into Sizzle, looking like a delicious treat I wanted to taste. Good God, the alpha male that had been hiding under the ill-fitting suits and too much hair—no fucking wonder I’d reacted to him the way I had from day one. My body instinctively knew what my eyes had missed.

Walking in now, in a tailored shirt and slacks that fit his body perfectly, no tie, sleeves rolled up on his forearms to show the cut of his muscles, his hair slicked back—he looked like something between comfortably casual and the freshly sexed wealthy, and I had to resist the urge to lick my lips.

I’d looked away, pretending noninterest, before those scrutinizing eyes of his caught me drooling.

He turned the card over to the side with the website address then back to the front which held nothing but two simple letters in a flowy script.

“What does it say?” I said.

“It says Vi.”

“Correct,” I said. “You’ll notice it doesn’t say Miss Reed, or Violet, and it certainly doesn’t say *cher*.”

He flipped it over his own fingers in much the same way I had, and it was disconcerting. He tapped it against his chest. “I get the sense that’s important to you,” he said softly.

“For people to address me as I ask them to?” I said. “Yes. It’s common courtesy. For someone putting out all this—” I gestured to him with a flourish.

He laughed. “All this *what?*”

Damn it. He was flustering me. “You want to act all southern gentleman on me?” I finished. “Don’t refuse a basic request.”

A small grin pulled at his lips as he studied me, his gaze warm. “So, you don’t like being called *cher?*” he asked. “Or you don’t like hearing it from me?”

“Yes.”

Another chuckle rumbled in his chest. “And what’s wrong with Violet?”

Fuck. Everything inside me twisted when he said my name like that. Like he was tasting the color as the sound passed over his lips. More than that though, it was—it wasn’t me. Not here. Not in *this* life.

“Maybe I think Violet suits you,” he said, bringing his glass to his lips.

I tilted my head. “Maybe I find you to be more of a *Luke*, then?” I said. “I mean, if that’s how we’re rolling. Lucas is kind of pretentious.”

There was the slightest twitch next to his right eye.

Yeah.

I was good at tells. I’d been using them to my advantage since I did tarot cards and palm readings for tips on a sidewalk off Bourbon Street. The same method I used to milk information to my advantage then came in handy with clients now. I hadn’t become the most sought-out escort in the city for my bedroom skills. Anyone with a pussy could fuck. Any

woman with good muscle tone could fuck well. It took a well-trained mind to listen for what a client really wanted, to watch their faces, their reactions. Facial expressions and body language were my bread and butter.

“Hmm, have an opinion on that, do you?” I asked, running a fingertip along my glass so that his eyes would be drawn there and away from mine. I needed to regain control, and quick.

“Not really,” he said, although something in his eyes said differently when his gaze moved right back up to mine. “So, what are we doing tonight?”

The subject change would have made me laugh if I were on my game.

But, God help me, I had no damn game when I was around this man. All my savvy, all my well-honed charm and grace, flopped to the floor like a drunk seal whenever he got this close to me, and all I could be was thankful that this wasn't a full-service gig.

There was no way I'd ever be able to get down and dirty with Lucas Broussard—or Thibodeaux or whatever the hell he was calling himself now. I'd lose my damn mind. And probably my soul, all my carefully built walls, and probably any semblance of professionalism.

“What are we doing?” I echoed. “You tell me. That's not my call.”

“Your clients call the shots,” he said, the words a statement.

I lifted an eyebrow. “It's their dime.” I drained the last of my glass and set it on a tray carried by a sweet, barely legal, ginger busboy whose cheeks always glowed when I smiled at him. I gave him a wink, and he nearly dropped the tray. “Sorry,” I whispered on a chuckle as he passed.

Lucas ran a hand over his jaw, muttering something I couldn't make out.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head, his composure returning as his gaze darted over the room, the sharpness I was accustomed to seeing on him returning. “Nothing.”

“Okay, well, you definitely can’t do *that*,” I said.

His brows furrowed. “Can’t do what?”

“Look like *that* in here if you want to blend,” I said, leaning into his space and lowering my voice. “Lose the cop eyes.”

I was too close, as those same eyes burned down into mine, his expensively delicious smell wrapping around me like a lover’s hands, making me want to dive all the way in and bury myself. Beth’s voice in the background was soft and sultry and romantic, and that didn’t help.

“Excellent tip, thank you,” he said softly.

Don’t look at his mouth.

Don’t look at his mouth.

I looked.

“Another drink?” a chirpy waitress asked, one I didn’t know but simultaneously hated and wanted to hug at the same time as I backed out of ground zero.

Fuck. It was like being drugged.

“Yes, please,” I said. “A double.”

“You got it,” she said. “Anything for the gentleman?”

“No, thank you, sweetheart.” He lifted his half-empty beer with a wink, making me cringe inwardly with an emotion I refused to name. Instead, I focused on his forearms as he leaned on the table, his hands wrapped around the bottle.

Bad idea.

“So then educate me, Violet,” he said, yanking my attention back to his face. “Since I’ve never hired an escort before. What would you normally do with a client?”

That question was so loaded with things that could either blow my resolve or get me arrested, all I could do was detour. “Well, honestly, *Luke*,” I began, reaching into my bag for a pen and a tiny notepad. “Appointments aren’t usually here. Occasionally, but I’m hired as a plus one for all kinds of events. Powerful people need an equally impressive date on their arm. Someone who can interact and make them look good in front of peers or clients or friends and sell the fantasy.”

His head tilted, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes. “What fantasy is that?”

“That maybe he or she didn’t buy the date,” I said, lifting an eyebrow. “That just maybe I’m a real girl.”

He lifted his drink to his lips slowly, never taking his gaze off mine. Or blinking. It was maddening. “You seem very real to me, *cher*.”

My heart began to thunder against my ribs, and I fought an uphill battle to control it. Those amber eyes, so eerily astute. I felt naked under his gaze. I averted mine quickly to focus on the notepad as I wrote a name.

“You know what I mean,” I managed to whisper just as the waitress appeared with my drink. I snatched it up and took a long sip, then tore the top sheet off the pad. “Can you check on something for me?” I asked, my voice low. “Or someone? When you’re not being Lucas Thibodeaux, that is.”

“Nice subject change.”

I met his eyes as neutrally as I possibly could. “Can you?”

He sighed and slid the paper closer. “Amy Todd.”

“She used to work here,” I said. “The assistant before Jonathan. And a friend.”

He looked back to me. “And?”

“She left a few months back—well, longer than that, actually. Right after Charli’s mom and grandmother died.” I

frowned. “She had something come up with family, but then fell off the grid. And it’s weird.”

“You were close?”

I nodded. “We were. All of us were.” I sighed and smiled up at him adoringly when two Cameo dancers sashayed by on their break, batting their fake eyelashes at him. “It’s just odd that she’s never returned a call.”

“I’ll check into it,” he said. “What’s the phone number?”

I pulled my phone from my bag and scrolled.

“How deep does that thing go?” he said, pretending to lean over and look inside. “Do you have a pair of shoes in there, too?”

I glanced up and smirked. “Actually, there is a t-shirt and leggings in here.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I’d never do that,” I said, then lifted an eyebrow. “In my business, you always have cash and a change of clothes. Always.”

“What about a weapon?” he said, looking serious.

I picked up the pen and wrote Amy’s number on the paper before I clicked it twice in front of him. “Check.”

A smile pulled at his lips, a hint of dimples making a brief appearance. “I’ll keep that in mind. So, back to this appointment activity.”

“Oh, good, I was hoping we’d get back to that,” I said on an exhale.

“If you do stay here,” he said, ignoring me, “I’m guessing those VIP rooms upstairs come into play.” He smirked.

Tread carefully.

“The VIP rooms are usually for high-profile clients who want privacy and anonymity, but yes, sometimes a client of mine requests one,” I said slowly.

“To have sex with you.”

A chuckle escaped my throat. “You’re not very good at separating your two worlds, are you?” I smiled again as the two dancers came back our direction, and I stepped around the table to move into his space and rest a hand against his shirt so that it looked more believable. “Stop interrogating me, *Detective*,” I whispered, trying desperately to keep my shit together and not breathe him in. “Play the part.”

One finger ran down my arm as his infuriatingly unblinking gaze went slightly heavy. “I see. You can ask me to do my job, but I can’t do my job on my own, is that about right?”

“That’s the gist of it,” I said, toying with a button.

“Got it.” His lips tugged. “But don’t think I missed your non-answer. Classic diversion technique.”

I smiled up at him as his finger lit a fire down my arm, and I had to fight not to shiver. Hoping I could keep my eyes neutral and not let them fall to his very sexy lips. Lips I had no business thinking about. Or even looking at. Kissing was taboo in my world, and since I hadn’t dated in a million years, I doubted I even remembered how it was done.

“Are you saying you don’t have sex with the men you go out with, Violet?” he asked. “Because I have a very hard time believing that.”

“Really?” I said, fingering my braid just to watch him fight back the tortured fire in his eyes. *Yeah, keep calling me Violet, dude.* “And why is that?”

“Because you’re stunning,” he said, his tone deep and low. “One taste of you would drive a man insane with the need for more.”

I’m pretty sure my mouth fell open. My fingers went numb. Brain empty. Nipples painfully hard and aching. Who the hell was torturing who?

He shook his head then, as if *his* brain just came back online. “Hypothetically, of course,” he added, the words coming out scratchy. “Not me.”

“Of course,” I echoed, forcing a smile and a casual chuckle. “Not you.” I cleared my throat and pulled my cool demeanor back from the ghetto or wherever it had gone to reside. Backed out of his aura an inch or two. “Well, like we’ve made clear multiple times, no one pays for sex at Cameo.”

“And if they get it anyway?”

I shrugged, resisting the need to fan myself. “That’s between two consenting adults.” I snagged the stirrer straw from my glass and ran it along my bottom lip. *Time to turn it on him again.* “Anything that may or may not happen with the men—or women—that pay me to accompany them, outside of the event’s scope, is entirely by choice.”

The longest pause in history passed before he nodded, and I took in a slow, full breath.

“Well, we can do that another evening,” he said, his voice gravelly. “A VIP room,” he added quickly. “For appearances.”

“Of course,” I said, my laugh sounding like a choke.

“Although if the point of those rooms is just to watch the dancers in private,” he said, thankfully lightening his tone, even if it was mockingly. “I don’t see the appeal.”

“Too far away?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he said, bringing a smirk to my lips that then melted away when his eyes locked in on me again. “What’s the fun in that? If I want to see action, I want to be up close and personal.”

“Well then, let’s go,” I said, suddenly eager for distance. For a chair and space to get my head back together and away from his body heat. “Let’s get you up close and personal. I mean, a client in your league needs floor seats at stage level, right?”

He laughed as he followed me out of Sizzle.

I turned, pulling my thick braid over one shoulder as I let him catch up and I took his arm. Sweet Jesus. His muscles flexed at my touch, and heat shot straight between my legs.

I swallowed hard and kept walking.

“Have you never gone to a gentlemen’s club with a woman?”

“Can’t say that I have,” he said. “I don’t know many women that could handle that.”

I lifted an eyebrow as we sauntered into the main feast of the senses that was Cameo at its finest. Beautiful women moved seductively on small stages. Two nearly naked nymphs were suspended twenty feet up on poles, their bodies twisting into formations that I could never pull off. The acrobatics never ceased to awe me.

Beauty was everywhere. Even the new male hosts and servers sprinkled in with the ladies were drop-dead droolworthy, as they should be. They were members of Cameo’s hot new male revue, The Knights of Cameo, now performing ladies’ nights on Thursdays. I helped choose a few myself.

“Then you don’t know the right women,” I said, guiding him to an intimate table for two, one row back from the stage. “If you can leave your jealousy at the door and open your mind, it can be incredibly erotic.”

I took a seat and nodded for a waitress to bring us fresh drinks, letting the high side slit of my form-fitting dress fall open as I crossed one leg over the other, giving him a generous view of the inside of my thigh to go with the extremely low cleavage. It was obvious that he was as attracted to me as I was to him, and I needed to use that to my advantage. Regardless of why he and I were really here, the man was making me lose my cool. I very much needed him to know how that felt.

The expression on his face told me I'd succeeded. Even in the low light, I could recognize the dark, raw appreciation in his eyes as they raked over me.

Score.

Breathe.

“Would you like a lap dance?” I asked, bringing his gaze sharply back to my face.

“Are you offering?”

I laughed, glad that he couldn't see me breaking out into a sweat from the thought. “I don't do that,” I said. In public. I very much did that in private, which generally concluded in a very different way than what could happen out here.

He took a sip of his drink and licked his lips, breathing in slowly as he averted his gaze to Jezebel, a sinfully curvy dancer with thick mahogany waves tipped in pink, who'd spotted him and was shamelessly gyrating her hips in his direction while pinching her own nipples. “What a shame.”

My core clenched at the thought of his hands sliding along my body as I straddled what I knew would be a massive hard-on just for me as I moved over him.

Shit, fuck, hell. At this rate, I was going to have to go do myself in the bathroom just to get through the evening.

“So, what's on the agenda for this little pet project of yours and Gideon's?” I blurted, suddenly needing a severe degree of separation.

The look he gave me was almost one of relief as he slipped into a more professional—definitely more chaste—conversation.

He lowered his voice and quickly laid out the basics of a plan for an event there at the club, down in the casino. A private one with Gideon's business associates.

“His business associates?” I echoed.

“Yeah. Even when I was in Narcotics, I have to say, I never had the honor of being invited to a party full of gunrunners.” He grinned as he tipped back the rest of his drink. “This will be a first.”

“You mean a liquor distribution gathering?” I asked, nonchalantly, mentally cataloging that little tidbit about him working Narcotics.

“Of course, *cher*,” he said with a wink. “My mistake.” He shrugged. “I doubt anyone there will be real, but it’s a big, showy opportunity to involve all the employees here and watch everyone.”

I nodded, my heart going dark as I recalled the horror of Charli’s shower. “Whatever it takes.”

“Are you okay?” he asked, making me blink back to him. “That must’ve been awful to see.”

I shook my head. “Honestly, if anyone was okay after that, I’d worry about them.”

“Good point,” he said, sitting back.

He declined a lap dance from Paisley without giving her so much as a glance, his gaze focused on me.

“It wasn’t just horrible to walk in on,” I said, my voice nearly a whisper. “But—to actually do what he did to those animals. What the fuck is wrong with this guy?”

“We don’t know it’s a guy.”

I gave him a look. “Well, what woman would destroy a baby shower? Charli was so excited.” I forced my gaze upward at the lights overhead and blinked rapidly to stem off the angry emotion. “She’s come so far and—yeah, Gideon can be a bit of a pompous tool sometimes, but he adores her. It just infuriates me that—”

“That’s why I’m here,” he said, his hand suddenly on mine, his eyes flashing. His tone was sharp, almost harsh, as if the case going this long unsolved was a personal thorn in his side. “That’s why we’re doing this.”

The heat from his hand was so electric, so—real. Too real. I yanked mine out from under his and grabbed my glass like I could dive into it. I knew he was being nice, but I couldn't handle nice right now. I'd do much better, in fact, if he would go back to being that arrogant asshole he was the other night in Charli's office. That guy was easy to distance myself from.

"Do they know what they're having?" he asked after a few long moments and a song change.

"No," I said. "Just that there are two of them, and she didn't find that out till recently. Her grandmother—Camille Vaughn, the woman who started this place—had a twin sister that Charli never met, so she knew it was possible, but damn, what a shocker. *Hey, I don't know what the hell I'm doing, so let's double it up just for fun.*"

"What about you?"

I met his gaze, lifting an eyebrow. "What about me?"

"Ever thought about settling down one day?" he asked, giving a micro-shrug. "Kids, picket fences and all that?"

I ignored the stab that pierced my chest, laughing instead. "Uh. No. Thanks."

He smiled, and it was so damn warm and genuine, I felt the goo. It was like a—a date smile. The back of my neck tingled. "No?"

I gestured at myself, sitting there with my boobs half on display and my legs pulling his attention—again. "Do I look like I could be anyone's mother?"

His eyes shot up to mine. "Why not?"

That stabbing feeling spread throughout my chest. "No. I'm good being Auntie Vi," I said, forcing a tight smile. "Notice the *Vi* in that?"

"Are you Auntie Vi now?" he asked.

I frowned, exasperated. "What?"

"In real life?" he said.

I blinked, narrowing my eyes. “No. Only child. I was enough. They could barely handle that.” I leaned forward. “Which I’m pretty sure you already knew. What’s with the interrogation again, *Luke*?”

He chuckled, and I wanted to twist that smirk right off his lips.

By way of mine.

“Just getting to know you,” he said. “Part of the—”

“Helloooo . . .” Jezebel’s hands were suddenly on his shoulders, sliding down his strong arms as she smiled brilliantly. “My goodness, Vi, where have you been hiding this beautiful man?”

“He’s a new client, Jezi,” I said, winking at him as he laughed nervously, preparing to decline her as he had Paisley. “Luke Thibodeaux.”

If she didn’t recognize him at this proximity, then the disguise was a huge success.

“Mr. Thibodeaux,” Jezi purred, running her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. Envy coursed through me as my stupid fingers itched to do just that. “Would you like a dance?”

“No, thank—”

“Yes, he’d love one,” I said, tilting my head and smiling at the incredulous look on his face. “It’s on me,” I said, resting my hand on his leg as Jezi straddled his lap.

Oh, yeah. Power was all mine again as the music thundered through the floor, vibrating our bodies as Jezebel moved against Lucas, pulling her straps down to bare her perfect, surgically enhanced breasts. She dropped low, sliding up between his legs while he chuckled and gave me a *seriously?* look that would have been hysterical if I weren’t so relieved to be out of the frying pan. She slid all the way up his body till her hard nipples grazed his cheek and her hands

messed up his hair. She was one of the best at what she did, and incredibly hot to watch.

His eyes weren't on Jezi, however. They were on me.

Shit.

Grasping his face in her hands, she straddled him again, grinding against him to the beat of the music.

“Mmm, Vi, you have quite a package waiting for you,” she said.

“Well, thank you,” he said, grinning up at her, taking her hands from his face and kissing a knuckle. “Why don't you turn around?”

“Ooooh, an ass man,” she cooed, spinning. “And a charming one.”

Arching her back seductively with nothing but her thong covering her sweet spot, she leaned back into him, pressing her curvy ass into his lap as she laid her head on his shoulder. Palming his hands, she filled them with her breasts, her nipples squeezing between his fingers as she began a slow twerk against his crotch.

Lucas slid his hands down her body, gripping her ass with his long fingers as she mock fucked his cock. Any other man would be spellbound, watching a gorgeous, nearly naked beauty like Jezi rub her body all over him.

He was spellbound alright, his eyes dark and hooded, his jaw twitching.

Watching *me*.

As I watched him.

I was fucked.

CHAPTER FOUR



Lucas

THE VOLUPTUOUS WOMAN moved along my lap, but honestly, she may as well have been a ghost for all I noticed her. It was the baby blues of the woman across from us that held me captivated.

The flare of her dilated pupils that told me she was turned on by the display in front of her, no matter how she tried to hide it.

The way she bit the corner of her wine-colored bottom lip when I squeezed the breasts filling my hands.

The subtle rise and fall of her chest as her breath picked up pace ever so slightly.

How she crossed then recrossed her legs when I grabbed the ass moving over my cock, my mind fighting to take off to a million sinful places as hers clearly wanted to join me for the ride.

I noticed every damn thing about her.

When the song came to an end, the dancing woman—hell, if I could remember her name—rolled to sit on my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Did you enjoy that, sweetheart?”

My eyes flashed from Violet to her. “I most certainly did, ma’am. Thank you.”

She giggled. “Ma’am? Such a gentleman you have here, Vi.”

“Don’t I know it,” Violet murmured.

I shifted to draw out my wallet and handed the girl a hundred-dollar bill, in spite of Violet’s subtle head shake. “Thank you again.”

“Ooohhh.” Her eyes gleamed as she rose, and her gaze flicked to Violet’s in envy. “You kids have a good evening.” She pressed a kiss to my cheek and whispered in my ear. “Come see me anytime, Luke.”

I nodded, and she sauntered away, her hips swaying seductively.

“You have . . .” Violet began, indicating my face.

“What?”

She rolled her eyes and leaned over to swipe the lipstick off my cheek with her thumb. “Big spender, huh?” Her gaze met mine. “Keep that up and the ladies will be eating out of the palm of your hand in no time.”

“I’m only interested in one lady eating anything out of my hand, *cher*, and she’s proving to be a difficult nut to crack.”

“Good luck with that,” she mumbled.

I laughed and sipped my drink.

“I told you it was on me,” Violet said, leaning back. “Popping your lap dance cherry, and all.”

“I never said it was my first rodeo,” I said, leaning closer to her. “I said I’d never done it with a beautiful woman watching.” My cock twitched as her eyelashes gave a tell-tale flutter she probably wasn’t aware of. “You were right. It was incredibly erotic. Worth every penny.”

She sat up taller and blinked away, palming her glass.

I blew out a subtle breath. *What are you doing, Broussard?*

We sat there for a while longer, watching the women dance, or pretending to. I let my gaze wander over what I could of the club, taking everything in. The layout, the

patrons, the girls, the support staff, the Kane security staff, how it all operated with nobody the wiser. Security was tight, but I still spotted a ten-minute gap with nobody guarding a back exit and a sketchy-looking bartender named Rodney who I didn't remember showing up on any employee roster they'd sent me.

I also realized the longer we sat there that Violet's co-workers had noticed us and were talking, probably thanks to my dance and big tip. It was subtle, not overt, but definitely happening, and definitely making her uncomfortable. The tell was in her tense shoulders and the way she picked her thumbnail under the table while the rest of her remained cool as a cucumber.

I downed the last of my drink and stood, holding out my hand. "Let's go, *cher*."

Blue eyes shot up to mine. "Where?"

"Does it matter? Out of here." I flicked a look to the two dancers in the corner looking our way. "Besides," I lowered my voice. "My dime, right?"

She rolled her shoulders and stiffened her spine and I'd swear mentally shot those girls the finger. "Absolutely, *Luke*." She took my hand and rose from her seat like a fucking queen. "Let's go."

I tucked her hand into the crook of my arm and led her out of the dance area, past the Oral Treats bar, where I lifted my brow in question.

"Don't even think about it," she said, her voice low. "I'm not feeding you anything."

I belted out a laugh. "I thought—"

She shot me a dark look, and I shut my mouth while I was ahead. Maybe another day. I tipped my head subtly to Miss Vaughn and Gideon, who were speaking with JD in the lobby as we wound through, but I kept walking. Past Sizzle and the grand staircase and the ladies dancing behind silhouette screens.

Violet didn't question me until I led her down the back employee hallway to a rarely used elevator to the basement. "Where the hell are you going?"

"It's a surprise."

She gave me a look.

Down in the storage and employee dressing areas, I kept going until I reached the very end. I glanced around, making sure nobody was there.

"Lucas—"

I slid the racks of dancers' clothes away to reveal the hidden door, unlocked it, and slipped us both inside before flipping on the light.

She blinked, gaping at the space.

"What the—?" She spun around, taking in the small room before facing me again. "What the hell is this?"

"It's my workspace. Sort of." I propped a hip against the small metal desk. "Apparently, this has been here since the place was built as a hiding place for the mobsters to use during raids, but hardly anybody knows it's here. Miss Vaughn did because she grew up here, and she told Kane, so he outfitted it for me as a place to work while I'm undercover."

She took in the desk, leather chair, and large computer screen that was hooked to the multiple security feeds, as well as the loveseat, end table, and mini fridge (they'd thought of everything). Miss Vaughn's touches were obvious in the red throw pillows, the framed print of the California coastline on the wall, and the fact that the fridge was fully stocked.

"Wow," she murmured. "So, the place that was used to hide *from* the cops is now *for* a cop?"

I smirked. "Looks like it."

She nodded, her gaze moving to the loveseat, I'm sure unconsciously. "So, why did you bring me here?"

“I wanted you to know where you could find me if you needed me.”

Blue eyes flashed. “I won’t need you.”

“We all need someone at some point, Violet.”

“Really.” She snapped up like her spine became a steel rod. “And who do *you* need, Detective?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Oh, I think that’s *exactly* the point.”

God, I wanted to kiss those sassy lips and taste an ounce of that fire, but I held myself in check. Bad idea, and not what I was there for. “I just wanted you to know where my temporary office was. That’s all,” I bit out, crossing my arms over my chest.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Talk about diversion techniques.”

Yeah, well, I was the one schooled in interrogation.

“Talk about sassy.”

“Talk about asshole.”

“Ice queen.”

“Uptight.”

I reared back, my comeback lost. “Uptight? You think I’m uptight?”

She scoffed. “Please, you don’t know the half of it. Do you know any other colors besides black and white? Are there any shades of gray in your world?” She huffed out a sarcastic half laugh. “Damn. I’ll bet you fold your underwear. Your plain, boring, *white* underwear.”

I lifted a brow, not bothering to correct her. “So astute. Care to venture any other guesses about my life while you’re at it?”

She bit her lip and looked me up and down, making me stiffler a groan. “I’m thinking prep school. The beard thing you

had going on was a rebellious thing to make Mommy and Daddy mad. Am I right?”

I did not respond.

“No? Private school for sure, then. Maybe homeschool.” She squinted. “No. Nope. Definitely one of the other two.”

I tilted my head. “Please. Go on. I’m amused.”

“You have to tell me if I’m close first.”

“I’ll give you the private school,” I admitted. “The beard is because I like it.”

She looked skeptical, but she smiled indulgently. “Okay.” Her eyes raked me over. “Obviously you’re from Louisiana. But what brought you to Vegas? The job? A girl?”

“You tell me.”

She studied me a few seconds, her mind working it over like a puzzle. “I’m guessing work. You don’t strike me as the romantic type to change your life for a woman.”

I quirked a brow, not sure how to reply to that. I couldn’t argue the point, I just didn’t like that she’d pegged me so quickly. “Well, Miss Romance, my turn.”

She fidgeted with her nail, her tell. “I—”

“You have a sassy, smart mouth, but it hides a soft heart. You’d do anything for those you love, including put yourself in danger. And even though you deny it, you secretly wish for a life far, far away from here, where you can be a normal woman, maybe even loved by a normal man.”

She gaped at me.

“How’d I do?”

“Not close at all,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s a wonder you solve any cases.”

I nodded, taking in the way her eyes darted away from mine, the shift of her feet, the way she played with her hair. Everything that said her words were lies.

“Yeah, a wonder.”

“So,” she snapped, attitude back in full force. “Are we staying in the dungeon much longer?”

I stifled my grin. Kitty had her claws bared, and I had to admit I liked it.

“No, ma’am.”

I poked my head out the door to make sure it was clear, then let her lead the way before closing and locking up and sliding the racks back in place.

We moved down the dark, winding hall silently, but I’d swear I could hear her thoughts ticking. Our chemistry was off the charts. I’d be an idiot not to acknowledge that. It was going to be a matter of keeping it in check and staying focused on the job at hand. Keeping her safe. I could do that. I’d done harder things as a cop, as a Marine. Still, when she looked at me like—

Footsteps sounded, coming our way, followed by women’s voices, one of them clearly the dancer who’d been in my lap just minutes ago.

Fuck.

Violet flashed me an alarmed look.

“Isn’t your dressing area down here somewhere?” I asked under my breath.

“Yes, but—”

Perfect. They’d think we’d been in there.

I swung her around so her back was to the wall and pressed my body flat against hers in a mock lover’s embrace, hiking her leg up to my hip as I nestled my pelvis between her thighs.

A gust of breath escaped her as her hands automatically came to my chest, her eyes burning with indignation and something much more primal. Her jaw clenched as she glared

up at me, pushing one hand up into my hair—playing the game.

She didn't have to like it—that's what her fiery gaze said. Fuck if her body didn't say something else entirely.

So did mine.

I ran one hand along her now exposed thigh, the other one rested on her tiny waist. Fuck, she felt better than I'd imagined, sending my mind reeling into twenty different fantasies that could start right here.

The voices rang closer still.

Her pulse beat frantically in her throat, matching the one shooting fireworks through my veins. She had to feel that under her hand.

This is a job. This is a case. Pull it together, Broussard. Restraint.

“Trust me?” I pushed through my teeth.

“Never,” she gritted through hers.

I smirked. “Smart girl, *cher*.”

With a hard rake of her nails against my scalp, she yanked me toward her, her tongue branding my neck where my collar fell open.

Lightning shot through my body at the heat of her mouth on my skin, the feel of her hot breath fanning over me.

Fuck restraint.

Unable to help myself, I pushed my now rock-hard cock into her core, showing her just how well I could play this game, too. I may be a cop, but I was also a man.

Her eyes slid shut as a low moan rumbled in her throat, her fingers fisting in my hair and clutching my shirt. *Fuck*, this woman. Flames raged through my blood as her breathing quickened.

The sound of heels clicked just feet away, and the briefest of thoughts zipped by on its way to clearer vision that these women needed to hurry the fuck up before this train skipped the tracks.

The hand spanning her waist slid up under her breast where I felt its perfect weight and the unsteady rhythm of her breathing. She trembled as my lips brushed the shell of her ear, and I bit back a moan of my own.

My cock strained painfully against my zipper, desperate for that sweet heat that lay on the other side. Jesus, I was barreling way past faking it, alarms blaring in my head, but still I couldn't seem to reel it in. My fingertips dug into the soft flesh of her thigh as my mouth moved to her jawline.

She turned her face, however, biting her bottom lip as if she was in pain. "No," she managed, her voice breathy.

I pulled back a fraction, dizzy with the direction change and no blood to my brain.

Glazed blue eyes slid open to meet mine. "They'll know," she whispered. "I don't kiss my clients."

Hazily, I nodded as the women came up on us, their steps slowing. Watching the show.

A show. A job.

I slid my hand farther up her thigh. Rolled my hips a bit more into hers. Taking the chance I might never get again, I brushed my thumb over her hard nipple and nearly lost my shit when she drew in a shaky gasp. I lowered my head to her throat, breathing in the intoxicating scent of honeysuckle and roses and something uniquely Violet, letting my lips track over the sensitive flesh of her neck, not quite kissing, but letting her know my mouth was there.

Finally, the footsteps behind us picked up again as the women moved on.

"Lucky bitch," one of them mumbled, making me smile against her skin.

I made my way back to her ear. “Did you hear that, *cher*?” I whispered against it as the sounds of the women’s heels grew softer. “Lucky.” I let the tip of my tongue and lips brush her lobe as I breathed the word.

“They’re gone,” she finally managed, loosening her grip on me, her hand sliding down my chest, her words coated in a thick, naked desire she couldn’t hide. Not from a seasoned detective.

Slowly, I let go of her thigh so she could regain her footing, but I kept her held against me as I lifted my head to look into her hooded eyes.

“Was that . . .” She swallowed and cleared her throat. “Was that really necessary?”

“What?” I chided with a half-assed smirk, mentally trying to talk down my cock. “You’re the one who told me to play the part.”

Her breasts heaved against my chest as she fought to catch her breath. The familiar fire returned to her eyes, one blink at a time. “Well, play time’s over,” she said, shoving me back a step. She straightened her dress as she walked away, not turning back.

“Too convincing?” I called after her.

“Nope,” she said instantly, not missing a step as she sashayed smoothly away. “Goodnight.”



AFTER I WAS sure we’d made our appearances at Cameo and started our cover successfully, I got Violet to her security detail guy so he could see her home, then sped back to my house.

I needed my own hot hand to ease the unrelenting ache she’d started, a cold shower, and then to sit down and focus on work. In that order.

I was right. One taste, and all I could think was *more*.

Those deeply intelligent eyes that saw right through me and knew things that no one else did, and now a fierce need was burning deep inside me. A need to figure her out. I'd started dossiers on everyone at Cameo and Kane Enterprises already, but Violet Reed's was cursory right now, containing primarily her current stats and information. It was time to delve a little deeper.

I booted up my laptop and got to work.

Within two and a half hours, I knew more about the woman who haunted my dreams than I ever thought I'd want to, and it broke my heart in a million different ways.

Her past was beyond fucked up. Homelessness and petty crimes. Nothing major on her arrest record, just clear proof of trying to survive. No wonder she was locked down tighter than Fort Knox.

As I clicked through the last couple of articles and items on the screen, however, my stomach bottomed out somewhere near my feet.

Her father was Charles Reed.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered.

How had I never put that together? God knows I'd heard the name enough over the years as the bane of my father's existence.

Violet Reed was that man's *daughter*?

Her past—everything I was looking at on this screen—was all because of Broussard Land Development in New Orleans, Louisiana. My family's company. One of their acquisitions—my father's favorite term for buying weak or broken things and stripping them clean—had ripped everything from her family when she was just a teenager.

Hers wasn't the only family affected, but it was the most well-known. Her father's very public suicide over their situation had made the local and national news at the time. I'd been away at school, so I wasn't around, but the toilet swirl

around it all and the ridiculous settlement my father's lawyers flicked their way to shut them up—it was embarrassing.

I couldn't fathom what it must have been like for Violet.

The years of missing data on her, the lack of home addresses, the eventual hospitalization of her mother for mental illness—it made it all too damn clear.

I sat back and raked a hand over my now unruly hair, absorbing the fact that our families' pasts had intertwined in such a twisted way . . . mine for their wealth and greed, hers for their desperation and loss.

Big blue eyes haunted me more after tonight than they ever should, and now it was about more than my visceral, primal need for her.

It was about what I owed her.

More than simply my protection.

I owed her a life.

CHAPTER FIVE



Violet

THE RABID-LOOKING SQUIRREL glowing behind Jonathan's name on my phone screen made me want to bang my head against a wall. Or the headboard—in a very non-sexy way. Or bury it in a cave of pillows. Any and all were close enough to make happen. It was doable.

I hadn't left my apartment in twenty-four hours.

A little over that, if I were being honest and gave a shit about the math.

I called Charli yesterday. I felt like that was enough. But then she called back later and again this morning. Beth called. Then the yoga guru she'd hooked me up with texted when I didn't show up for my private lesson yesterday morning, and the client I canceled on last night left an unhappy voicemail. When I clocked myself out on the Cameo app last night so that I wouldn't show as available for any spur of the moment needs, Jonathan joined in the fray—at last count, twenty-two calls ago.

The squirrel picture was the only thing making it worthwhile.

"What?" I barked, touching the speaker button finally.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," he exclaimed. I could totally picture him standing by Charli's desk, his manicured hands propped on his hips like a frustrated parent. "Where are you?"

“You know where I am,” I said. “I’m chipped like a damn dog.”

“Those GPS necklaces saved Beth’s life, Vi,” Jonathan threw back. “Don’t knock it. But that’s not the question . . . are you *okay*?”

“I’m fine,” I said, widening my eyes, hitting the mute button on my TV remote and rendering the home improvement show I was watching into a silent action film. “What do you need?”

“What do I—?” I heard a scoff. “I *need* to know you’re not dead,” he said. “And don’t act all haughty like that’s over the top, because we both know how normal that’s become around here.”

I blew out a breath, knowing he was right. Also knowing he really was standing in Charli’s office and that he wasn’t an *I* but a *we*. I could hear her clock ticking in the background.

“I called in sick yesterday,” I said. “I didn’t fall off the planet.”

“You also haven’t answered any calls since, Vi,” Charli chimed in, her voice sounding more boss than friend. “Not cool. Not with everything—”

“I know,” I said on a sigh, grimacing. “I’m sorry. I just figured with Chris outside my door, probably reporting in on the hour, you knew I was here.”

“Nothing is ever that simple with you.”

I tried to remember my bestie was pregnant and everyone around her kept dying. I was so sucking as a friend right about now. “I’m sorry,” I said again, pulling a sheet over my head. “I just—”

“You don’t get sick,” Jonathan interjected. “Ever. Not since I’ve been here. Not even when half the staff got the flu.”

“Even when you do, you never stop,” Charli added. “You don’t cancel appointments. You don’t bail on projects.”

Projects.

Cute.

And, yeah . . . the canceled appointment was with a long-standing client that was scheduled long before the detective had made me his personal arm candy, but I was supposed to meet that particular *project* afterwards in the casino and bailed on that too.

“You’re like that friggin’ bunny that keeps going forever, so what’s going on, Vi?” she said. “I’m coming over right now if you don’t tell me.”

I flung the sheet off my face.

Shit.

Tell her what?

That my robot abilities were failing me? That I’d turned into a *real* girl over a real man, and that the eyes I’d been fantasizing about for months now had hands and lips—and all of that was all over me and now *I fucking wanted it*? The grind against me, the touches, the *fucking* nipple tease—the hot breath on my neck. That was a normal Friday night in my world, and something I’d been desensitized to for years.

Sex wasn’t a turn on to me; it was a tool of the trade.

Three more minutes with this guy, however, and I would have been screaming against that wall. In fact, I’d let my fingers do the walking more times than I cared to admit in the last day and a half, just thinking about what that *more* would feel like. Thinking about his cock between my legs and the feel of that hot mouth on my skin and what it would taste like if I—

If I what?

Broke my own fucking rule and *kissed* him?

Tell her *that*?

Jesus, she’d be over here till past the babies’ first birthday for that conversation. Auntie Vi gone rogue. No, thanks.

“I just had a stomach bug, okay?” I lied. “Nobody wants to be around that. Especially a client with an ass fetish.”

“Ohhh.” Jonathan groaned in repulsion, his voice further in the background. He must have been relegated to the couch. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“And you couldn’t have told me this yesterday?” Charli said. Her tone said she didn’t buy it. I didn’t blame her. I wouldn’t either.

“My Gigi had a surefire cure for that,” Jonathan called out.

I rolled my eyes. He and his Gigi-isms. I swear, Jonathan carried his dead grandmother around with him in his pocket. Or maybe his iPad.

“Olive oil and cayenne pepper,” he finished.

“That would literally *make* you shit like a goose,” Charli said, the *what the fuck* implication heavy in her tone. “My Gram mixed that very thing with applesauce for constipation.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Nothing in there . . . nothing to blow out.”

I closed my eyes against the visual. “You do realize that’s not how a stomach bug works, right?”

“Well, it *worked* like a charm when I needed a quick cure before a date,” he said. “I was right as rain by the time I picked Brandy up.”

“Brandy?” I echoed. “*Dancer* Brandy? That used to work at Cameo?”

“Blonde hair?” Charli added, her voice slightly distant like she was talking in his direction. “Dark roots?”

“Yes.” He almost sounded offended. “We went out a couple of times.”

“I . . .” I snapped my mouth shut. I had nothing for that, and I doubted Charli did either. Honestly, we all thought he was gay. Maybe he swung for both teams? Hell, except for the constant reminders of his grandmother, I couldn’t remember

him ever talking about a personal life. Not that it mattered, but still . . . “Okay, then,” I said instead. “Anyway, I’m fine. I’m on the upswing. I don’t have anything scheduled for tonight, so—”

“Not even with Mr. Thibodeaux?” Charli asked.

My palms went damp. Immediately. I licked my lips on reflex and then wiped them off with the sheet as if he’d done the licking. “Not *tonight*, no. I don’t think so,” I said, my tone emphatic and even.

“Well, be sure and check,” she said. “He’s a very important contact of Gideon’s, you know, and—”

“I know,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. I knew she was talking in code for pretty boy’s benefit. “He has my number. I’m at his beck and call,” I added through my teeth. “Tomorrow I’ll—”

“Oh!” Jonathan called out, coming back to the phone. “I don’t know if you saw, but Mr. Kane’s casino cocktail party has been expedited. It’s tomorrow night at nine thirty. I believe Mr. Thibodeaux is on the guest list with his plus one.”

I closed my eyes and counted to three. In Russian. Backwards.

I needed to change my business cards to just say *Plus One* instead of Vi. That’s all I was, after all. Lord knows I didn’t know how to be a real woman anymore without having a mental breakdown.

Okay, the internal whining was getting old.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll be there.”

“You sure your stomach problems will be over?” Charli asked.

If I could have reached through the phone and pinched my best friend’s arm, I would have, the smart-ass.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a twenty-four-hour thing,” I said sweetly. “If not, then I’ll suck it up.”

I lay there for maybe a whole extra minute after I hung up, staring at the TV show I wasn't watching.

Tomorrow night I'd suck it up, alright. I would dress to kill, and it was virtually guaranteed that he would, too. Could I stay professional? Good God, I'd never had to ask myself that question before. But could I? Would I be able to put my hands on him and keep my neglected and achy libido at bay?

I flung off the rest of the covers and sat up in my messy and rumpled bed. Suck it up, indeed. It was time to adult. I wrinkled my nose as I sniffed.

Shower first. Then adulting. I needed out of there.



CHRIS STOOD IN front of me, big arms crossed over his chest, as his newbie-in-training stood behind him in a similar stance.

“Do you practice that?” I asked, pointing from one to the other with my keys. “Because you're really pulling it off.”

“Miss Vi,” Chris said, eyeing the keys dangling from my finger.

“Vi,” I corrected.

“Miss Vi,” he repeated. “We're here to take you anywhere you want to go.”

“That's great,” I said, propping my other hand against my hip. “But right now, my truck is where I want to go.”

I realized I looked very unimposing, standing there in a ponytail, tank top, shorts, and flip-flops. I didn't care.

“Ma'am,” he said. “We can't let you do that.”

“I promise, you're capable,” I said.

“JD would have our asses,” he said. “And then our jobs. But besides that, I don't want to see you get hurt.”

“Aw, that's sweet,” I said. “But I have a taser, and I'll be fine. And truthfully, I wouldn't mind you guys hanging out in my back seat, but my truck doesn't have one.”

My woman card included driving a fully loaded, cherry-red Ford pickup truck. No extra cab. Bucket seats. No room for sleeping.

“No, ma’am.”

“See?” I said, flashing my brightest, most dazzling smile. “We understand each other! See you boys later.”

I sidestepped them and walked by while they recovered from the smiling.

“Miss Vi,” Chris said again, more forcefully as he turned around. “There is no option here. We have to go with you.”

“Then follow me,” I said, not stopping. “In your vehicle. I’m driving myself.”

I did. And it was fucking liberating. It didn’t matter that I had a big gray SUV tailing me the whole time, because I was behind my own wheel, and I decided where to go. I turned right. I turned left. I turned onto the highway and then exited near where Beth had been forced over the railing into the canal. I drove back into the center of town and wandered randomly, knowing full well that Chris and his minion, Stone, were probably panicking and had already called it in.

Vi’s gone off the rails!

She’s out of control!

So damn be it.

A cool and leafy green little city park, just off Mayport, caught my eye, and I pulled into a parking space. Chris pulled in right next to me on the driver’s side. The moment Stone pushed his door open in tandem with Chris’, however, I lowered my window and held up the taser.

“Either of you step foot outside that truck, and I’ll set your balls on fire,” I said.

They froze, and two sets of eyes looked at me as if weighing probabilities. I must have looked just crazy enough

to follow through, because the satisfying *thunks* of doors shutting followed. Chris lowered both windows instead.

“Good choice,” I said, getting out and smiling at them. It wasn’t the day to test me. “I’m just gonna walk around—by myself,” I added with an eyebrow raise, lifting the taser again. “I have my phone. I have my taser. If I’m not back in an hour, then you can get out.”

Pissed-off glares met mine, but they didn’t say a word.

I felt almost giddy with the freedom.

I knew it wasn’t real freedom. I knew damn well that they were just waiting till I was out of sight to follow or had already called for reinforcements. I smirked at that. But I also knew I was being kind of a diva asshole, and the protection was to keep me from ending up as the next Lady Killer masterpiece. I knew it, but ten minutes of risk (if that, because honestly, I probably wouldn’t even have that long before the cavalry marched in) was worth it. I needed to breathe, to stretch, to feel sun on my face that wasn’t overshadowed by testosterone five feet behind me.

So, I strolled down the sidewalk, my flip-flops slapping my heels, the soft, loose-fitting tank top settling around me with the breeze, my favorite ancient cut-off jean shorts hugging me like a glove. No makeup or glitz, just me. The way I liked it. The day was spectacular, bright and dry. Hardly anyone was in the park—just a family on one far end having a picnic and a couple getting touchy feely under a tree. I nearly had the place to myself.

I headed to a set of swings and sank onto one, pushing off lightly as it wrapped around my ass, listening to the metal links of the chain groan as they rubbed together.

Déjà vu swirled around me, tugging at me, poking my memory. I closed my eyes to look for it, and the smell of the sun-warmed rubber seat found it for me. The last time I’d swung on a park swing, my mom and I had just finished a picnic lunch that I had stolen off a table at a McDonald’s. She

was having a good day, and laughing, and offered to push me on a swing.

I was thirteen and probably too old for that, but I took it, soaking up every second. I knew it could be whisked away at any time. And it was. But in that one moment, the sun on our skin and laughter in the air, our bellies full and sated, life was precious.

My eyes filled with unexpected hot tears, and I blinked them open, gasping and looking around as if someone might catch me. No one did. Still just the horny couple and the family, no Chris or Stone or anyone else just yet.

And why the sudden stroll down memory lane?

I knew why. Lucas-Fucking-Grope-Me-Please. Of all the things that drove me up a tree about that man, his constant reminder of home topped the list.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I scrolled to the Rs. She wasn't in my favorites. I don't know what that said about me as a daughter, but I touched her name and listened to it ring. By the third, I had a panicky moment, wondering if it was still the same number, and then a guilt-stricken one that I even had to question that. How long had it been?

My mother lived in a facility—a *community*, I'd had to call it when I moved her in—for people with mental disorders. She was bipolar, depressed, had severe anxiety, was slipping into dementia, and at one point possibly teetered into schizophrenia. I don't think that one was ever officially diagnosed, but two weeks of calling herself Marsha when her name is Laura sure felt like it to me.

She was never really quite right, even when I was little. Always high-strung and hard to read, but then living with my perpetually angry father probably didn't help that. He had problems keeping jobs, and we had to get creative sometimes with meals. We danced around his moods a lot, but she made it work. She loved him. For all his flaws and her weaknesses, they loved each other.

When he died—no, when he *hung himself* prominently from a construction beam on the property we'd been illegally evicted from for new development—the light disappeared from her eyes. I've heard parents talk about their children being their life, their reason for living, but I wasn't hers. He was. He basically took her with him.

The land developer, who'd skipped the proper protocol on relocation of his new acquisition's residents in lieu of fast-tracking the demolition, jumped on a quick settlement. My father's prone body graced so many cameras, the story couldn't be buried, so we all got a speedy lump sum of forty grand per family. Forty thousand dollars was all my father's life was worth.

We lived as frugally as possible for the first couple of years, my mother's inability to work anymore leaving us with just the settlement money. I got a one-semester free ride to a community college, but then we lost the tiny apartment we'd snagged and resorted to her Toyota Corolla, and my street skills had to up their game. I didn't have time or more money for college; I had to take care of my mom, make sure she ate and went to the bathroom at the nearby gas station.

So, I did what every eighteen-year-old girl dreams of doing. I cashed in on all the leering I'd gotten on the streets and hit my back. Within a year, I'd saved up enough to get her into Green Gables—yes, it was really named that—and got myself out of that fucking car.

I spent a lot of time with her at first, but it confused her. Even irritated her sometimes, I think, as if the sight of me seeded the bad memories. So, I lessened my visits and calls, and the next year I left New Orleans.

She was okay, I'd tell myself. So much better than she had been. Thriving, even, with the help of medication. She didn't need the complication of *me* stirring up the dirt.

The questioning lilt to her *hello* broke my heart anyway.

“Hey, Mom,” I said, my eyes automatically settling on the family picnic as the familiarity of her voice wrapped around me.

“Violet?”

A small smile pulled at my lips. “Yeah. How are you doing?”

There was a pause. “Well—it’s close to lunchtime.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said. “What’s on the menu today?”

“Salisburies and mashed potatoes,” she said. “And maque choux.”

“Ooh, yum,” I said. “But it can’t be as good as yours.”

“That was your daddy’s favorite,” she said.

“Sure was,” I said. “He’d snatch it all up and leave us like two bites.”

Mom chuckled, and it was almost like a normal conversation. “Well, he’s dead now,” she said. “I need to see to the flowers. Are you still working at that coffee shop on Titan?”

And then it wasn’t.

“Yep,” I said, shutting my eyes tight against the burn. She didn’t remember where I was. There was no point in correcting her. “Got a promotion. I’m manager now.”

“Oh, that’s so good, Violet,” she said. “I’m proud of you. I knew you’d be someone important one day. You have that way.”

Hot tears leaked out and down my cheeks in spite of my efforts. “Thanks, Mom,” I whispered.

A jingle sounded in the background. “That’s the lunch bell,” she said, movement jostling the phone. I pictured her standing up, holding the phone, looking longingly toward the door.

“Okay, you go ahead and go eat, and I’ll call again soon, okay?” I said, swiping tears off my face right and left. “Maybe even come see you one day.”

“That’d be nice,” she said. “Try to come on meatloaf day. That’s Sundays.”

A chuckle escaped through my tears. “I’ll do that. I love you, Mom.”

But she was already gone. Details like greetings and goodbyes weren’t significant to her anymore.

I leaned onto my knees, watching the sand absorb my teardrops in little darkened splats between my feet.

CHAPTER SIX



Lucas

THE WOMAN STOOD me up.

I wasn't an arrogant asshole or anything, and I'd never presume that a woman owed me anything, but damn. Violet and I were working together undercover, and she'd no-showed me for our date in the casino. I could only assume it was because we'd had to fake make out in the hallway, and things had begun to feel entirely too real—for both of us. I just never took her for one to run when the going got tough.

I was also dying to know what was up with this no kissing rule. And if I was honest? I wanted to be the one to break it and taste those sweet wine-colored lips.

“Jesus.” I raked a hand over my unshaven face and turned back to my notes in the tiny room that passed for an office in the bowels of Cameo and tried to work.

Mornings like this, I missed my beard. I missed not having to keep up appearances. Growing up under a goddamned microscope of social pressure, where no one would dream of leaving the house without looking immaculately put together, will do that to you.

I enjoyed the anonymity. Blending in. The feeling that no one really saw me.

No one but Miss Reed.

Damn it if she didn't give me second looks that spoke volumes, as if she saw right through the average Joe cover.

Granted, her looks were usually glares and haughty eyebrow raises, followed by vitriol and smart-mouthed retorts, but they were there—and I knew it pissed her off royally that I knew it. That I flustered her. And damn if that didn't make me crazy.

Crazy enough to piss me off that she didn't show up for a work date. A *work date*. Something that shouldn't affect me at all.

“Yeah, how's that working out, asshole?” I muttered under my breath, turning a page in my case binder so hard, I ripped an inch tear in the paper.

I'd run down intel on Cameo's newest dancer. As a potential target, she was low on my radar, but I couldn't risk overlooking anyone. I also did a thorough sweep on the Kane's newest security guy, Stone. So far, so good. Ex-military and clean other than a minor charge for a barfight that was dropped. Nothing that jumped out at me as a potential Lady Killer.

I found some interesting information on the previously unknown bartender, Rodney, including several drug charges and an arrest for domestic violence, but so far, my loudest alarm bells were sounding about Jarod.

I knew that wouldn't sit well with anyone on the Kane crew. Jarod had been with them for years, was trusted by Gideon and JD on the most sensitive of jobs, including the security of their women, and he was currently dating Sophia Kane.

The problem was he had a dark and violent past that I could not ignore. Known violence. A short-fused temper. An arrest record that included a stint for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon—a knife.

I'd cashed in a favor to unseal his juvie record and found he'd done time as a kid when he and his friends were involved in the robbery and brutal torture and murder of a woman. Again, with a knife.

Why Kane trusted this kind of man in the inner workings of his organization, much less with the women, was beyond me. But he was on my short list. He had access to the women here in Cameo, the means, and, clearly, the rage to pull off the Lady Killer murders.

The question was why? And there was the DNA issue dangling like a constant damn carrot in front of my face. Jarod's didn't match. But again, that wasn't conclusive.

I intended to keep digging and keep the rest of the women safe while I did that, plus find the evidence to stop him. Him, or any other monsters lurking around here.

A quick knock preceded Gideon and Charli's entrance. They quickly slid the clothing racks back in place, then closed and locked the door behind them. I wondered to what I owed the honor, when he could've easily called or texted.

Then I saw the bag in Charli's hand from the taco place down the street.

"Thought you might be hungry," she said with a smile, offering it to me.

"Thank you." I accepted it reluctantly. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know." She sank onto my loveseat and glanced over at the paperwork strewn all over my desk. "Consider it an apology for Vi skipping out on you last night. She said it's a stomach bug." She said it with doubt in her tone, but I knew she'd never voice it. Gideon, however, flashed me a look like maybe I had the answer.

I set the bag down on my desk. "No need to apologize. I'm sure she has her reasons, and we're still working out the kinks of this plan. It's—a lot for her to deal with, I'm sure." I nodded toward my methodical mess before either of them could read anything into that. "I've been productive in the meantime."

"I hope she's up for the party tomorrow night," Gideon tossed out, crossing his arms, no nonsense as always. "I've got

some important people coming. We can't blow it."

"Nobody's blowing anything," Charli admonished. "Vi's nothing if not professional."

I turned to him. "Did you manage to get my guys on the guest list?"

"It wasn't easy, but yeah. We slid them in as potential new buyers from Canada."

"Great," I said. "I think it'll help to have them there, so their faces start to be recognized by the crew here when they pop in and out."

"Sure," Kane said, nodding distractedly. "Charli's paired them up with a couple of girls who won't ask questions as long as they get paid."

I smiled at that. "Perfect."

"So . . ." He glanced at my desk. "Coming up with anything?"

"I'm not sure." I hesitated, gauging him and glancing toward Charli. We'd agreed to work together on this, but I was still a cop, and he was still a mobster. Trust would always be an issue.

"Broussard," he bit out. "We'll get nowhere if we don't share intel. If it's about a member of my team, please don't worry about telling me. I can handle it as long as it's the truth."

"Can you?" I asked, locking eyes.

He looked wary. "Whoever is hurting these women, threatening my fiancée, ripping our lives apart," he said, his volume rising with each word, "has to be stopped. Period. So just spill it." He glanced at her, too. "Whatever it is."

"Fine. At the moment, I'm looking a bit closer at your bartender, Rodney." I shot Charli a quick look before turning back to him. "And Jarod."

He barely flinched, but I caught it. "Jarod? Why?"

I mirrored his crossed arm pose and leaned against my desk. “You’re a smart man, Kane. You tell me.”

His brows thundered down. “His past has—”

“Everything to do with this,” I interrupted. “He’s short-tempered.” I ticked off one finger. “He’s known to be violent.” A second finger. “He’s done time as an adult and as a juvenile —”

“That shit is supposed to be sealed!” he roared.

I lifted a brow, questioning his loyalty in that moment. “—for violent crimes with knives. Against women.” I let that sink in for a hot minute in the silence. “In my position, who would *you* be looking at?”

“Gideon?” Charli questioned as she sat up on the loveseat, her eyes narrowed. “Is all that true?”

I gave him a moment to answer.

His silence was reply enough.

“I believe the question really is, *why*, knowing all of this, is he still allowed to work for you?” I tilted my head. “Protect your women? Date your *sister*?”

His face grew mottled, and his jaw ticked as he held himself in check. “Watch yourself, Broussard. You don’t know everything.”

“Then please, enlighten me,” I said. “Because right now, he’s looking pretty fucking good as a suspect, with the exception of some reports that don’t add up.”

He stared me down for several long seconds, clearly debating how much to tell me. “I wouldn’t have someone in my organization I hadn’t fully vetted and couldn’t trust. Not with my sister. Not with Charli. *Definitely* not near my children. His *sealed* juvenile record is his story to tell, but I’m fully aware of the details, and you can trust that it has nothing to do with these murders.” He flashed Charli a meaningful look. “Nothing.”

The fuck? Why wouldn't he just tell me? What was he hiding?

"Gideon—" Charli stood, hard concern still evident in her eyes, but the buzz of his phone cut her off.

He yanked it from his jacket pocket and frowned down at the screen. With a sigh, he answered. "Chris? What's up?" He listened for a few seconds, his frown growing.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled at his expression, knowing Chris was Violet's personal security detail. Even Charli's mouth tightened into a line as she studied him, one hand going to her swollen belly in a soothing gesture.

"Are you serious?" Gideon ground out. "And you fucking let her?" He dropped his head and rubbed his eyes. "Fucking Vi. Of course, she did. Well, grab her ass and—" He ground to a stop when Charli gasped, his eyes darting to hers.

I watched as the big, bad Vegas mobster reigned in his baser tendencies for the woman he loved. "She's at a park off Mayport," he said to her in a low voice. "Do you want to ride with me to go check on her?"

Mayport?

Seriously?

Charli's eyes widened in surprise, then dawned with some sort of understanding. "Oh," she said, waving a manicured hand. "She's always loved that neighborhood. It's her dream to buy a house there and fix it up like one of those home improvement shows she's always watching." She looked between us as we simply stared at her, uncomprehending. "She's probably decompressing and having some Vi-time in her happy place."

Gideon frowned as if that was the dumbest shit he'd ever heard. "Yeah, well, she's having Vi-time without her security detail, so, unfortunately, Mr. Fucking Kane has to nix it." He shrugged. "Sorry." But he didn't look sorry at all. "So, you wanna ride with me, or shall I have Chris haul her over his shoulder caveman style? Your choice."

“I’ll go.” The words fell out before I even knew it, and they both turned to stare. “I know the area, and I need a break anyway,” I covered quickly, hoping it sounded believable.

Gideon was silent a moment, then he belted out a laugh. “It’s your ass, Broussard.” He slapped a hand on my shoulder. “Good luck.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Violet

THE HEAVY CRUNCH of footfalls on the gravelly sand tore me from my reverie.

“You generally have to pick your feet up to do the back and forth thing.”

Sitting up with a start at the deep voice, I quickly swiped under my eyes and took in the incredible specimen of man strolling toward me in worn jeans and a t-shirt.

Somehow, the detective had found me.

“Shit, are you okay?” He crossed the remaining space in seconds and knelt on one knee, looking up at me like he would slay dragons. It was so fucking cute and sweet and twisted and messed up, and I couldn’t help the weary laugh that escaped my throat.

“I’m fine,” I said, my voice still husky with emotion.

“Clearly.”

Taking a deep breath, I mentally reined it all in, tucking everything away in my little pocket of hidden feels and emotions that the world didn’t need to see.

“I was having a moment—alone,” I added, widening my still damp eyes. One more swipe under my lashes and that was it. “What on earth are you doing here?”

God, he was beautiful, looking up at me like that. Old jeans, worn soft, hugging his body. A shirt that was the perfect

amount of snug, stretching a little tight over the cut muscles of his arms. His hair soft and a little tousled from the breeze. The scruff he'd shaved off the other night was back . . . and perfect. I'd never seen him casual like this, and damn if my hands didn't want to slide into that hair like they had the other night and—

“I heard about a runaway escort,” he said.

I nodded, blinking away from those eyes that I couldn't meet for longer than a few seconds anymore. “Of course, you did.”

“And I was in the neighborhood.”

I barked a laugh. “Really?”

“Sort of,” he said, pushing to his feet and moving to land in the swing beside me. “I live a few blocks from here.”

I glanced at some of the houses in the distance. Houses I had dreamed about since taking root in Vegas. They were old money. Magnificent and gorgeous, most of them just needed a little TLC.

He lived here? That didn't compute, but I was not in the frame of mind to question it. Maybe the department was putting him up there to fit the undercover role. Maybe he was just fucking with me.

“So,” I said, gliding back and forth slowly. “The chickenshits called you instead of JD?”

“Not exactly. I was there when they reported in to Gideon. I offered to check on you.”

My brows shot up. “Check on me?”

“Hey. Don't be offended,” he said, holding up a hand. “I had an agenda of my own.”

I cut a wary glance his way. “What kind of agenda?”

He stared straight ahead. “I actually wanted to apologize.”

Didn't see that coming. “Um—” I tilted my head. “For?”

He took a deep breath and let it go slowly. “For acting like a real client.”

Goosebumps peppered my skin, and my mouth went dry. I remained silent, letting him finish.

“Like the countless other pricks that just take what they want because—”

“They paid for it,” I finished, my voice a whisper.

He met my eyes, and this time I couldn’t look away. My heart slammed double time in my chest as those eyes seemed to dive down deep inside and see all the things. Everything. Too much. No one had ever *apologized* for that . . . no one.

“I got caught up in it, and—” He blew out a breath and shook his head, breaking the contact and freeing me, thank God. “It got away from me.”

“*It?*” I said coyly, grasping at brevity to lighten things.

He chuckled and hung his head. “Violet, I know this is a role we’re playing, but I think we’re both pretty clear by now on how real the attraction is.” He looked at me sideways. “At least for me.”

The memory of his hard-on-of-steel pushing against my needy core, his touch lighting my body on fire, flooded my memory and flushed my skin.

What. The. Fuck.

“Anyway,” he added quickly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have —”

“Lucas,” I said, my chest tightening in something way too close to emotion. “Relax. If we would have been on a real date and things got hot and heavy, would you be asking forgiveness?”

His contrite look turned to smoldering in a blink. “If that would have been a real date, *cher*,” he said finally, “we wouldn’t have been at Cameo. And that hallway scene would have ended very differently.”

Oh, God, why did I have to notice that sexy Cajun accent right now? I'm pretty sure my panties ignited as I pictured him fucking me against a wall, our bodies naked and sweaty, all his muscles rippling.

"Well," I managed, blinking away before I did something embarrassing like orgasm on the spot. "For what it's worth, I didn't take offense at—at any of it." I licked my lips and forced myself not to meet his gaze. "I probably got a little *distracted*, myself."

"Oh?"

At the jaunty turn of his tone, I darted a glance his way and made a show of rolling my eyes at the typical male reaction, but I was internally breathing a sigh of relief. "Whatever," I retorted. "I'm over it."

His hearty laugh did things to places that shouldn't be doing things. "Sorry to hear that."

"So," I said on a deep breath. *Move on*. "Speaking of houses—"

"Were we?"

"The LVPD paying for that? And the makeover?" I plowed on. "I mean . . . I'm guessing *Detective Broussard* doesn't live in Mayport, and he definitely didn't dress like Lucas Thibodeaux."

He glanced down at himself. "He didn't wear jeans? Because I'm pretty sure—"

"You know what I'm saying," I said. "That suit you had on with Gideon earlier this week wasn't cheap. Even the shirt and slacks from the other night were very high-end."

"And *I* get accused of being too observant," he said. I heard the amusement in his voice. "You're up on men's fashion?"

I cut him a glance. "Call it a hazard of the job."

He smirked and averted his eyes, something clouding them. “No, it’s all mine.” At my questioning look, he added, “From another life.”

Another life? What—the house, too?

“How many lives have you had, Detective?” I asked.

He turned my way again, his expression unreadable. I didn’t like unreadable, but it was also becoming a tell with him.

“Quid pro quo,” he said finally.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Oh, hell no.”

“Tell me something first.”

“Dude, if you start talking about lotion, I’m leaving.”

His growing laugh was contagious. “Clariiiiiiiicce.”

“You need to burn in hell now,” I said, chuckling. “You’re a sick man.”

He pushed his swing sideways, bumping into me gently. “So, talk to me.”

“Don’t act like you don’t already know my story,” I said. “It’s public record.”

There was a pause, both of us gazing ahead in the sudden quiet. “Then share something not on that record,” he said. “Something private.”

“So many wrong directions to go there,” I said.

“Keep it easy,” he said. “Kissing.”

My mind imploded. “What?”

He met my eyes, a warmth in his that was disconcerting. “You know what.”

“I—it’s—” I blew out a breath. Damn it, why did I let him fluster me? *Breathe.* “Kissing is personal,” I said. Was my voice a little too high? I cleared my throat. “Intimate.”

“Real.”

I gritted my teeth. “Yes. Work is work. Your turn, Hannibal. Tell me about this other life you changed the subject for.”

He nodded, looking amused. “Okay. I come from money. The end.”

“Oh, no, you don’t get off that easy,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “The end—meaning you lost it? Or you walked away from it? You admitted to private school the other night. Family disown you?”

“More like the other way around,” he said, his smile not quite reaching his eyes.

Interesting.

“Because?”

“I refuse to be like them,” he said tightly. “Your turn.”

“I will never own a vehicle I can live in,” I said, wondering who the hell suddenly commandeered my mouth. It didn’t stop. “Or a home with wheels.”

His expression wasn’t surprised, and that told me how much he knew. His jaw tightened as he appeared to struggle with something. “I never sit with my back to an entrance,” he said. “I always know where the exits are.”

“Military.”

He gave me an approving glance. “Good catch.” He shrugged then. “Let me guess. Hazard of the job again?”

I tilted my head. “I’ve known a few.” It actually explained quite a bit about the all-absorbing gaze he was so famous for. “That how you walked away from things? Joining the service?”

He frowned as if I’d caught him off guard, and it was weirdly liberating to be on that side for once.

“There was a little more to it than that,” he said, another preoccupied smile gracing his lips.

“Yeah?”

“Another day,” he said, getting up. Walking behind me, he pulled my swing back a little and pushed me, making me yelp as I grabbed the chains and laughed. “So, dinner tonight?” he asked on my second trip back.

“Diversion, much?”

On the third, he caught me, his mouth landing at my ear. “Dinner?”

Fuck. My whole body went liquid.

I shook my head. “I can’t. I have an appointment.”

He let go, and I moved forward and back again in silence.

I totally did *not* have an appointment, but it was my knee-jerk reaction. We were already on for tomorrow, and all this talky-talk crap today had me unsettled. Seeing him tonight would just be—too much.

“I thought you were supposed to be exclusively mine during this little sting,” he said, instantly holding a hand up as I looked over my shoulder. “That—I didn’t mean—”

It really was fun to watch him squirm. “Well, not everything can be rescheduled,” I said. “Not every client is okay with cancellations. It’s my livelihood.”

I slowed the swing with my feet, letting them slide in the sand as he moved slowly around in front of me, his brows slightly dipped.

“Has he been vetted?” he asked, his tone more serious than before.

“Everyone is vetted.”

“Said Jade,” he said. “And Stormy. And Cherry.”

“They weren’t on appointments,” I said, feeling a flutter of something I couldn’t quite identify in my gut. “And I can’t live my life in a bubble, Detective. I have to make a living. I have expenses and obligations.”

“Violet, right now—”

“It’s *Vi*,” I said, emphatically. “And like I said, they’ve been vetted by both Jonathan and Tony. I’ve seen them before.”

“Them?”

“Yes,” I said, quickly pulling a client couple from my memory bank. “It’s a couple. They’re having a rooftop party at—one of the hotels,” I quickly ad-libbed, realizing he’d probably check if I named one.

Stepping forward into my space, he grabbed the chains above my hands, standing over me in a stance so powerfully sexy it took my damn breath away. I knew what he was doing, and damn if my heart didn’t double-time it anyway.

“A couple,” he said, his eyes a mix of amusement, a little jealousy, and something darkly delicious that wouldn’t be denied. “Quid pro quo, *Violet*. How does that work?”

Meeting his gaze dead-on, all I could do was roll with the game and call his bluff. He was so close, there was no room for me to stand on my own, so I rose slowly. My hands on his waist, sliding up his body. Those eyes darkened with desire as I pressed closer, playing a dangerous hand.

“Exactly like you think it does,” I whispered with a wink. I trailed my fingers over his torso as I ducked under his arm and walked away, praying that hand wasn’t shaking like my insides were. “See you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



Lucas

IT WAS BULLSHIT. She didn't have a date, and we both knew it, but I let her play her little game and saunter away from me when things got too close to the realm of real.

“Yes, you will, *cher*,” I called to her back, knowing full well she heard even though she ignored me.

I waited until she was safely back in her truck then waved to Chris and Stone, who followed her out of the parking lot, then I made my way back to my Land Rover. I figured one of those two would text Gideon that she was safe, but I shot him a message anyway.

Me: Violet's all good and back on the road with your men on her tail.

Gideon: Thank you.

Me: No problem.

Since she'd shot me down about dinner, I grabbed some Italian takeout, then headed home. To the house I'd stupidly told her about a few streets over.

I had no idea why I'd bought it, other than the real estate agent had caught me in a moment of weakness. Harkening back to home, it was a two-story Acadian-style house with a giant wraparound porch and a sweeping backyard that I'd personally been landscaping, bit by bit, in my scant amount of free time. The problem with this particular house was that, unlike the rest in this upscale neighborhood, it was a

foreclosure in need of some serious renovation. I didn't really have time for a project of this magnitude, but something about the giant five-bedroom, four-bath home that had sat unloved for over a year just called to me. Maybe it was the enormous Spanish moss that commanded your attention in the front or the sweet scent of the magnolia blossoms from the back—honestly, it was probably the four-car garage—but, either way, I couldn't escape the gentle reminders of a simpler time at home, when Louisiana was my place of refuge before I truly had an inkling of what my family was capable of.

When life was good. Or so I'd told myself. So, I'd scooped it up for a steal, knowing I could always flip it for a sweet profit once the renovations were done.

As it was, I only used a few of the rooms, my furnishings sparse, just like my military days. I had no need for the ostentatiousness of my family. I hadn't lied to Violet. I had basically walked away from them, but I choked down the obligatory holiday phone calls and occasional visits because I was still their son, and I wasn't a total douche. My mother didn't deserve to be blackballed because of my father's business dealings, even if she put her own blinders on. She'd already basically lost one child with my sister in the wind. I wouldn't do that to her again. So, as it was, they "tolerated" my "honorable" choice of profession, trotting it out to brag to their friends when it suited their purposes, while it was really my older brothers, Jake and Troy, who they were most proud of. They were the ones who were chips off the old block. They were the ones taking over the business and being groomed for politics. Sarah and I were the outliers. The lone wolf and black sheep of the perfect fucking Broussard family.

Well, I was more of a shade of gray that they pretended could be whitewashed. I honestly didn't give a shit as long as they left me alone to live my life. The trust fund I never really touched before the purchase of this house and a few toys with engines never really crossed my mind that much. Until lately.

Until her.

Violet shot into my consciousness as I settled onto a folding chair on my back patio with my dinner, overlooking the work I'd done on the roses just last weekend.

The life Violet had been forced to live because of my family, the things she had to do without, what she'd had to do to survive . . . it was unfathomable. Wrong.

She's always loved that neighborhood. It's her dream to buy a house there and fix it up like one of those home improvement shows she's always watching.

I had to smile around my bite of chicken parmesan, picturing Violet, digging in the dirt with me or ruining those pretty, manicured hands with half of the projects that needed to be done inside. I wanted to have a hard time imagining her doing those things, imagining her wanting that, but damn it, it was easy. I saw past that façade she worked so hard to erect for everyone.

God, that woman was all fire, but she wanted the world to see her as an ice queen. And I knew why. I'm sure I was one of only a very exclusive handful who did, and that made me want to protect her even more. An idea I was sure she'd loathe if she knew it.

I finished my meal and sat back as the sun sank low in the sky, painting the horizon a brilliant shade of orange. It reminded me of a trip I took many years ago to the Grand Canyon. Some stupid part of me wondered if she'd ever been. How that light would look on her skin, under my hands, under my body . . . would she ever admit she wanted that too? Even if we could never act on it?



I MADE ARRANGEMENTS with Chris to pick Violet up at her apartment rather than him bringing her to Cameo for Gideon's party. I didn't bother telling her because I didn't figure there was any point in riling her up.

I shaved, slicked my hair back, put on my best tux and most expensive cologne, then headed her way in my powder-

blue McClaren 720s Spider. I figured it was best to look the part at a party full of gunrunners.

Chris excused himself when I approached her door, and I knocked and waited, stupidly nervous, my hands behind my back, my head bowed as I listened to the click of her heels on the other side of the door.

The door flung open, the soft melody of smooth jazz floating out behind her. “Geez, Chris, I told you I’d be ready in —” Her words froze when she saw me. “Luke?”

I offered her my most charming smile along with the single white rose from behind my back. “Violet.”

She took it as she took me in, those epic blue eyes raking me over automatically before darting past me to look for Chris. “What’re you doing here?”

“I’m here to pick up my date. You look stunning, by the way.” And she did. Fucking breathtaking. She gave the term *little black dress* a whole new meaning with the way she wore the thing. The simple black halter dress dipped low between her breasts and hit just mid-thigh, but it hugged her curves in dangerous ways. High black heels accentuated her amazing legs, and a thin gold anklet encircled her left ankle. Blood red nails. Bare pink lips. Smoky eyes. Instead of her signature thick braid, she had a ponytail that I wanted to wrap my fist around and yank so I could bury my nose in her throat and finally drown in that honeysuckle and rose scent of hers.

“I . . .” She took a moment to regain her composure but snapped to quick enough. “Thank you. But it wasn’t necessary. Chris gets me where I need to go.”

“I’m aware. Still. I thought for appearances, it might be best.” I glanced past her to her colorful apartment, taking it all in. Very Violet. “So,” I said, facing her again. “Are you ready to go?”

“I just have to put on my lipstick,” she said, her voice breathy.

My gaze dropped to her lips. “No need, *cher*. Your lips are perfect as they are.”

Those big eyes blinked at me as her cheeks flushed just a bit and she twirled the rose in her fingers. “I don’t—” She cleared her throat. “I don’t go out without it.” With that, she spun away from me and sauntered out of sight.

I nearly groaned aloud at the vision of her bare back. The halter dress clasped at her neck and plummeted to just above the curve of her beautiful, luscious ass.

“Fuck,” I muttered, adjusting where my tux jacket landed. It was going to be a long, challenging evening, keeping my hands off her while she did her job of keeping hers on me.

She returned a couple of minutes later with a shiny clear lip gloss. Not her usual wine color. I considered it a small victory, but I didn’t dare say a word, or I knew she’d wipe it off and change it just to spite me.

“Don’t you all have those cameo necklaces with the GPS trackers?” I asked, realizing I’d never seen her wear hers.

She held up her tiny but misleading purse. “I carry mine. Not a fan of chokers.”

“And if you get separated from your Mary Poppins bag?” I asked.

She cut her eyes to me. “I’m willing to risk it.”

I offered her my arm, not thrilled with that answer, but not willing to argue. “Shall we?”

She frowned up at me but didn’t say a word, sauntering out the door and leaving me in her dust.

I could only laugh as I followed her to the elevator and downstairs. She pushed outside and scoured the lot for my Land Rover before spinning back to me with a scowl.

I moved around her and opened the passenger door of the Spider without a word.

She shot me a look. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

“What happened to your other car?”

“Nothing.”

“Is this a rental?”

Something in my chest tightened. “Does it matter?”

She narrowed her gaze at me, trying to gauge something on my face. “Lucas.”

“Violet.”

Her eyes roamed over the car again before settling back on me. “You . . . do you *own* this?”

“Jesus, Violet. Would you get in already?”

This made her laugh. “You do.” Thankfully, she sat down, and I was able to shut the door and round the hood to get in the driver’s side.

I started the car and began driving, and she remained quiet all of thirty seconds. “So, why pick me up in your fancy sports car if you’re going to play coy about the fact you own it? Most guys buy these kinds of things for bragging rights like they think it makes their dicks look bigger or something.”

I barked out a laugh. “I’m not playing coy, and I have no need to make my dick look bigger, thank you very much.”

“But—”

I flashed her a look. “We needed to play the part tonight so we’re playing the part. I told you I came from money, but I’m not interested in impressing you with my car. I’m not that shallow, Violet.”

“I never said you were shallow,” she said, a defensive edge to her voice. “And I certainly don’t expect you to try to impress me.”

I frowned. “Hey. That is not what I meant at all.”

She shook her head. “Whatever. It’s fine.” She met my eyes, hers closed off, her mouth in a tight smile that didn’t

reach them. “You have your past, and I have mine, right? We don’t need to share. This is a job. Playing a part, like you said.”

“Yes, but . . .” This was going off the rails fast.

“No *buts*, Detective,” she said, patting my arm and looking coolly out the window. “Let’s just do this.”

Detective. Shit.

And why did that kick me in the balls?

I was a cop, pretending to be a criminal, in a business deal with both the Vegas mafia and a high-end escort, the latter of which was twisting me up in knots of lust and something else I couldn’t even name.

But this was business, just like she said. So why did it feel like a lovers’ spat?

We rode in silence for the next brutally long few minutes, pulled up to Cameo, and as the valet approached the car, I looked her way. “Ready?”

Vi, the escort, was back in full force. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

I stepped out to let the valet take the car while another opened her door to help her out. I rounded toward her, and she took my arm like we’d practiced the move a thousand times. She settled close into my body, and we walked inside like a real couple, her scent wrapping around me like silk. She pasted on a genuine smile, her hands on my arm like she had real affection for me. I had to hand it to her, the woman was a fucking amazing actress.

We wound through Cameo slowly, in no rush, letting ourselves see and be seen together as we made our way downstairs to the casino and Gideon’s party.

When we arrived, we got through security with my fake name, and Gideon immediately caught my eye, giving me a subtle nod from where he stood, speaking to two men I knew were Japanese Yakuza.

The Cameo casino was for high rollers only, the games consisting of high-stakes poker tables and roulette wheels, all very elite and classy. Tonight, it was full of well-dressed men and their equally beautiful women. Discreet servers moved among them with platters of delectable hors d'oeuvres and champagne, wine, and cocktails of all kinds. Soft music played in the background and not one dancer was to be found. It was very different than I imagined a typical Cameo party to be.

If not for the questionable guest list, it could pass for one of my parents' society cocktail soirees. I bit back a chuckle as I pictured the pride on my mother's face if she could see me there, tuxxed up like James Bond and mingling like *people of our stature are supposed to*.

Oh, what a twisted life this was.

I grabbed two glasses of champagne off a passing server's tray and handed one to Violet as I continued to scour the room, taking in all of the known and unknown players, cataloguing potential suspects and making eye contact with my undercover officers. The Organized Crime unit would have a fucking field day in here right now, but this wasn't the time for that. I needed to figure out if any of these guys had the motive or means to be the Lady Killer that trumped what I'd been compiling on Jarod.

Automatically, I found him standing in the far corner, nursing a beer, broody as always, his dark eyes taking in the world around him like it owed him something. Tonight, his gaze was locked on his date, Sophia Kane, as she sipped wine and chatted up the wife of a Russian mobster. Looked like there might be trouble in paradise.

"I've never been down here during business hours," I murmured. "Just once after your friend Jade's murder when we worked the scene. Looks totally different tonight."

"Everything looks different when you dress it up," she said. "Did you know it used to be a speakeasy back in the day?"

I met her eyes, surprised I'd missed that during my research. "No. Really?"

"Yep," she quipped, pointing at the dark narrow stairs at the far end that looked like they curved into nothing as if were simply a décor choice. "Before the elevator was put in, those stairs were the only way down, and they were hidden by a secret door." She nodded toward the hallway the staff came and went through with platters of delicacies. "Has its own small kitchen and wine cellar, and those benches over there are made out of the old original oak bourbon barrels."

"That is so cool," I said.

She chuckled. "You are such a geek."

I met her gaze again. "Over history? Especially criminal history? Hell, yeah, I am." I leaned in to whisper in her ear. "I have to admit, *cher*, I'm standing here wishing they would have given me an office down here just so I could use that secret door."

Vi laughed, but I was already ticking off ten things to check into after hours. For one, I'd be willing to bet that no one investigated that staircase and the area around it. It was too tucked away and looked like decoration.

"You're doing that cop thing again," Violet leaned into me and whispered, making it look like she was being flirtatious as she smiled up at me.

I glanced down at her, noticing the coolness still dulling her eyes. "Duly noted. Apologies." I sipped my champagne and focused on her instead for a moment. Yes, this was work, but I wanted that light back. The heat, the spark, the fire in her that rendered me stupid. "In case I forgot to tell you, you look absolutely stunning tonight."

"You might've mentioned that."

"Good." Someone bumped into us, forcing me to wrap an arm around her waist. I didn't let go as I steered her to a far corner where we could take in more people. "So, do you know any of these men?" I asked.

She looked up at me, then out at the crowd, her glass to her lips. “A few,” she admitted quietly.

My hand slid to the silky skin of her exposed lower back, filling my palm with her warmth, and suddenly, wild fucking horses couldn't have pulled that hand away.

Her eyes fluttered slightly as she kept her gaze outward.

“From around the club?” I pressed, trying to keep the blood in my head. “Or in your professional capacity?”

Big blue eyes cut in my direction. “Both.”

She knew she was making me crazy and was enjoying it. Okay then. Game on. I trailed two fingers in a slow circle over her spine and watched the slightest lift of her chin as she inhaled deeply.

“Well, since we're here for a while, Violet,” I said. “Do tell.”

She leaned into me, causing my fingers to drop lower over her soft, hot skin. “Well, you see that guy over there?” she said in a low, breathy voice. She pointed out a man playing roulette, who I knew to be the second-in-command of the Irish syndicate—a stocky redhead with tattoos snaking up his neck from under his suit and beady eyes that sliced like daggers. “That's Keegan O'Roark. We've been out a few times. He has a thing for being tied up. And a few other things,” she added with a lift of her perfect brow as she took another casual sip of her champagne and kept scanning the room.

I couldn't identify the heat rushing through my blood. Was it lust? Jealousy? Fucking rage at the thought of that ugly dickhead touching her? I took a healthy gulp of my drink to cool my jets. *Back it down, Broussard.*

“Oh, and that guy?” she added, moving closer. “That's his younger brother, Ian. He's not very high up in the organization, but he's sweet. He has a thing for feet.” She glanced my way as her subtle shift moved my hand and fingers down to where the fabric just covered the swell of her perfect

ass. I could easily slip my hand under and keep going, and she knew it. Her breathing quickened. “Shall I continue?”

“By all—”

“Thibodeaux.” I was saved from hearing about all of Violet’s past sexual escapades with the Vegas underground, and my unjustified yet inescapable jealousy was stifled as Gideon made his way over, and I reluctantly let go of her ass.

“Kane.” We shook hands like we hadn’t just seen each other.

We made small talk for show, including some fake bullshit about my purchase of some guns and suppressors next week. Violet hung on my arm, feigning little interest, much like the rest of the women, until we were done, then Gideon moved on to his next client.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Ian O’Roark spot her and start our way, his gaze hungry.

Oh, fuck no.

“Let’s play,” I said, steering her toward a craps table.

She followed easily, ever the professional in her role, but he was persistent.

“Vi,” he rasped in a husky brogue, drawing out her name like he was tasting it. His bald head was shiny and his eyes shinier with drink. Those pale, icy-blue eyes travelled her body all the way to her tiny wisp of an ankle bracelet and her blood-red toes and rooted there. “Don’t you look delicious, love.”

“Good to see you again, Ian,” she said with a smile and a quick hand to his arm that said *Hello, I’m being polite, but I’m working right now. Or I’m with someone.* And damn, if I wasn’t projecting the latter as I slid a protective hand around her waist. “How is the new house in Dublin?”

The inebriated fuck couldn’t pull his eyes away from her feet, and I felt repulsed for her.

“You should have a drink with me,” he said, finally meeting her eyes and giving her a boyish grin. “We’ll make plans for you to fly out and see it for yourself.”

“I’m busy tonight,” she said, her voice as soft as the smile pulling at those beautiful glossy lips. “Another time?”

It was as if he didn’t see me standing right there with my arm around her as he lifted a hand to stroke her cheek.

She stiffened against me, although her expression never faltered.

“I believe the lady said another time,” I ground out, stepping forward and simultaneously turning her a step away from him.

His eyes landed on me with a mixture of surprise and aggression. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” he rasped, stepping farther into my space.

I put a hand forward to grip his and control the distance between us, while meeting his icy glare without blinking. “I’m quite sure we haven’t,” I said slowly.

His grip on my hand tightened, and I just let my lips curl into the slightest of upturns. I wouldn’t compete in a hand-fucking contest with him. I didn’t need to. He had me by at least fifty pounds, but I could put him on the ground three different ways.

“Well,” he said, releasing my hand and clapping my shoulder in an aggressive move meant to show me his strength. “I’ll let it pass this time, since you don’t know who I am—”

“I know who you are,” I said quietly, my jaw so tight I thought it would snap. “I just don’t care.”

His eyes narrowed, glimmering with a shadow of a doubt. Clearly just enough of a question in his mind as to whether this was too public a venue to risk a possible humiliation. A smoker’s laugh rumbled through his throat and he let go of me

to lift Vi's hand and kiss the back of her knuckles. "Appears you have a *gentleman* on your hands tonight, love," he said.

"It appears so," she echoed, her voice tight.

"Well, you two enjoy your evening," he said, making a flourish with his free hand, backing away as his gaze continued to throw poisoned barbs my way.

I guided her straight to a table as he let go of her, willing my adrenaline to slow the hell down. Gideon's scowl from across the room didn't escape me either. That little display hadn't exactly been staying under the radar, and for all I knew, he would have to do damage control because of it. I would add Ian O'Roark to my list of suspects to consider, more for optics than anything, but damn it, I needed to pull my shit together.

"What the hell was that?" she hissed.

"Defending your honor," I said under my breath.

"My *honor* is just fine," she said, pointing her barbed words at the side of my head. "It doesn't need defending. I don't go to your office and insult the people that sign your paycheck, do I?"

I frowned at that, not particularly liking that analogy, but I begrudgingly had to concede her point.

I nodded to the dealer for \$10K in chips I knew had already been preapproved, then picked up the dice and clamped my fist closed over them, attempting to calm myself and settle back into the persona of Lucas Thibodeaux.

It had been years since I'd lived this wasteful life. Treated money like it was nothing. The rush was both foreign and familiar, and both of those thoughts burned me like a brand. Still, I needed a fucking release, and—

"Fine," I said. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she said, rounding to stand between me and the table. "Just don't do that shit again. I can't afford to alienate these people."

My eyes burned down into hers as I let that thought roll through my blood. She had to stay on good terms with assholes like that so that they would continue to hire her. To do whatever the hell they wanted with her—to her. God, that rankled me more than I could afford for it to.

“I hear you,” I managed.

“That being said,” she added, averting her eyes casually as if she were scanning the room, and then pretending to straighten my lapels. “Thank you.”

Her simple touch made my tightly wound muscles begin to relax. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

Violet leveled a look up at me with a raised brow. “You heard me.” Clearing her throat, she lifted her chin. “So, would you like some luck?”

Taking my hand in hers to pry open my fingers, she blew softly on the dice as she blazed me with a sultry look that had me fantasizing about every position I could fuck her in on that table. She pivoted slowly then, turning her back to me. That bare, exposed back with her ass nestled up against my crotch. On purpose.

Fuck. Me.

With a barely restrained growl, I pushed against her, leaning over her shoulder to shove the whole stack of chips out in one bet, and threw the dice. Her gasp, I knew, was about more than my cock straining against her. It was about ten thousand dollars flying off into the wind.

The dice tumbled down the table in what seemed like slow motion . . . and I won.

Another gasp came from Violet, and then she stifled it. We weren’t in a regular Vegas casino where wins like that drew whoops and hollers. That was an average success in a high roller environment, drawing smiles and murmurs of approval from other players, possibly some whispered questions about who I was among these other criminals, but otherwise, it was low-key.

I thanked the dealer and moved on, feeling Violet's quiet seething on my arm.

I made rounds of a few people, introducing myself as Lucas Thibodeaux to those for whom it would be harmless enough, ate a few snacks, drank another glass of champagne, then when I'd gathered enough intel to keep Organized Crime busy for the next decade—if I weren't under oath not to use any of it—I squeezed her hand, letting her know we could go.

“Go ahead,” she said casually, fingering the thick strands of her ponytail. “I may stay a bit.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

She shrugged. “There are a couple of former clients here besides Ian who I should probably network with—”

Without another thought, breath, or anything close to logic, I yanked her by the hand to a dark hallway that led to the restrooms. The walls were smoothly sanded cedar, providing a beautiful contrast to her figure in black as I shoved her against one of them, caging her with my body. “What are you doing?” I bit out under my breath.

Her eyes flashed. “My job.”

“Your job is to be with me. Or did you forget that?”

“Oh no, you made that quite clear,” she said, her voice going icy, instantly making me regret my choice of words.

I arched a brow, confused by her anger. “That you then thanked me for, as I recall.”

“That I'm now taking back,” she spat. “But hey, since you're tonight's *job*, let's get on with it.” Expert fingers found my zipper, lowering it and reaching inside just as I grabbed her hand.

“That's not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Do I?” she said, fury flushing her skin. She shoved me backwards a step as I discreetly zipped up. “Because this weird push-pull shit you do? *It's a job, Violet*, but hey *quid pro*

quo! Let's talk. Tell me about when you were five! But I'm not telling you shit, other than I used to be a rich prick who's totally okay pissing away ten grand. Then—nope! Switch flipped back and it's a job again. I'm getting fucking whiplash, Luke."

I forced a tight smile toward a woman coming back from the bathroom, and then closed my eyes. "This is—"

"This is fucked up," she finished for me, her body language closed off and tense. "This is why this job has rules and lines and boundaries. I don't date my clients. I don't date *anyone*. People don't get to know me. Where I come from. Where I live—"

"Come on," I said, walking away before I touched her again.

Damn it, she was right, and this was so convoluted. And unfamiliar. Never, in my whole career—in either of my careers—had I blurred lines like this.

"Where?"

"Just come with me, please," I called back, gritting my teeth, praying she would actually follow, then breathing a sigh of relief when I heard the click of her heels on the marble.

Not another word was said until we were in my car again, both of us sitting in the quiet darkness.

"You're right," I said finally, staring ahead. "My job has lines, too. And I'm normally very meticulous about keeping them very clear."

"Exactly," she said.

"Personal—anythings can be dangerous. I've never blurred the lines. Ever."

"That's my motto."

"Until I met you."

Silence answered me. And it was too dark to see her face.

What the fuck was I doing?

“Look, we have a job to do, Violet, and that’s important. But I can’t deny the rest of it because I’m not a liar, and I’ve learned it does no good to hide from the truth. You throw me off fucking balance and confuse the ever-loving shit out of me.” I ran a hand over my face. “I like you more than I know I should, considering what I’m here to do, but there it is.”

More silence.

All I could hear was our breathing and the internal cursing in my head as I cranked the engine and drove toward her place. I was a fucking idiot. I’d just spilled my guts like a stupid teenager to a woman I barely knew, on a subject that, best-case scenario, could get me fired, and, worst-case scenario, could get my head mailed to someone in a box.

As I pulled in front of her building, Chris nodded from his post by the door, and I cut the engine. I expected her to bolt like her ass was on fire, but she didn’t move.

“Me, too,” she said after a few beats.

The words were low and soft, almost reluctant, but they landed on me like they were over a loudspeaker.

I glanced over at her profile in the soft glow of a nearby streetlamp as she stared straight ahead, her brows drawn together in a frown. One finger tapped furiously on her bag. I couldn’t even be sure I’d heard her right, but the moment seemed too fragile to question her further.

I rested my hand over her nervous one before I could stop myself, and she cleared her throat. I yanked my hand back like I’d been stung.

“Did you get what you needed?” she asked, making me blink in confusion. “From the party?”

“You want to talk whiplash,” I muttered under my breath, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Go with it,” she said, her words clipped. “Change the subject.”

Go with it.

Okay.

“I’m not sure,” I said, blowing out a breath. “But every little bit helps. How about you? Did anyone give you any bad vibes? Feel out of place?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You know a lot of those people and that scene better than I do. Did anyone feel off to you tonight?”

She seemed to think on it for a bit. “No. I guess not. Pretty status quo for a Voldemort party.”

“Sorry?”

“Nothing.” She rested her head back. “No. Normal night with a bunch of mobsters and bad guys and one undercover cop.”

I glanced over, and she was smirking at me.

“What’re you doing tomorrow evening?” The question popped out before I thought better of it, but honestly, after this night, logic was out the window.

“Tomorrow?” I heard the question underneath the question. There were no functions planned, and it was supposed to be her day off.

“You have no appointments, so don’t bother lying about it.”

“Wow, *Detective*. What if I have plans to wash my hair?”

“Well, can you wash it tonight?” I asked. “I’d like to take you somewhere tomorrow if you’re up for it.”

She paused for a beat. “Do I get a clue?”

Well, she hadn’t flat out told me to go fuck myself. It was a start.

“How adventurous are you, Violet?”

I felt her surprise echo through the car. “Well, *Luke*, I’m an escort for a living. I think that’s pretty freakin’ adventurous.”

“Then my idea is probably tame in comparison. You game?”

“Am I *game*?” she asked, laughing. Actually laughing. “For something you won’t even tell me about? How am I supposed to decide?”

Was she actually considering it? Holy shit. I’d blurted my invite on the fly on the heels of her confession, but I mentally threw together a plan even faster. One I hoped would dazzle her.

“I’d rather surprise you,” I said. “I will tell you, it’s something I’ve wanted to do for a while, but I’d rather not do it alone.”

She blinked up at me in suspicion. “And you want to do this with me?”

The inuendo of those words danced between us. “More than you know, Violet.”



CRAZILY ENOUGH, SHE agreed.

Maybe it was a moment of temporary insanity on her part, or maybe it was the allure of a surprise. Or it could’ve been that I promised to give her an update on the case. Probably that. Either way, I would have Violet Reed all to myself for an entire Sunday evening. Willingly. Not on the job. That was a victory in Lucas Broussard’s playbook.

I could only wonder if she got the anonymous delivery of two dozen white roses with the cluster of African violets I had them cocoon in the middle, along with the array of breakfast pastries I sent over the next morning. I had no idea what she liked best, so I had everything delivered. Surely, the woman liked sweet and decadent. Most women did. And she was the epitome of decadence, tormenting me with those eyes and lush curves and lips I couldn’t have.

I double-checked everything I'd set up, grabbed my wallet, keys, and extra helmet, then straddled my Ducati to rev it to a start. I sure hoped she meant what she said about being adventurous.

When I pulled up in front of her apartment building, she was waiting outside with Chris, her ever-present shadow. I'd cleared the outing with JD, who'd passed along that I was good to take Violet out alone anytime, but his face was stoic as his gaze raked over my Ducati.

She stood, her body perfectly outlined in form-fitting jeans and a black t-shirt, simple black flats on her feet. Her hair was up in its customary braid, but she had very little makeup on today, which I found I preferred over the Cameo version she painted on for work.

Her eyes grew wide as she took in the bike. "Seriously?"

I offered her a half-grin. "You're not scared, are you, *cher?*"

That wicked, bright-blue gaze whipped back to mine. "Of enough flowers to choke a dead man and enough sugary carbs to gain thirty pounds? Terrified." She snatched the helmet from my outstretched hand and popped it on, batting away my help to settle herself on the seat behind me. "Of a little thunder between my legs? Not on your life, *Luke.*"

I twisted around to meet her eyes, my cock twitching at the mix of fire and off-the-fucking-rails adorableness. I shook my head and faced back forward, trying to talk the blood back into my head. Trying to ignore how fucking good it felt to have her small, warm body pressed so close to mine as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

"So, where are we going?"

I tipped my head in her direction. "Ever been to the Grand Canyon?"

She hesitated for a moment as if she hadn't heard me right. "No."

“Well, you’re going today.”

With that, I saluted Chris, gunned the engine, and took off toward the airport with the magical sound of her laughter in my ear.

CHAPTER NINE



Violet

WHO THE LIVING hell was I?

Because the woman currently wrapped around a hot police detective's ass on the sexiest machine on earth, hurtling toward some cute twilight rendezvous to the Grand Canyon could not possibly be me.

Lucas reached a hand back to stroke my leg, and I nearly fell off the damn bike. It wasn't even a stroke, just a pat. Next to my knee. He wasn't feeling me up. What the fuck—

"You okay?" he yelled, turning his head slightly so I could hear him over the motor.

"I'm good!"

Yeah, I was good, alright. If I wasn't afraid of him driving us into a ditch, I'd return the favor with a traveling hand down his torso. See how good *he* was.

A date.

Me.

Jonathan knew, per my schedule, and had made little comments about it being so outside my box. He had no idea. Chris knew and wasn't happy about it, but the only reason I'd been allowed out without my watchdog was because JD had given the all clear per Gideon. All of which might rain down on me in a shower of what-the-fucks once Beth and Charli heard. Because I didn't tell them.

Why?

That was a good question. A question that ran a close second to the more prominent *why the hell did I say “me too”*?

This wasn't my first rodeo with a client falling for me. It happened. Lucas wasn't a client, but still. I do my research to act out the perfect role, being the absolute fantasy dream match for someone, and if they *don't* get a little infatuated, I'm not doing my job. But a decade-plus had taught me to always keep my head and heart out of the body business. Always.

Until I met you.

Me too.

Because, fuck if everything he said couldn't have come out of my own mouth.

I didn't sleep. Like at all. Every time I closed my eyes, I felt his hand sliding down my bare back, his body pressed against mine, saw the turmoil in his eyes and heard all his words. On one long loop.

How had I let this happen?

Easy.

I didn't.

It was there long before Detective Sexy was sexy. It was there the first time we'd ever laid eyes on each other. It had been set in stone that we were predetermined to break all our own rules and do something monumentally stupid. Because we were going to do something stupid. I wasn't so naïve that I didn't know that.

It's like randomly, harmlessly, idiotically going to look at puppies under the guise of “just looking.”

You're coming home with a fucking puppy.

We slowed, and I blinked out of my thoughts as we pulled into the parking lot of a private airport.

“What are we doing?” I asked, pulling off my helmet as he did.

He raked a hand through his hair, and I fought the urge to reach up and check the state of mine, refusing to appear girly.

“Taking a shortcut,” he said. “Unless you want to ride all night.”

“We’re flying?” My spidey sense tingled.

He cut me a look as his hand rested at the small of my back. Just where it had been last night. “Trust me?”

“No.”

He chuckled. “Smart girl. But I promise you’ll be safe.”

When I saw the bright-blue helicopter we were heading for with the smiling pilot standing by, my heart somersaulted in my chest. “Oh, my God, are we?” I asked, containing myself from jumping up and down. “I’ve always wanted to ride in a helicopter.”

He gave me an amused grin. “You never have? Even on your . . .?”

The question hung clear in the trailing of his tone and in his expression.

“No,” I said. “Never.”

The way his eyes danced at the knowledge that he was giving me something new touched me in a kind of uncomfortable way. It was a feeling I both wanted to remember forever and run away from like my ass was on fire.

When we settled in, buckled up, and I clasped my hands together to stem the giddy excitement, I noticed a huge picnic basket tucked behind us. “What is th—?”

My words were cut off by the champagne flute that appeared in front of me. I darted a glance to the bucket of champagne chilling behind Lucas, and then met his eyes.

“What is this?” I repeated, although my meaning was slightly different. I took the glass reluctantly and waited, my mind trying to make sense of the whirlwind. “What’s with the full-court press?”

He shrugged. “Just having a little fun,” he said, pouring himself a glass. He cut a mischievous look my way. “Seeing if I can get you to actually relax and cut loose.”

“Cut loose,” I echoed with a chuckle, taking a sip. “You don’t strike me as the cutting loose type.”

He raised an eyebrow with a nod. “You’d be right,” he said, those ever-absorbing eyes of his taking in the doors, the exits, the safety features, and probably every one of the controls up front in his line of vision. Just in case. “I’m not. But I’m working on that, too.” The sharp gaze softened as it rested on me. “I’m really glad you came.”

My mouth went dry, and my throat felt like I’d swallowed his helmet. “Why is that?”

He scoffed. “Because I’m crazy. Clearly.”

I laughed as we took off, his arm around the back of my seat for the rest of the ride, his fingers grazing my shoulder as he’d lean in and point out things below us. It was phenomenal and breathtaking. It was fun. Easy. Normal.

And God, that was scary as hell.



WHAT I SAW shortly afterward—when we’d landed in the belly of this amazing place and strolled around a little rock formation to a tiny hidden beach along the Colorado River—was much scarier.

A small palapa lined with tiki torches, flowers, pillows, and a tiny, ground-height table on a blanket for two was set up and waiting for us with more champagne.

My feet took root in the sandy rock. “Luke.”

“Relax. Enjoy yourself,” he said, continuing on as if we were strolling into a grocery store. “It’s just dinner.”

“Seriously.”

At that, he looked over his shoulder, setting the big picnic basket on the blanket next to the table. “I’m always serious about dinner.”

“Who *are* you?” I asked, to which I got a sigh and a head shake. “I’m not kidding,” I said. “This isn’t like—normal people dating.”

He narrowed his eyes, tilted his head, and grinned a little. “Did you say—?”

Then I heard my own words. “No,” I said flatly. “I didn’t. Focus on the bigger mammoth in the canyon here, please. The precinct can’t be paying for this. This isn’t work-related.”

“I—”

“I know,” I pushed on. “You have money that you trot out when it suits you, but this isn’t just *cutting loose* here, this—”

“Is me,” he said, cutting me off and strolling my way, looking so fucking sexy with his brow furrowed all caveman-like, I had to struggle to breathe regularly. “This is me, Violet. Wanting to spoil you a little. Can you just dial back the fight for a minute or two and let me?”

I perched my fists on my hips, and then moved them to cross my arms over my chest. “Because you’re crazy?”

“Didn’t we establish that?”

I peered around him, surveying the whole romantic seduction scene in front of me. Unbelievable. And almost hilarious for someone who made a living as a sure thing. “Did you come all the way here and do this yourself?”

“No,” he said, crossing his own arms. “Does that make it better?”

Meaning he paid for that, too. Jesus.

“Slightly.”

“Then can we eat now?” he asked, jutting his head back toward what was likely a friggin’ gourmet feast in that basket. “Or do we need to analyze that, too?”

I gave him a surly look. “Cute.”

He winked and gestured with his arm for me to pass.

I did, sinking cross-legged onto the blanket in front of the little wooden table. The view was like something from a dream or a virtual reality experience. Colors were vivid as the sun was sinking low in the sky. The air was fragrant. Even in some of my wildest client extravagances, I’d never lived something like this. It was way off the charts and simply lovely at the same time. Sitting inside one of the earth’s wonders, having a picnic.

“What’s your favorite food?” he asked, his hand poised on the basket lid.

I gave in to a chuckle. “Ten bucks says it’s not in there.”

Pulling his hand back, he lifted an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” I said. “I’m sure this is amazing, but I like the simple things.”

“And you’re assuming I don’t?”

I widened my eyes and did a double hand flourish around us. “Um . . .”

“So—favorite food,” he prompted.

I rolled my eyes. “Cheeseburgers and fries.” I put my fingertips against the lid and lifted. “I get paid to be fancy. When I’m off, I like—”

I could almost feel the giddy, self-back-patting reeking off him. Almost as strongly as the aroma of two giant cheeseburgers from Frank’s Burger Barn, a little mom and pop joint two blocks off the strip. The paper wrapping was greasy from the meat juices and the fries were generously dusted with steak seasoning and black pepper.

“You were saying?” he said.

“Oh. My. God.”

“Amen,” he said. “Grace is done. You owe me ten bucks. Let’s eat.”

He pulled out paper plates and a roll of paper towels, unwrapped a burger and fries for me, and set it up on my plate.

I took it in awe, narrowing my eyes. “Who told you that was my favorite comfort food place to go?” I asked. “Did you ask Charli?”

“Eat,” he said melodramatically. “Good God, woman, you can be a pain in the ass.”

I sighed and took a bite as he got his food out. “Sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean to be.” I closed my eyes and gave a little smile. “Man, that’s good,” I mumbled around it.

“So . . .”

I shook my head slowly, my eyes still closed. “You’re gonna ruin this, aren’t you? Don’t mess with the burger magic.”

“Why don’t you date?” he asked.

I opened my eyes with a frown. “Whiplash?”

“Go with it,” he said with a head tilt, mocking me. “So, why not?”

I had to smirk. “What makes you think I don’t?”

“You said so last night,” he said.

Oh, yeah. I did. Damn detective. “Why don’t *you*?” I countered.

“What makes you think *I* don’t?”

“A whim you just confirmed,” I said, taking down another bite.

He gave a half shrug. “Don’t have time for the complications or to catch feelings, mostly. And my hours suck.”

No feelings. Boy, did I get that one. And yet there sure seemed to be something contagious following us around.

“And back to you,” he said without looking up.

I laughed softly. “I used to try. But what decent guy can deal with my career choice? I don’t have time for the massive ego petting that entails, and the fights, and the distraction.”

He was studying me now. “Distraction?”

“It’s hard to—” I widened my eyes. “*Focus* on a client—when your heart is somewhere else.”

He nodded. “Ah.”

“Feels like cheating,” I said. “I mean technically, it’s not, but it feels that way. That’s a blurry line that gets really chewed up and messy when you’re arguing over stupid shit like Chinese takeout or the position of the toilet seat, and it blows up into everything that’s ever bothered him, and generally, my seeing other men for a living tops the list.”

He just nodded and kept chewing, and I felt like I did any other time I chanced to entertain this notion. Like I’d just had the first and last date.

“Tell me about your family,” I said, clearing my throat and knocking back a gulp of champagne. Anything to flip the coin. “Only child? Siblings?”

“Two brothers, one sister.”

I ate a fry, watching him, sensing he wasn’t altogether comfortable talking about this. “Not exactly the Waltons, I’m guessing?”

“Not exactly.” He finished the last bite of his burger and wadded up the wrapper. “As I said, we’re not close. We don’t see eye to eye on several—on most things, actually—especially my father and brothers.” He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal, but by the way his jaw ticked and the tightness around his eyes, it clearly was. Or had been, once upon a time. “Who doesn’t have family drama, right?”

“I guess.” I toyed with another fry. “So, your mom? Your sister? You’re closer to them?”

His gaze shot to mine, carefully concealed emotion in check. “I try to be. It’s not always easy.”

I wanted to question that, but something held me back. It was clearly a tough subject for him, and we were only on a first date, if you could even call it that in our odd situation. So, I diverted the topic. “And you left home to join the military?”

His relief was palpable as he offered me a half-smile. “Joined the Marines at the ripe old age of eighteen, right out of high school.”

Damn. I couldn’t even imagine. I was living a hand to mouth existence at eighteen, totally unaware of how much worse my life was about to become. I swallowed and wiped my hands on my thighs. “And you liked it?”

“The service changed everything for me,” he said, his eyes clouding over, his gaze going unfocused. “Not only did it get me away from home, it allowed me to serve my country and become the man I wanted to be. Not just another self-absorbed rich boy who can’t see past his own bank account and ruthless ambition.” He blew out a breath. “There’s just so much more to life.”

“Like fancy cars and motorcycles and private helicopter rendezvous?” I asked, instantly regretting the snark when his sharp gaze popped back to mine. I wanted to pull the words out of the air and stuff them into the sand. “I’m—”

“I won’t apologize for having access to money, Violet,” he said. “I did nothing to earn it but be born, and it’s there whether I use it or not. I stopped living on it day to day, but being able to do special things like this on occasion . . .”

“It’s nice,” I said, holding up a palm. “Thank you. Sincerely. My mouth . . .” I shook my head. “It jumps out there sometimes. Ruled by too many years on the street. I’m sorry.”

“No,” he said. “I know it seems extravagant.”

“Seems?” Damn it, it wouldn’t be stopped. I tried laughing to dilute it. “This night alone would pay my rent for six months.” I held up a hand again. “And that’s fine, I’m not destitute anymore. I do okay. But the bet you laid down last night—I watch people do that all the time. And all I can ever see is how a bundle like that could have helped my mom and me ten years ago. Given us a home or paid for her hospitalization so that I didn’t have to take the blood money settlement after my father died.”

He looked physically pained by my words, his eyes drifting closed, and I wanted to kick myself for bringing the evening down. An evening he’d dropped a small fortune on. And fuck if all roads didn’t keep leading there.

“I’m sorry,” I said. Again. “I’m being a jerk. This was so beautiful and so amazing, and I’m being a complete jackass. My history and my problems are not your fault, and I am so sorry I’m putting that shit on you.”

He dropped his head and rubbed the back of his neck with that troubled tell of his, as if it just got entirely too heavy. “A jerk and a jackass?” he said, the trouble in his eyes lightening a little as he lifted his face back to mine and joked. “That takes some balancing.”

“I’m a multitasker,” I said solemnly.

He smiled—again with those adorable dimples—and laid a hand on mine, shooting warmth and heat and eighty different levels of good through all my extremities like Grand Central Station. He looked a million miles away as he stared hard at our hands.

“I wish I could fix that for you,” he said, finally meeting my gaze with one that could melt icebergs with the turmoil going on in there. “You have no idea how much I wish that.”

“Fix it for others,” I said, surprising myself. I didn’t know where that came from, but with him looking into my eyes like that, it kept falling out. Something was going on with him that he didn’t want to say, and it made me want to help him find a

way out of it. “You have the means to change people’s lives, Luke. You like looking tough and quiet, and absorbing your surroundings without ever saying a word, but you have a heart for people. Embrace that. Find a cause and let whatever funds you don’t need do some good.”

He stared at me unblinking, like I’d just spoken in tongues. “The things you see,” he said, his words barely over a whisper. He cleared his throat. “That is a fantastic idea.”

I gave a half eye roll. “I have them once in a while.”

He blinked quickly, whatever fog there was being pushed away. “You have them more often than you think,” he said.

“Saying yes to this evening, for instance?” I said.

His fingers curled around mine, and he gave a small shrug. “Perfect example.”

The air instantly thickened between us, the dusky dark and the flicker from the tiki torches setting the mood. Me being me, I couldn’t just soak it in.

“So, what do we do now?” I blurted.

His eyes lit with amusement, letting go of my hand. “We could go for a walk.”

“Or a swim.”

His mouth fell open in genuine surprise, which I totally got, because who the hell was controlling my damn mouth? A swim? But I knew who was doing it. *Vi* was doing it. The woman who knew how to send things to Sexy Town on a moment’s notice to alleviate awkward tension, because she knew what to do there.

Slow down, chica.

But it was said, and couldn’t be unsaid now, and his deep sexy chuckle just made me want that for real.

“You want to go for a swim in there?” He pointed behind him. “In the Colorado River?”

“It looks nice,” I said, glancing behind him at the sparkles catching on the water.

I rose to my feet and walked toward it, a breeze catching my hair as I closed my eyes and made the decision. My back was to him, and I had no doubt his eyes were on me, probably thinking I’d lost my mind. That wasn’t out of the question. The anticipation thrumming through me was both familiar and incredibly foreign. I couldn’t remember ever wanting a man like this. Ever wanting a man to want *me* like this.

I slid my fingers under my t-shirt and unfastened my jeans, sliding them down slowly.

“Violet?” he said, his voice deeper. My hands trembled as I kept pushing them down, stepping out of them without turning around. “What are you doing?”

Jesus, I was nervous. When was the last time I’d been nervous about my body? This was crazy!

“Well, I’m not swimming in my clothes,” I said.

I began to lift my t-shirt up when suddenly a hard chest was behind me and hands were on mine, stopping me.

“You aren’t putting on a show for me, either,” he said, his head bent so that his mouth was at my ear. “I’m not a client tonight. I’m not even a client at all, technically. So, you don’t have to do this.”

“And I’m not an escort tonight,” I said, ignoring the goosebumps that his proximity and body heat gave me. With all the willpower in the universe, I stepped forward and out of his touch, pulling my t-shirt over my head and dropping it next to the jeans. “How’s the movie quote go? ‘Just a girl . . . standing in front of a boy . . .’”

My throat closed on the next words as I realized what they were. With fumbling fingers, I unhooked the front clasp on my bra and let it slide down my arms.

“Naked and ready to go swim off some of that cheeseburger,” I quipped instead, looking over my shoulder

finally.

My knees nearly gave way at the earth-crushing intensity in his desire-laden gaze.

“You aren’t naked yet,” he said, his voice soft and husky.

I looped two fingers in the tiny strings of my thong panties, tugging one side down. “Scared?” I whispered.

His eyes raked down the entire length of my backside, all the way to my feet, before slowly dragging back up to meet mine. “Terrified,” he said, tugging his shirt over his head and tossing it behind him. “But I’m always up for a challenge.”

My mouth watered as my hungry gaze took him in. The broad shoulders. The hard, cut muscles. The sprinkling of hair at his sternum that led me to the line heading south. When he reached for the button above his very strained-to-the-limit zipper bulge, I turned and sauntered toward the water’s edge before my more basic urges drove me to lick that man from neck to cock and suck him dry right then and there. I had no idea who I even was anymore, because none of these urges were on a first name basis with me.

I didn’t stop walking until I was waist deep, and then I lowered myself down to let the cool water cover my breasts before turning around.

To—nothing. He was gone.

“What the hell?”

My eyes darted around the beach in the low, failing light, but no Lucas. No sign of him, no swell of water, no splash, no —

Hands landed on my upper thighs and slid up to my hips.

“Shit!” I screamed, kicking and batting the water, jumping backward and slipping. I landed sideways and went under, coming up coughing as water went up my nose. “What the—”

“I’m sorry—” Lucas said, slicking his hair back while trying to simultaneously help me up and keep from laughing

his ass off. “I couldn’t resist.”

“Are you twelve?” I said, backing away, fighting to keep myself under cover. It was almost fully dark, but still. Tiki torches. I sucked in another wheezy breath and coughed. Yeah, I was sexy now.

“Quit whining,” he teased, flicking more water at me.

I scoffed. “Oh, you!”

I flicked it back, and he responded with a bigger splash at my face.

In seconds, I crossed the space and had my hands on top of his head, shoving him under. I jumped back again as he rose up like some kind of Viking beast, and I squealed as I turned to run.

There was no actual running in waist-deep water. He was on me in a full-on tackle, bringing us both down in a tangle of arms and legs and nakedness.

So many things were groped in the process that it actually took the edge off the anxiety.

We came up sputtering and laughing, his arms still around me from behind, one of his hands holding my left breast. I looked down and laughed again. “Well, that saved a step.”

He chuckled, the rumble vibrating throughout my body as he squeezed me tighter against him. His hand moved on my breast, squeezing the nipple between his fingers as his lips landed against my neck. “You’re a lunatic, you know that?” he murmured against my skin, sending little shocks all down my right side.

“Mmm, that’s the rumor,” I whispered, letting my head roll to the side to give him better access.

His mouth traveled to my shoulder and back up again, my hand reaching back to hold his head as he tasted and took little nips along the way.

That hand worked my breast as if it were the first one on earth, bringing his other one up to palm its twin. His touch was magical. Many men had treated the girls like fun bags to play with. Lucas caressed, every touch purposeful and full of longing. I found myself arching against him, pushing my ass against his hard cock with every stroke, and relishing his quickened breathing each time.

“God, you feel so fucking good, *cher*,” he growled, letting one hand slide lower over my belly. “Need to tell me if something’s too much, okay?” he said against my ear. “I only want to do what feels good to—”

I shoved his hand lower, gasping as his rough fingers found my aching clit.

“Fuck,” I moaned as he cursed under his breath with me.

It had been so long since a man’s touch had me spiraling like this. Since sensual contact was something more than my own practiced hand. Since anything sexual with another person was something like *this*.

I was going off the rails, and fast. Rocking against his fingers as they slid across my clit and in and out of my slick entrance underwater. Nearly bringing him with me it seemed as my ass bounced against his raging hard-on. I reached behind me and raked his balls with my nails, bringing a feral growl as he grabbed my hand.

“Slow down,” he said, his voice gravelly as his lips traced my cheekbone. He turned me around to face him, withdrawing his fingers and making me whimper in need.

“Please . . .”

I didn’t recognize my own voice begging him not to stop. Who was this person?

He lifted me to kiss my breasts, and my fingers dove into his wet hair, holding him there as he took a nipple into his mouth and sucked.

My legs wrapped around his torso, my body instinctively needing the contact, and he groaned against my nipple as I pressed my heat against his rock-hard shaft. I wasn't going to fuck him without a condom, but, *oh my god*, the feel of his cock against my clit was shooting fireworks off in my brain.

“Luke—”

“Fuck,” he muttered through his teeth, his fingers digging into my ass cheeks as I moved, mock fucking his dick. “Lie back, baby.”

“But—”

“Trust me.”

For once, I didn't think. I let go of him and floated on my back as he propped my thighs on his shoulders, his hands supporting my lower back as my dream came true—my recurring fantasy and the inspiration for all my self-indulgences became reality as the sexiest eyes I'd ever seen locked in on mine from between my legs.

Lips I'd never kissed with my own, focused on one singular place, as his mouth teased my clit, making me buck and pull him in. He made a growling noise against my tender flesh, cursing under his breath as his mouth made love to my pussy and his scruff scraped me in delicious ways. Oh, God, how long had it been since I'd been given this? I always did the giving. And the men that paid me for sex never considered putting their mouths to work.

Suddenly, I was so glad of that. This was all him, every sensation, as his tongue circled, dipped, and teased. He sucked my clit as I writhed against his mouth, gasping to a night sky full of stars that I'd never see the same way again.

“Luke—” I cried, when all my muscles drew back to send me hurtling over the edge. “I'm—oh fuck oh fuck oh—*fuck!*” I screamed, his hair tangled in my fingers as I fisted them and pulsed against his hot mouth. “Oh, God, yesssss . . .”

He kissed the insides of my thighs as I came down, drifting in a sea of weightless limbs and the rocketing realization that

I'd just orgasmed with another human being. That he'd given that to me. I pulled my legs down under me, still holding his head and moving my hands to his face.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

"Seriously?"

"Just checking," he said, running a finger over my cheek, looking unsure if he should pull me close or if *me* being done meant we were done. The table-turn was a mindfuck.

"Why me?" I asked, breathless and a little surprised that I'd let the thought slip out. At his befuddled expression I added, "You and me—we're from different worlds. Why—this? Why me?"

"Because you take my breath away," he said without pause. "Have since the first day I saw you. And the day after that, and the day after that."

"That's just looks," I said. "That fades. You could have any woman you want, but you want tainted goods?"

He shook his head, his hands coming up to frame my face. "Don't you ever say that about yourself, do you hear me?" My eyes burned at the fire in his words. "You are amazing. You're funny and beautiful and exquisite and sassy and smart and—God, you make me so fucking crazy."

I laughed and blinked two tears free that he swiped away. "More than that, I *saw* you, Violet. And you saw me. I didn't look like this, but you still saw *me*." He pulled me closer, wrapping me in his arms. "And you keep doing it. That's what kicks me in the fucking gut and won't let go."

"Well, you know, that beard was pretty hot," I said, needing to lighten the seriousness a little. Everything he was saying was right out of my own brain, and it was dizzying.

A small chuckle rumbled in his chest, warm and real, and something flipped over in mine. Something resolutely foreign and infinitely terrifying. A need I couldn't deny myself.

I traced his lips with my fingers, dropped my gaze to follow the movement as my heart thundered in my chest like a caged bird desperate to take flight . . . then, unable to stop myself, I leaned forward those few mere inches and brushed his lips with mine.

A butterfly kiss at first. A satiny skim of flesh on flesh. Then a second brush, more solid and committed.

The sensation was like a lightning bolt, the intensity and intimacy of the moment forever sealed in my heart. The briefest of pauses struck us both still as our eyes locked and so many things were addressed, asked, and answered, before his hand came up in my hair and his mouth took mine.

CHAPTER TEN



Lucas

I SUNK INTO Violet's kiss and took everything she offered and then some. In that moment, I was no longer a former Marine, or a detective on the trail of a serial killer, or even a son haunted by his father's ruthless legacy. I was simply a broken man finding the other half of his soul.

As she whimpered and moaned and clung to me like she was drowning in the same ocean of emotion, I knew I was sunk.

Keeping things professional and unattached had been the stupidest idea in the history of stupid ideas. I knew that going in. One look at Violet Reed and I'd known on a cellular level that she was meant to be mine, and I'd never be able to keep my hands off her, much less keep my heart free from becoming collateral damage. She was a tornado, and I was the willing storm chaser who wanted to be caught up in every messy inch of her.

"Luke . . ." She pressed herself even closer to me, her tongue tangling with mine as our hands began to slide desperately along each other's bodies. "Please . . ."

I don't even think she knew what she was begging for. Release. Answers. To be grounded as we found ourselves flailing in a flurry of emotion.

"I know, baby," I murmured against her lips as I began to guide her toward shore. I slid my mouth down to suckle her throat. "I've got you."

Her fingernails sunk into my shoulders.

I instinctively knew she was accustomed to being in control, putting on a show for clients, never being taken care of or made love to, never being the real Violet with a man. I knew her letting her guard down with me tonight was something monumental, something she may regret in the morning, but it would be my mission to make sure that didn't happen. The caveman in me needed to give her something to compare every other man to and find him lacking, so that I was the only one she wanted between her thighs ever again . . . the only one who could pleasure her the way she deserved to be pleased . . . the only one she would ever again break her cardinal rule for and kiss with those perfect lips.

I kept up my assault on every bit of flesh I could get my mouth on as I led her from the water and back to the palapa. The sun had set now, and it was dark but for the flicker of the tiki torches.

Water beaded on her skin and goosebumps rose as I sunk with her to the ground on the blankets and pillows, collecting her against my chest.

Wide, vulnerable blue eyes lifted to mine, every doubt and complicated thought racing through them. Vulnerability was foreign to her.

“Don't think, *cher*,” I whispered.

“But—”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

She opened her mouth to retort, a smirk tugging at her lips, but I cupped her jaw and stole the words with a kiss. I was desperate for her. Desperate to take what she offered. More than that, I needed like I'd never needed before in my life. Dizzy on the need to have what she didn't give up to any other man but me.

I kissed her breathless, teased her nipples, and suckled every bit of flesh other than her clit, until she was writhing against me, her leg draped over mine, her wet pussy making

itself known against my thigh and driving me absolutely insane. Still, I held back.

“Lucas,” she moaned, her hand sliding down my abs toward my aching cock. Pushing me gently to my back, she trailed her lips along the same path.

“Fuck, *cher*,” I growled, gripping her head as she ran the tip of her tongue along my shaft.

“I’m trying,” she said, her lips soft against the head as her tongue circled it.

I pulled her back up slowly, vibrating with the need to hold her there instead. The sight of her beautiful full lips on my cock like I’d fantasized so many nights was almost enough to send me over the edge.

“Violet—”

“What are you doing?”

I looked up into her hooded eyes, her face in my hands, and traced her bottom lip with my thumb. “Taking my time. Is there something wrong with that?”

Her nails scraped my left nipple, and she bent to flick her tongue over it. “Yes. You’re killing me.” That hand moved back down, caressing my balls and making me suck in a breath. “And you’re so ready for me.” She licked her lips like the seductress I was used to seeing in *Cameo*. “Can we please get this show on the road before I spontaneously combust?”

I frowned through my lust-charged haze at the sudden shift in her demeanor. “What if I don’t have a condom?”

“Oh.” She leapt up and found her small purse and began to rifle through it. “Why didn’t you say so? I’ve got—”

“Violet.”

Her gaze shot my way at my serious tone.

I sat up. “Is this what you want?”

She tilted her head. “I wouldn’t be naked, getting a condom from my purse if I didn’t. I’m not a tease, Lucas.”

“I didn’t say you were.” I rose and moved her way, grabbing the condom from her and tossing it to the makeshift bed. “Let me be clear here. If we do this, it will have nothing to do with work.” Her gaze lifted to meet mine, the flickering flames in those blue orbs almost too beautiful to absorb. My fingers traced her jawline. “This isn’t Vi the escort with a client, and it isn’t you and the detective playing a part.” I reached for her hand, my thumb raking over her knuckles as I stared into her eyes, unblinking. “Not for me. Is it for you?”

A simple slight shake of her head was all she gave, but the emotion warring in her face was enough.

“If we do this, it’s me and you. Period. No jobs. No baggage. No hidden agendas. Nothing but us.” I interlaced my fingers with hers. “Is that what you want?”

Her gaze dropped to our joined hands. “I . . .” She looked back up to me after a beat. “So much,” she breathed. “I’m just—I don’t know how to do this.”

“I know,” I whispered, collecting her into my arms as her hands slid up my back, her fingers tracing every muscle. “And we have all the time in the world to let me show you if you’ll let me.”

Relief mixed with a splash of disbelief danced over her features. “You’re a little bit amazing, you know that?”

I bent to kiss her lips. “You’re the amazing one, *cher*,” I said against them. “And I want to spend tonight showing you that.” I moved around to her ear, and she tilted her head to give me access. “Trust me?” I whispered.

A tiny chuckle escaped her throat as I tasted the tender skin under her ear, and her eyes fluttered closed. “No,” she breathed. “But I’m up for the challenge.”

I smiled against her skin as I pulled her tightly against my aching hard-on. “Do you feel how badly I want you?”

She inhaled quickly, her nails digging into my back, and her breathing quickened. “Mmm, yes.”

I drew my face back and looked down into those beautiful eyes. “Do you want *me* like that?” I asked. “Do you want this?”

“Yes,” she repeated, the word barely making sound.

Without another word, I scooped her up in my arms, carried her back to the blanket and laid her down, searing her with a kiss, reveling in the fact that she let me. I tasted every inch of her that I could reach, stopping to gently bite her nipples as I opened the condom and let her sheath me.

I’d planned everything about tonight with her in mind, never assuming that I’d have the opportunity to make love to her. Now that it was in front of me, I knew I had to make it different from what she did for work—then simultaneously hated that I had to think about that. What did she do with other men? What would she prefer?

“Lucas?” She seemed to sense my tumbling thoughts and cupped my face, her eyes looking straight to my soul. “It’s me and you, remember? No one else.”

She guided my cock to her entrance, but I slipped a finger inside her first, making her moan as her slick, wet heat took it in. She was definitely hot for me. This was no act.

“One question,” I said.

“Anything,” she said, her breathing ragged.

“Do you come with them?”

She blinked, her gaze clearing as she focused. “No.”

“Never?”

“No.”

“But they think you do.”

“Of course, it’s part of the—” Her words trailed off, her back arching a little as I let that finger stroke the sweet spot.

“Oh, God, Luke.”

“Just one more thing,” I said, kissing her bottom lip as I stroked harder.

She moaned and spread her legs further, giving me better access. “What’s that?”

“No faking with me.” Her eyes fluttered open and met my gaze. “Ever.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me,” I said, withdrawing my finger.

“Oh, God, don’t stop,” she whimpered.

“Promise.”

“I—I can’t . . .” She blinked away from me.

I froze as that sunk in like a lead weight. “Violet?” She turned back to me slowly. “You can’t promise, or . . . you can’t come?”

“Mood killer 101,” she said. “Sex therapy during sex.”

I ignored that. “Do you come during sex?”

“Just by myself.”

Holy. Shit. The thought of her pleasuring herself nearly had me undone. I ran my finger, still soaked in her juices, along the seam of her mouth so she could taste her own arousal.

“Well, if I have anything to say about it, that’s going to change.” I kissed her throat, letting my tongue slide along her pulse. “I want this to be good for you. I know you like this.” I moved lower and took a nipple into my mouth. “Tell me what else you like.”

“Mmmm, I do,” she said as I lavished the other breast with equal attention. “I like what you were doing with your finger, too.”

I slipped two of them back inside, and curled them upward, relishing the rush of breath she exhaled as she bucked

against my hand.

“For weeks, I’ve fantasized about you looking up at me from between my thighs,” she admitted in a throaty whisper, then gasped as I stroked that spot harder. “You made it happen today.”

“Really?” Pride burst inside my chest. Fuck, yeah. I’d eat that pussy a thousand times if that’s what it took to make her fantasies come true.

“Really.” Her hands tangled in my hair as she fucked my fingers. “You have amazing eyes.”

“So do you,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Luke?” she said, her tone high and clipped as I added my thumb on her clit.

“Yes?” I answered, my own need at its breaking point.

“Fuck me now, please!”

That was it.

Our bodies found each other as she wrapped her thighs around my hips, cradling me. I sunk into her in one smooth stroke, making us both groan out loud.

“Fuck, *cher*, you feel so good.”

She clawed at my shoulders, my biceps. “Oh, God, you do too.”

I pumped slowly, not wanting this to go too fast. But, damn, she made it nearly impossible as her hips surged to meet mine, faster, harder. The needy little sounds that came from deep in her throat.

“Luke . . .”

The way she breathed my name as her eyes slid shut.

I was all in, one hundred percent lost in her, but I had no idea where she was going in her head. I’d never been insecure in my life, but suddenly, I was there. Greedy and needy, sharing her with way too damn many people in her past. I

couldn't control that, but I needed to know she was there with me right now.

“Violet,” I panted, my voice low and gritty.

Those damn blue eyes that had me under their spell slowly slid open.

I stopped moving for a moment and leaned down to kiss her. She melted into it like soft candle wax, as if she'd been kissing me for ages, as if she'd already memorized my lips.

Then I reached under her and flipped us so she was on top. She gasped in surprise, catching herself on my chest as she stared down at me and I gripped those gorgeous hips.

“You take control now, baby, but I want your eyes on me. Always on me.”

She hesitated momentarily, and I knew why. She could walk away in her mind. This—keeping the eye contact, the connection, the intimacy—it was going to break me, too. After a few beats, however, she began to move her hips and ride me like the queen she was.

“That's it, baby,” I murmured, thrusting my hips deeper. “God, you feel like fucking heaven.”

She ground down on my cock harder and faster as she found her rhythm, rocking and stroking her clit against my pubic bone. “Oh, God . . .” She began to pant and groan. Loudly.

Her eyes grew heavy with pleasure, and I knew her orgasm was closing in on her.

“*Cher*,” I growled in warning. “Do what you need to do to come, baby, but eyes on me.”

Fuck me, she took me at my word. Grabbing one of my hands, she brought my fingers to her mouth to wet them before guiding them to her clit, showing me exactly how to touch her.

As I helped her there, she began to squeeze and roll one of her own nipples, her eyes pinned hotly to mine in the sexiest

fucking show of my life, daring me to come first.

No fucking way.

I thrust my hips, bottoming out as deep as I could as I rubbed her clit.

“Picture my mouth sucking you again, baby,” I ground out. “Look in my eyes and come on that cock. Come *hard*.”

She did.

Fuck, she did.

With a keening cry, she half screamed my name as her release slammed into her, her body trembling, those blue eyes burning into mine and searing her expression into my memory forever. Milking my cock so hard, it forced the most violent orgasm I’d ever had out of me with a primal roar that I couldn’t contain.

She collapsed onto my chest and lay there completely limp for several minutes as we both struggled to breathe. I thought she might’ve fallen asleep after a while, until I felt the telltale hot wetness of tears trailing down my skin.

“Violet?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you crying?”

“Nope.”

I rolled us over, quickly disposing of the condom in the trash, then facing her on my side. Sure enough, her cheeks were pink, and her eyes were red and wet, though she was trying valiantly to hide it. I traced her cheekbone with my finger, suddenly alarmed.

“Did I hurt you?”

She seemed truly puzzled that I would ask such a dumb question. “Uh, no. Kinda the opposite.”

Now I was confused. “Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, forcing an embarrassed chuckle as she swiped two more tears away. “Just being a girl. Please let it go.”

I stretched over to grab the blanket and pulled it over us. “Sorry, but no. I don’t like making love to a woman only to have her crying the next minute. Please give me a clue here.”

Her eyes filled again, and she shut them tight as the waterfall spilled over. “I’m fine,” she whispered, frantically wiping at her face. “Just a little new to this—what you said.”

What did I say? I replayed my words. “Making love?”

She blew out a slow, steady breath. “Sorry.”

I gazed at this woman in awe as I wrapped my head around her perspective. This soft-hearted, passionate, fiery woman, who was forced into the oldest profession in the world to make a living for herself and support her family when she was too young to really know herself. A woman who had created an armor so impenetrable that she’d shut down her own body. Making love was probably completely foreign to her, along with any kind of feelings.

I understood that better than anyone. It terrified me, too. But there was no denying what just happened. Nothing about that was just sex.

I brushed a hand down her arm. “You never have to be sorry about anything with me, *cher*. Keep it real. I know it’s scary, but—”

“Keep it real,” she echoed on a whisper, tracing my jaw with her fingertip and following the move with her eyes.

Fuck, how could one touch like that turn me so upside down?

“Do you feel it?” I heard myself ask, wondering who the hell gave my mouth the permission.

After a long, long, torturous moment, she finally met my gaze. “I don’t want to . . .”

“But?”

“But, yes, I feel it too.”

Thank fuck.

“Good. That’s—”

“The problem with that is everyone I’ve ever let in has hurt me. How do I know you’ll be any different?”

She was worried I’d hurt her. So was I. If she ever found out what my family had done to hers . . . it would go beyond hurting. It would break her ability to ever trust again.

The best I could hope for was for that to never happen while I did my best to make it up to her. The kicker? I was falling for her. Hard.

What a clusterfuck.

Not that I gave a shit about appearances or what anyone thought.

Yes, I cared that she was an escort that slept with other men, and yes, I cared that any sort of personal relationship between us crossed all kinds of lines as far as my assignment went, even though I was certain I could still do my job without being compromised.

The real problem, as far as I could see, was that Violet was too damaged in her own eyes to see a future beyond the confines of Cameo. Whether that included me or not. I was serious when I told her how I saw her—independent and sexy and magnificent in all her mouthy glory. She was also, however, a lost and hurting girl deep down inside who just wanted to be loved for who she was.

How do I know you’ll be any different?

God, I desperately wanted to be different for her.



IN THE TWO weeks since our *date* in the Grand Canyon, everything shifted between us in giant and infinitesimal ways.

We still put in appearances at Cameo and around town as I gathered intel for the Lady Killer case. Jarod remained at the top of the list, though his behavior had been decidedly benign as things between him and Sophia heated up. Rodney, the bartender, was acting sketchier, so I dug further into his background, as well as more into the Irish syndicate and all of their players from the party.

Tony and Jonathan kept security tight, and JD kept me up to date on their findings, which were basically nil.

It was frustratingly slow, but undercover could be that way. Watching, waiting, gathering—until it's time to move. It wasn't glamorous, and couldn't be hurried, unfortunately. It was hard to explain this to Gideon, who grew incredibly antsy, the longer it took and the more his pregnant wife began to show. Not that I blamed him.

But in the rare moments that I got to put all of that aside and just be Lucas, all I wanted was to be with Violet, just like we were under that palapa, naked and in each other's arms. I took every opportunity possible in the last two weeks to woo and spoil her.

The twist on that? She was spoiling me.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd looked forward to such simple things with another person. Dates to Frank's Burger Barn, going to the movies, bike rides through the North Vegas mountains, shows and expensive dinners on the strip, and sometimes just long phone calls when we couldn't get away. It was scary how much we were getting to know each other . . . and how hard I was falling. We hadn't had sex again, but we'd come close, finding secret places to fool around in Cameo when the opportunity presented itself.

And I made sure it presented itself, because God, I was dying for another taste of her.

I had flowers and chocolates delivered to her regularly, and I even had a deep violet, designer gown delivered to her with all the fancy, girly doodads a woman might want along with a

bottle of her favorite perfume. I had no doubt she would look beautiful in it. I just didn't expect the tailspin my heart would take when I saw her wearing it. Waiting for me as I picked her up to bring her to my home for the first time, decked out in all the things I'd chosen for her.

"You're stunning, *cher*," I said.

She did a little mock bow as I helped her into the car. "I have a secret admirer," she said with a wink.

"Not so secret," I said under my breath, using every bit of restraint I could muster not to devour her right there in my front passenger seat.

"So, where are we going?" she asked, smirking.

"It's a surprise," I said, kissing her hand and shutting the door.

"Okay, where are we?" she asked a few short minutes later, sliding out of my Land Rover and glancing around at the house and the trees covered in Spanish moss. I saw when it clicked, and she pivoted back to face me. "Is this your place?"

"It is."

"Holy shit, Luke." Her smile was genuine as her heels clicked on the walkway. "It's amazing."

"It needs some work," I warned her.

She waved that off. "It's called potential."

"Right." I opened the door and led her inside, and the awe on her face as she turned in circles and took it in was enough to undo me, along with the kick in the gut I got because I could see—really see—her being here regularly. Living in my home. With me. That was just too much.

I was suddenly desperate for another taste of those lips. Anything to break the domesticity blanketing me like molasses. I grabbed her arm and spun her around, pinning her to my chest as I claimed her lips in the possessive way she'd come to allow.

She sunk into the kiss, her mouth opening to mine as she leaned into me with a little moan of approval. I kicked the door shut as she tugged at my shirt, raking her nails over my abs, letting me know she'd missed me too.

“Don't you want a tour?” I asked against her lips as I cupped her hips.

She began working my belt buckle. “Sure. Let's start with the bedroom.”

I growled and scooped her up.

She kept her lips on mine as I made my way up the stairs to my room, where I unceremoniously dropped her on the bed.

“I've been waiting for this since the Grand Canyon,” I said, my voice husky as I yanked my shirt off and tossed it aside.

She was like a fucking drug to me that I couldn't get enough of. Clamoring to her knees, that mouth that had served so many of my fantasies was on my chest, her tongue branding my skin as her nails raked up my back.

“Me too,” she breathed against my skin. “All this teasing . . .”

I found her zipper and liberated her from the dress, exposing milky white skin already flushed with desire. One tiny black thong, garter hose, and no bra.

“Foreplay,” I growled.

“Two weeks of foreplay,” she said, gasping with excitement when my hands went into the silky waves of her hair and tugged. “Makes me a needy girl.”

I groaned as she gave my nipple a bite and then licked the burn away, moving quickly down my abs.

I dropped my jeans as I watched that beautiful mouth wrap itself around my cock, nearly bringing me to my knees. She arched into it as I held her head and fucked her mouth, my gaze sliding down the curve of her spine to her gorgeous ass.

“*Fuck, Violet,*” I moaned through my clenched jaw as she sucked, licked, and literally made love to my dick. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“I can’t get enough of you either,” she said, palming my balls as she dragged her mouth back up my body. “I’ve never felt this way before, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“God, I’m glad to hear that,” I said, pulling her face up to mine and kissing her hard, with all that I had before pulling back and meeting her eyes. Lust and need and something so much scarier sparked between us. Something so real, and without the walls that once guarded so much. It seized at a part of me I couldn’t name. “Grab the headboard, baby. I need to be inside you.”

I grabbed a condom as she did what I asked, and when I looked back, my breathtaking Violet was positioned with her ass in the air, her hair tumbled over her back, the garter hose seam tracking up the backs of her thighs. A sultry fire burned in her eyes as she peered at me over her shoulder, and her thighs spread to invite me past the tiny strip of thong.

“I think you’ve put a spell on me, Detective,” she purred.

“That’s Luke to you, *cher.*”

“Well, *Luke . . .*” She rocked forward on her knees and back again, arching that beautiful ass and reaching back to pull the string aside to show me her pussy, wet and wanting me. “I don’t want to presume or be crude, but I’ve waited two weeks to be fucked, so would you mind?”

I crawled up the bed and ran my hands over the silky skin of her ass cheeks and down her thighs, teasing her swollen clit with the head of my dick and cursing under my breath as she moaned and tried to push back onto me.

“Not at all,” I said, taking my dick in my hand and sliding it along her slit, letting her slick us both up.

A string of curses fell from her lips, each breathed huskier than the last.

“Such naughty words from such a perfect mouth,” I said, my own strained as I pushed into her.

God, it was impossibly better than the last time, this feeling of being sheathed, milked, sucked by her inner muscles.

Her back arched deeper as she leaned her head back and her body tensed.

“Grab my—”

Her words were clipped short as I plunged into her again, her fingers white-knuckled on the headboard. Sweet mother of fucks, she felt too good. Fuck, if I wasn't going to fucking blow like a sixteen-year-old boy with his first wet dick. But it was all her. Her body reacting to me, to my touch, to my everything. Like she was lit on fire from within, and that heat was engulfing us both.

“Hair,” she breathed. “Grab my hair, and fuck—”

I felt her pussy squeezing, on the brink of an orgasm already, and I wrapped a handful of her tresses around my fingers and yanked as I plunged deeper, my cock stretching her to the limits.

Her whole body began to tremble as her orgasm crested, barreling over the edge and drawing primal sounds from her that I knew I'd never forget as long as I lived. The sounds of pure ecstasy and total mind-fucking bliss, of wanting and giving and taking and letting the pleasure roll over her body. I was right behind her as mine crashed into me like a wrecking ball, roaring her name as I came for what felt like hours before I sank over her and struggled to catch my breath.

“Well, that was fast,” I said finally, kissing her shoulder.

“I'm not in any hurry,” she said, her voice low and sated, her tone sounding like she was smiling. “Are you? Did you see enough of me in the dress?”

“I have the mental image to hold me.”

“So, you don’t mind me staying naked for the time being?” she asked.

I removed the condom and disposed of it so that I could roll over and pull her with me. “I’ll sacrifice myself for the greater good.”



I WOKE UP to the relentless ringing of my doorbell and the buzzing of my cell phone, only to realize two things.

One . . . I was not alone.

Two . . . Violet was a snuggler.

I squinted and glanced at my alarm clock. Just after seven a.m. After a long night of exhausting each other in just about every position possible, we’d fallen asleep in a tangle of naked limbs, and she’d stayed.

She’d stayed.

I’d ended up on my side, as usual, and she was pressed up behind me with her chest plastered to my back in a spoon position, her warm breath at my neck, her arm wrapped around my waist.

Who would’ve thought Miss Violet Reed liked to cuddle?

The doorbell sounded again, but she didn’t flinch. Apparently, she slept like the dead as well.

Ignoring my phone, I carefully pried her arm off my waist and rolled from the bed, glancing back at her relaxed profile as she burrowed into the pillow. The fact that she was asleep in my bed was mind-blowing, but I couldn’t dwell on that as some fucking idiot was making a racket at my door.

I pulled on a t-shirt and pajama pants and padded to the door. I threw it open, ready to read whoever it was the riot act, only to come face-to-face with the last person I expected to see.

“Sarah?”

“Hey, big brother. How’s it going?”

I frowned and glanced behind her, expecting to find the rest of my family in some kind of weird intervention. “What’re you doing here?”

“Is that any way to greet your little sister after all this time?”

I didn’t budge.

She sighed. “Look. I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch. It’s been rough, okay? But I’m clean right now, and I miss you.”

Right now.

I looked her over. Really looked her over. She appeared clean. No track marks. Her hair was washed. Her clothes looked clean and neat. Duty and a sense of nostalgia tugged at my gut.

I stepped back and opened the door wider as I raked fingers through my hair. “Come in.” She smiled and walked inside. “Have you eaten? You want breakfast?”

“Breakfast would be great.”

I nodded, and she followed me to the kitchen, where I pulled out the ingredients to make us all some pancakes. I glanced toward the hallway, down which Violet lay sleeping. This was that family thing that kept looming, but it was too late to worry about that now.

I got coffee brewing, poured Sarah a glass of juice, then began to mix up the batter. All the while, noting her eyes taking everything in around my home. Everything, including Violet’s small purse by the front door.

“Got a girlfriend?” she finally asked.

I shot her a look. “Something like that,” I hedged.

She sipped her juice, appearing suddenly nervous. The customary alarm bells began to ring in the back of my mind, but I pushed the doubt back a bit. That was my family’s job, to instantly assume the worst. That’s why I’d made it a mission to be different, wasn’t it? Including now.

I made the first batch of pancakes, then put them on a plate and put it in front of her along with some butter and syrup. She cut and ate a couple of bites, and I was about to tell her about Violet and ask her to keep the family talk vague, when she put her fork down.

“Lucas. Can you talk to Dad for me?”

And there it was.

She needed money or something.

I leaned against the sink and folded my arms across my chest. “Why?”

“Don’t look at me like that, okay? I told you I’m clean, and I am. Three months sober now. I swear.” She held up her hand in a gesture of promise.

Sarah was my baby sister. I knew the rest of my family wouldn’t lift a finger to help her. They’d written her off years ago after her second stint in rehab. I had to at least hear her out. To try to be better than our parents were.

“Anyway, I’ve been living with a couple of friends. We’re all working. Trying to make it, you know. It’s hard when you have a past like we do, but we’re doing our best.” She sucked in a breath. “I’ve got a job. I pay my bills. You should be proud of me.”

“I never said I wasn’t. What does Dad have to do with this?”

She bit her lip, her eyes filling with tears. “The apartment complex we’re living in. It’s older and a little run down, but it’s the only one we can all afford. It’s close to where we work. Where one of my roommates is going to school. It’s perfect. But *Broussard Land Development* has set their sights on it for demolition,” she said, emphasizing the company name like it was acid on her tongue. “Just like they do everything else. Chew up the weak and spit ’em out, same as always. You know our family. They don’t even care that I’m living there —”

A gasp from the doorway drew both of our attention.

I spun to find Violet, dressed in one of my t-shirts that hung down to mid-thigh, her hair long and loose and tousled from sex and sleep. She had one hand at her mouth as she stared at me in disbelief, the other hanging at her side with my buzzing cell phone.

Fuck.

Sarah's gaze darted between us in confusion. "Is this your girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"No," she said simultaneously.

I lifted an eyebrow, which she ignored as she slammed my phone on the table. "The world's trying to reach you," she said, her voice hard and shaking with a rage I'd never heard from her. "I'd guess it's urgent."

I ignored that, urging her silently with my gaze to give me a chance to explain.

She did not, plowing ahead with fire in her eyes. "So . . . *Broussard* Land Development?" she spat.

I simply stared at her as she put the pieces together, the pain palpable in the air and written all over her face. Tears quivered in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall as she lasered me with a glare so deadly I felt frozen where I stood. My ice queen was back.

"I should have known," she bit out between her teeth, each word icier than the last. "I should've. Fucking. Known."

"Violet—"

She held up a hand and shook her head. "No. *No.*" She darted a glance toward my sister but quickly turned all her vitriol back to me. "You do not get to apologize. You don't even get to talk. What you *do* get to do is go fuck yourself."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Violet

EVERYTHING WAS A liquid blur.

I didn't remember pulling the leggings out of my bag or yanking them on under Lucas' oversized t-shirt. Suddenly, I was just dialing Chris, storming barefoot down the driveway toward the quaint little lantern-lined street, a voice calling after me.

A voice that tore into my chest and left it bleeding acid with every call of my name.

"Violet!" It came again, closer.

"Please come get me," I spoke into my phone when Chris answered on the first ring. My voice sounded tight and wavering. No. *Do not break.* I swallowed down the burn that threatened to choke me. "I'm at—"

"I know where you are," he said. "Look to your right."

My head swiveled, catching the purposeful flash of headlights from half a block away.

"Thank God," I breathed, turning in that direction as the vehicle rolled slowly my way.

"You okay?" Chris asked.

My heartbeat was so loud in my ears, I barely heard the question. "That's relative."

"*Violet.*" Lucas rounded in front of me, and the SUV sped up.

My whole body trembled; there was no way to hide it. I leveled my gaze at his throat, as his lying fucking eyes would likely send me into a murderous rage. “Move.”

“You have to listen to me.”

I stepped around him, and a warm hand closed around my wrist as the vehicle pulled up beside us. I twisted my arm up expertly, but my move didn’t work on him. It only pulled me closer as I glared up through hot tears I refused to let fall. “Get. Your hands. Off me,” I seethed.

“Violet, please,” he said softly as his phone buzzed from his hip. Again.

“I believe she said to let her go,” Chris boomed, his voice hard as he morphed next to me.

I watched the irony of those words land on Lucas, glazing his eyes over as he released my wrist. I stepped away and slid into the back seat, closing my eyes and inhaling the scent of leather as the hot emotion spilled over my lashes and down my cheeks.

“I’m sorr—” he began.

Anything else was cut off as Chris slammed the door, and all I could hear was my pounding heart and the sound of one shaky breath after another.

“Miss Vi, you alright?” Chris asked as he got in and put the vehicle in gear.

“Just Vi,” I said automatically, pulling in a calming breath. “Thank you, Chris.”

“Just doing my job, ma’am.”

“Why were you parked outside?” I asked.

He met my eyes in the rearview mirror. “My job, ma’am.”

I nodded. Of course.

“Just take me home please,” I said, suddenly more exhausted than I’d ever been in my life. Numb and yet not

nearly numb enough at the same time. I needed to call Charli and Beth and tell them . . . tell them what?

That I was an idiot? That I stupidly neglected to connect the name, especially knowing where he was from? And more than either of those, that I fucking let my heart out of its cage to run amok and *feel? Trust*. Believe that just maybe . . .

“Ma’am, I’m sorry, but I just got a text from JD,” Chris said a few minutes later, interrupting my pity party as he slowed to make a U-turn. “I have to take you to Mr. Kane’s house.”

“Why?” I said, sitting up and swiping at my face as alarm raced through me. “Is Charli okay?”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” he said. “But I’ll get you there in ten minutes.”

Lucas’—no, Detective *Broussard’s*—phone had been burning up with calls from Gideon that morning. That’s what woke me. I yanked mine out and checked—fuck, it was dead. And my portable charger wasn’t in my purse. What the living hell was wrong with me? I wasn’t careless like this.

We pulled into the driveway at Charli and Gideon’s to find a lot of buzz for such an early hour. Multiple SUVs flanked the driveway, both coming and going. I was out of the car before it came to a complete stop, my bare feet not caring about the rough gravel or the brick steps leading to the front door. Two burly men with arms crossed and guns on their hips parted like the Red Sea as I approached and blew through the thick oak door.

“What’s going on?” I demanded as soon as I laid eyes on Gideon. “Is Charli okay? Where is she?”

Gideon turned around amidst a cluster of men, a coffee mug in his hand and a weary scowl on his face. I barely registered that, however, due to the face behind him, gazing at me warily.

Lucas.

Looking really damn irritable.

“How the *fuck* did you get here before me?” I spat.

Gideon’s scowl deepened as he glanced at the detective then back to quickly assess me from head to toe. “What the hell?”

“That’s what I want to know,” I growled, yanking my mess of hair up on top of my head with the band on my wrist. “Where’s Charli? And you need to get *his* ass out of your fucking house because he’s a lying son of a bitch.”

“Vi.”

I spun at Charli’s soft voice to find her and Beth, and that alone sent up red flags. Beth must have come with JD, and while I had kept her in the loop, she hadn’t been on Gideon’s need-to-know list.

Charli’s eyes were red and puffy, but her expression was pure fury.

“My phone’s dead, what happened?” I said in a rush, going to her. “Is it the babies?” I knew that wasn’t logical, but . . .

“It’s another body,” she said, her voice low, her eyes fluttering closed.

Her words stopped me cold. Or not her words. Her tone. Something was horribly wrong. More than horror over another death . . . and that thought was as fucked up as it could get. This new normal was chilling. My mind spun through all the women at Cameo, my heart hurting over each face.

“What?” I breathed, my skin prickling. “Who?”

“Come sit down,” Beth said, her face ashen as well. “Both of you.”

I sunk to the sofa reluctantly. “Why are you here?” I whispered.

She sat in the recliner across from us while Charli plopped down next to me. “JD insisted.” Her eyes sought out the group of men, and something big arced in the air between them.

I knew instinctively that this one was more significant than the others. I thought of Lucas' phone exploding with calls. I'd seen Gideon's name and two other unknown numbers lighting up his screen, but that would have happened on the other murders as well.

I couldn't handle the suspense.

"Will somebody please tell me what's going on?" I demanded.

Charli grabbed my hand, and her fingers were icy. Her blue eyes met mine, and that iciness went straight through me.

"They found human remains under one of the old dumbwaiters down in the casino," Lucas said from my left. I felt him getting closer, but I held Charli's gaze.

"Re—remains?" I whispered.

Pain filled her eyes, and she closed them, tears spilling down her cheeks as she shook her head. "At the very back of the kitchen," she managed, her voice husky and shaking. "In a pantry no one uses anymore."

I shook my head in response. Not only at what she was saying, but what she was about to. I felt my throat closing up. "Tell me."

Lucas knelt next to me, setting my teeth on edge. I stiffened when he held his phone in my line of vision, his arm brushing against mine, but the image that drew my gaze negated every other sensation.

It was a crime scene photo, clearly sent to him from his people working the scene.

A dirty bracelet—one I instantly recognized. It was the amethyst and mother-of-pearl bracelet that I'd given Amy last year for her birthday. She wore it every day. Every fucking day.

"No," I choked out. "That—" I grabbed his phone, no longer having fucks to give about boundaries. Zooming in on the photo with my finger and thumb, I saw that it wasn't

covered in dirt. It was dried blood. I closed my eyes and shoved his phone back at him, shutting out the feeling of his warm fingers against mine.

“There’s more, but the only other one I’m showing you is this,” he said quietly. “A cell phone. They’ll pull the card to verify, but—”

“It’s Amy’s phone,” Charli said, her tone defeated and low.

My eyes shot open, the automatic need to protect my friend and bolster her at the ready on my tongue. The sight of Amy’s pink cell phone case and the smashed screen, however, stole my breath. The faded sunflower sticker that wrapped around the bottom corner was the simple element that broke me.

I clapped a hand over my mouth as my stomach threatened to revolt. A cold sweat turned me clammy as tears spilled over my hand and the last of the what-the-fucks hit me in a swirling wave of horror.

All this time.

Our coworker, our *friend*, who left almost a *year* ago hadn’t gone *anywhere*. She hadn’t gone home. She’d been—

I shook my head violently as the tears streamed unheeded. “But—”

“She apparently never left,” Beth said softly, echoing my thoughts.

Gideon looked on, shaking his head as he walked to the kitchen with his mug as if he couldn’t listen anymore.

“Oh, my God,” I said, the words barely making it out as I leaned over my knees, staring at the wooden floor. “All this time. The phone messages, the . . .” A realization hit me. “Wait. We got a text. Both of us.” I looked up to meet Charli’s tear-streaked expression. “That she was going home to see her family. He—he knew we were her friends. He knew . . .”

“He got her first,” Charli whispered, even those words sounding broken. “The motherfucker got *her* first. Because of

me.” She pushed forward awkwardly and stood to pace. “What the fuck did I do to this guy?” she said, her volume increasing with each word.

“Nothing,” Beth said, her eyes bright with tears. “He’s just crazy.”

“You two need to get away from me,” Charli cried. “Seriously, I’m like C4. You don’t want to be around me.”

“And C4 is nothing but clay without an ignition, so don’t say that about yourself,” Lucas said. “Being with the people who love you is all that matters.”

It was a sweet thing to say, but all I could feel was a boiling rage. For him. For Amy. For the fucker hell-bent on destroying us.

“Besides,” he added. “It looks like we might manage to luck out with a fingerprint. Forensics is still on scene, but so far, there are partial prints on the bracelet and the phone.”

I shot him a confused look. “When was she found?”

“Just a few hours ago.” His expression told me all I needed to know. Neither of us were answering our phone because we were wrapped up in each other.

“New cleaning service,” Charli explained, her hands massaging her belly as Gideon morphed behind her, his hands kneading the back of her neck. She sighed and leaned back against him. “They didn’t realize that area was unused and were trying to be thorough, I guess. Needless to say, she got a shock.”

“Fuck.” I swallowed back the bile crowding my throat. “What . . . what now?” I couldn’t even think.

Lucas darted a look Gideon’s way then back. “Like I said, the scene is still being worked, but as quietly as possible. We’re keeping this on the downlow, just like we have been, and only bringing in people that need to know. We can’t risk spooking this guy now.”

“Oh, Amy,” I murmured, pain coating my voice as I wrapped my arms around myself, wanting to close off against the horror but knowing there were things to do. “We—we need to call her family.”

“I’ll do it,” Charli said, wiping at her face. “I called Jade’s, Stormy’s, Cherry’s. I’m getting really practiced at this.”

I felt a hand on my back, and I leaned into the familiarity of it before my broken thoughts could tell me not to.

“Are you okay, *cher*?” came Lucas’ soft question.

The endearment slammed into me with brute force, as everything that happened before I got to Gideon’s house flooded in.

“Don’t,” I said, stiffening against his touch. “Just go.”

“Violet,” he began, his tone clipped.

“If you call me that again . . .” I said, rounding on him as we both rose to our feet, “I will throat punch you and never look back. Now please, either leave or just leave me the hell alone, but either way, we have nothing to say to each other, *Detective*.”

“This isn’t the time, Vi,” Gideon warned, just as his doorbell sounded.

From the corner of my eye I saw Chris move to answer, but all I could focus on was the fire that suddenly roared through my head like an explosion. Maybe some veins went kamikaze on me. Maybe I was having an aneurism. Maybe I was just fucking done.

“Don’t you dare shut me up,” I said through my teeth, glaring up at Gideon. Lucas raked his fingers through his hair and pivoted to pace back a few steps, muttering under his breath.

“Excuse me?” Gideon ground out, his dark eyes flashing.

“You heard me,” I bit back, fully aware this train was barreling off the tracks but there was no going back. “I tolerate

your bullishness because I love my friend, and she adores you, and I truly believe you love her completely, but no one tells me when or where to do anything, *Mr. Kane*. Least of all you.”

“Get her out of here,” he muttered to JD, iciness lacing his words.

JD took one look at Beth and didn’t move a muscle. He was a smart man.

“I’m staying with Charli,” I said slowly. “Or are you kicking her out, too?”

“Vi, I’ve about had it,” Gideon warned as he shoved his hands into his pockets. Probably so he wouldn’t strangle me. “I don’t know what went down with you two tonight, and personally I don’t give a fuck—”

“He lied,” I accused.

“Again,” Gideon seethed. “Not my business. I know you’ve had some rough times in the past—”

“You know *nothing* about my fucking past,” I bellowed, bowing up as much as a small, barefoot, pajama-clad woman could bow up to a mountain. “You know nothing about my story.”

“And you don’t know mine!” Lucas yelled, wheeling around on me before Gideon could open his mouth to retort.

His expression was fierce, his muscles drawn hard and tight with adrenaline. His reaction was startling, but I refused to back up. I lifted my chin defiantly, meeting his hard gaze.

“I know I withheld information from you, Violet, and I’m sorry. I was wrong for that, but we were already into this thing when I found out who you were.”

“How convenient,” I said flatly as Gideon stepped away.

Distantly, I was aware of movement in the room. Of people and voices and breathing and life, of someone clearing their throat—probably to shut us the hell up.

“Damn it, woman,” Lucas yelled, not hearing or caring either as he focused solely on me. “Before you crucify me, can you take a fucking breath and think for one minute that maybe not everyone is as perfect as you? That *maybe* other people have shitty pasts, too, and just *maybe* you don’t have the market on that?”

Charli hissed my name, but I pretended not to hear her.

“Yeah, poor you,” I ground out, crossing my arms as I glared. “Must be horrendous to never have to worry about a meal or a bill or whether you have to give up your ass tonight to make your rent.”

He shook his head sadly. “And there it is,” he said. “Where all roads lead with you.”

“That’s the real world, *Detective*.”

He took one step closer and lowered his voice, his eyes dropping to my lips and then dragging back up as if he were memorizing me. “That’s right,” he said. “That’s who I am. And I’m done with this.”

“With what?” I spat.

“All of it,” he said under his breath, his eyes dark with a hard, keen focus I hadn’t seen on him in a long time. “I’m here to do a job. A job I was damn good at before you swept in. I’m here to find out who’s killing your friends, and now I finally have some fucking solid evidence to work with, so if you’ll excuse—”

“I’m sorry,” I said, barking out an insane-sounding laugh. “Swept in, did I? Who came after who?”

“If you’ll excuse me,” he continued, pushing into my space, his jaw looking tight enough to snap steel with his teeth as he glared down at me. “I have fingerprints to investigate.”

“Go ahead,” I whispered loudly, giving a hand flourish. “Go be all you can be. I’ve had enough liars in my life. I don’t need another one.”

His eyes narrowed to slits, and all the little voices that mattered told me that we'd gone too far. That this was going to hurt like none other. But I couldn't feel it yet. All I could feel was fire.

"I'm good with who I am, Violet," he said finally. "And I tried like hell to be good for you. But you'll never be satisfied because you live your life with a fifty-ton chip on your shoulder, expecting people to disappoint you. And they always will, because no one is strong enough to knock that thing off."

I felt the burn behind my already raw eyes as his words hit their mark. "How dare you—"

"Enough!" Gideon boomed.

We both flinched, but I turned first, feeling Lucas' hot stare on my profile.

My heart sank to my toes when I spotted Jonathan with his Bluetooth in place and trusty iPad in hand, his mouth agape.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

I heard Lucas' deep inhale as he stepped away from me and faced Gideon. My thoughts spun back over the last thirty seconds that felt like an hour. My blood was still buzzing, and I felt flushed from the neck up. *Dial it down and breathe . . . it's just Jonathan. It's not that bad.*

"Wait, that's the—" Jonathan began. "Holy crap, I didn't recognize you, Detective."

All the fucks.

Gideon closed his eyes as if counting backwards. "His identity is not to leave this room, Jonathan. Do we understand each other?"

Jonathan's eyebrows lifted as he took us all in, his mind appearing to piece together the puzzle and absorb the seriousness of the situation. "Oh. Uh, sure. I just came to talk to Miss Vaughn about some specs for next month. She wanted to meet here, but—I can come back . . ."

“Shit, I forgot,” Charli muttered, swiping under her eyes.

I watched the gears turn in Gideon’s brain. “No. It’s fine. We’ve just had an urgent issue come up at the club. Actually, if there’s any media blowback, you can help with that.”

“Yes, sir. I’m happy to help,” he said, his brows dipping in confusion.

Gideon nodded, his eyes locking with Lucas.

It was back to business, but all I could think about was that my friend was dead and then, as Lucas turned his gaze toward me . . . so was my heart.



IT FELT LIKE hours, rather than the minutes that passed before most of the men disbanded. Lucas and Gideon headed to Cameo separately. JD texted and then called Jarod, who wasn’t answering, but then neither was Sophia, so everyone silently did that math.

Beth and I sat on either side of Charli, half-forgotten coffee cups in our hands as we each stewed in our own thoughts.

Even Jonathan was more somber than usual after we filled him in. He hadn’t known Amy—hers was the position that he filled—but I guessed it was all getting to him, too. He scrolled to something on his phone, glancing over at us. “You three should go do something together today,” Jonathan said quietly. “Something to get your minds off this, but more than that, celebrate being alive and being together.”

It wasn’t a half-bad idea, and I for one needed to soak my brain in something potent after being schooled and cooled by the detective, finding out another friend was slaughtered and stuffed in a cabinet, and realizing that the man I was fucking and falling for was indirectly related to my father’s death. All before eight a.m.

It had kind of been a day already.

“I don’t know,” Charli said. “I feel like I should be at Cameo. The staff needs to see me there with them.”

“Which is why we’re closing today,” I said, looking pointedly at Jonathan. “No one needs to be there.”

“Done,” he said.

“Jonathan,” Charli said.

“Done,” he repeated, lifting a brow at her.

“Fine,” she said, rubbing at her eyes and her belly at the same time. “These two are killing my back today anyway. I don’t have arguing power.”

“There’s a day spa on Littlefield,” Beth said. “We can grab some burgers and milkshakes from Frank’s later and have an early picnic lunch. Just us. And then go to the spa.”

My heart seized up at the mention of Frank’s burgers, my mind rolling back to the Grand Canyon and the best night of my entire life. A night that was a complete and utter sham.

“Sure thing,” I managed.

“I’ll make it happen,” Jonathan said. “I know the spa you’re talking about. I have to go run some errands, and I’ll call them on the way. You ladies relax, and I’ll be back later—and I’ll even drive you all myself. How’s that?”

He left, and both women stared me down.

I sighed. “What?”

“What the hell was that with the detective?” Charli asked.

I closed my eyes. “Really? Right now?”

“Yes, right now,” she said. “People are dying, Vi.” Her blue eyes filled again. “Life is short. Confide in your friends.”

I had to blink fast to stem my own emotion. “Damn it, that’s not fair.”

“No shit,” Beth said, blinking up at the ceiling.

“Well, I’m pregnant, so if I’m crying, everybody’s fucking crying,” Charli added.

“Fine,” I said, swiping under my eyes. “We—I—I got involved.”

Charli’s reddened eyes widened. “Like . . .”

“Yeah, like that,” I said, the pain searing through my chest like a fire poker.

“In—love?” Beth asked, looking like she might need to duck.

“You kissed him,” Charli declared.

“I kissed him,” I echoed. “I everything’d with him. I talked, I felt, I—” My lips trembled and the waterworks began again as my throat wanted to close on the word. “I trusted him. I actually fucking trusted him, and I let myself *feel*, Charli.” The walls I’d been holding up with paperclips all morning started to crumble as the pressure pushed on my heart from all sides, and a sob escaped my chest.

“Sweet girl,” Charli said, rubbing my back. “Have I taught you nothing?”

“I know,” I sniffed. “I even canceled clients.”

“I noticed that,” Charli said. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“The only one I kept was Mr. Eisinger, because, well . . .”

“Oh,” Charli said. “Yeah.”

“What?” Beth said. “What about Mr. Eisinger?”

“He’s like seventy-five and can’t get it up anymore,” I said. “But he’s richer than God and just wants the company of pretty women. Pretty, naked women are even better.”

“Oh, wow,” Beth said, chuckling. “So, you just sit there with him?”

“Well, no,” I said, smirking through my tears. “I get myself off for him.” She gave me a look that actually made me laugh.

“And, yes, I get paid for that.”

“If they were only all that easy,” Charli said.

“So, anyway,” I continued. “That one was fine, but anything else—shit, Charli, I always said that I’d never be able to have this job and a real relationship. And I was actually starting to believe that maybe . . .”

“Maybe you could quit and—”

“Be normal,” I breathed.

“What. Happened?” Beth asked.

I swallowed hard. “His family are the New Orleans Broussards that pushed us out of our home when I was a teenager. That made us homeless. That caused my father to—”

“Oh, my God,” Charli said, gripping my hand. Beth grabbed my other one. “What the—did he—how did that come out?”

“His sister came over, and I overheard,” I said, taking in long breaths to cool my blood. “He—I don’t know if he was ever going to tell me. Or if any of it was real, or if he was just trying to—I don’t know, buy my forgiveness? Be with me out of guilt?” I pulled my hands back and covered my face. “I gave him something that I give *no one*, and it was all a fucking lie.”

“Motherfucker,” Charli seethed.

“Motherfucking ass wipe,” Beth added.

“We have men that can make him disappear,” Charli said to Beth, who nodded. That would have been humorous if it wasn’t so true.

This was what girlfriends were for. They had my back.

Beth looked me over like she was taking inventory. “Is that his shirt?”

I glanced down. “God, yes.”

“Oh, hell no,” Beth said.

“Get that shit off,” Charli said, pushing to her feet. “I’ll get you a shirt. And we’ll fix you up so you go to our spa day feeling good.”

“For Amy,” I said, hugging her.

“For Amy,” she whispered.

Beth hugged us both. “I didn’t know Amy, but I want in on this.”

I laughed and pulled her in. “Okay, I need a shirt or you girls are about to see more than you want to see.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Lucas

EVERYTHING HAD TURNED into an absolute goddamned clusterfuck.

Violet walked away from me, and now the case had blown up in my face. Or at least that was how it seemed. I wanted to blame myself somehow, but even I knew I couldn't have seen this curveball coming.

Violet had asked me to look into her friend, Amy, but I hadn't yet. I don't think anyone thought she was dead, but I should have. I should've been ten steps ahead of this, the way I usually was.

Usually had left the picture the second she entered it.

My mind was spinning with possibilities, yet I couldn't concentrate on any one of them because all I wanted was for Violet to fucking listen to me. My ice queen was back and in full force, however, and I couldn't say that I blamed her. I'd hidden something monumentally huge from her, something I knew would hurt her, and the moment she let me into her body—hell, the moment she kissed me—I knew I was on borrowed time.

But how the hell did you tell the woman you loved that your family was responsible for her family's demise?

Because that was the God's honest truth.

All of it.

I loved her.

And my family had destroyed her.

The question was, which of those truths would ultimately be the most important to her?

The second she'd left my house that morning, I'd checked the first two phone messages and then shooed my sister out the door with half-assed promises before hauling ass to Kane's house. Everyone was scrambling, trying to come up with a plan. Everyone was emotional. I'd only been there maybe five minutes when Violet got there, and—God, what a shitshow.

I'd never acted so unprofessional on the job in my life. Ever. And that was the problem. This was the job, and I'd gone so far over the line I couldn't even see the fucking thing anymore.

I felt like a fucking idiot when I realized that Charli's assistant, Jonathan, had shown up unannounced and overheard us. Overheard *case details*, no less. Thanks to Gideon's glower and unspoken threats of bodily harm, he promised to keep things on the downlow, but something about his demeanor seemed off. Maybe Kane frightened him. Maybe we'd truly shocked him. Maybe he was nervous for Charli and the girls, or maybe he was just like the rest of us, vibrating with the need to do *something*.

My recently comatose sixth sense was triggered now, however, and I had a gut sense that whoever was doing this was close enough to know the score. That we had Amy's body now. Possibly the first kill, sloppy, maybe even emotional. Before he learned to be careful and get rid of the evidence.

If that was the case, my gut was screaming at me that he would do one of three things now that we were closing in: Go into hiding until he felt this had blown over, move on to a new victim pool and leave Cameo in his dust, or become desperate to get to his endgame right where he'd started. I had a feeling it would be the latter, and in that case, things would most likely get even more violent and bloody as he decompensated and spun out of control.

Back in my makeshift office at Cameo, I looked at my notes regarding Jarod. JD had texted him repeatedly with no response, and I wanted to be suspicious, but he was looking less and less likely to be the Lady Killer. Especially since after a bit more digging into his juvie case, I'd found out he'd only been convicted because he'd been present during the events and hadn't been an active participant. Guilty by association. Bad, yes, but not as damning as I'd originally thought.

Also, at the moment, Gideon's sister, Sophia, was nonresponsive as well. While technically that could add up to something, I just wasn't feeling it. There was also something else nagging at me, but I couldn't nail it down.

I pulled up the photo of the bracelet found with Amy's body. That partial print—that *mistake* could help me solve this case.

If I could fucking concentrate.

I raked a hand through my hair with a growl.

I couldn't let anyone else get hurt because I had my head up my ass over a woman.

Not just any woman, my mind screamed, but I shut that shit down. It didn't matter. She hated me now, and for good reason. I'd told her I was done, and I needed to believe that, too. The best I could hope for was to solve this case and keep her safe, then walk away for good.

I paced. Poured myself a drink. Checked my phone—nothing.

“Fuck!” I threw it down on the desk, took another gulp of Red Bull, and kept pacing, my eyes glued to the other evidence photos on my desk, as if the pieces of this puzzle would finally come together.

After several minutes, I realized I'd done nothing but stare at the same picture, while what I was really doing was waiting for that phone to ring. I ran a hand down my face and idly realized I hadn't shaved that morning . . . remembered that just a few hours ago, I'd had my face buried between her sweet

thighs. More than that, I remembered the hours before that, the days before that, the weeks before *that*. The laughter and the conversations, the heat and the love . . .

I shut my eyes.

Yeah, you're done, alright.

“Fuck it.”

I stormed out of the office and slammed the door closed, throwing the rack back in place, not bothering with niceties. I was on a mission.

Security waved me through at the Kane property, and I found myself standing at the door without a plan. When Charli opened it, I knew from her expression that Violet had told her what happened.

“Is Violet still here?” I asked, knowing full well she wouldn't have left her friend.

“We're relaxing on the back deck,” she said. “Making phone calls and arrangements.”

I inhaled slowly and let it go, meeting her steely blue gaze. “I just want to talk to her for a minute,” I said. “Please.”

She rubbed her belly with one hand and her back with the other, giving me another dubious look. “I'll tell her,” she said, closing the door in my face.

I let my head drop with a silent curse.

When the door opened again after a few minutes, a different pair of blue eyes stared back at me. Eyes that had been haunting my sleep for weeks. Her hair was still twisted on top of her head, but she had changed out of my shirt into a bright-pink tank top. I knew that the odds were pretty high that mine was in ashes by now.

What hit me like a wrecking ball, however, was the pain in those eyes, and her puffy eyelids. She'd been crying, and from the way she glared at me, it wasn't just about her friend. I knew a million things must be weighing on her, and one of

them was me. I'd done this. I desperately wanted to hold her, comfort her, but I knew my Violet. She would sooner swallow her tongue than accept anything from me right now.

So, I tucked my fists in my pockets and approached cautiously. "You okay?" I asked quietly, my voice raw.

You okay? That was my big opening?

Steel shot through her spine. "Really?"

"Are you?"

"I'm fine," she snapped, moving to close the door.

"Wait," I said, holding up a hand. "Please."

She crossed her arms and leveled me with a fiery look. "I'm taking care of my friends today, Detective. We have plenty of security around us. So, you don't need to worry about how I am anymore. I'm not your obligation."

I took a step in her direction, and she arched a brow. "You have never been an *obligation*, Violet."

"No?"

"Of course not."

"So, just a debt you needed to repay?"

My stomach seized. I knew where this was going, but I also knew I needed to give her a chance to say what she needed to say. "A debt?"

Her jaw tightened. "To ease your guilt. Your family's guilt. Whatever you want to call running us out of our home, making us homeless. Destitute. Sending my father into suicide, and me into the street to find *ways* to support my mentally ill mother."

"*Cher—*"

"Don't you fucking *cher* me!" She spat.

"Baby." I stepped closer, ignoring the venomous look she shot me. "Please. Just two minutes, and if after that you never want to talk to me again, I'll walk away, and you'll never hear from me again. I swear it."

She averted her gaze, not giving me the dignity of looking me in the eye, but not telling me to go to hell either. I took that as all the go ahead I needed.

I took one more step in her direction so I was within arm's reach of her, but I didn't touch her, even though it killed me to keep my hands to myself. I gazed down at the top of her head, imagining the sweet honeysuckle scent that had enveloped me just that morning.

On nothing more than a wing and a prayer and blind faith, I started talking as fast as I could spit out the words, not knowing how long I had. "Violet, I need you to know that I would give anything—*anything*—to undo the things my family has done. But it was my family—my dad, to be specific, and his company—not me." I balled my fists to keep from touching her. "Surely, you know that deep down. I wasn't much older than you were. I was at college when I heard about that scandal. Hell, we had one of our own. My sister OD'd and went down a fucking rabbit hole. In and out of rehab. My parents disowned her after that, so if you think they'd ever give a rat's ass about anyone else's family, that should tell you something."

Her mouth opened to retort, but I pushed onward. "I'm so fucking sorry I didn't tell you when I realized who you were," I said. "That you had to find out like you did, but damn it . . . how was I supposed to tell you something like that?"

Her eyes shot up to mine then. And even though her silence was painful, brutal even, her next words annihilated a piece of my soul.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Violet

“I. TRUSTED. YOU.” The words fell from my mouth with brutal honesty, halting his, and I absolutely refused to acknowledge the immediate regret that filled his amber eyes. “I don’t trust anyone, but I trusted you because you asked me to. I gave you that. I gave you my belief, my trust, my body, my—” I wouldn’t tell him I gave him my heart. He didn’t deserve to know that. I blinked away to pull my shit together before lifting my chin to meet his gaze dead-on. *Breathe*. “I gave you *everything*. And you showed me exactly why I swore never to do that. Why I never will again.”

“*Violet—*”

“Stop calling me that,” I bit out, the last of my resolve teetering. “I’ve asked you a million times, and that’s one more thing you refuse to respect. I guess you’re above that, too.”

His eyes narrowed.

Good. Get mad. Anything would be easier than the intensity burning off him ever since I came to the door.

“You have my card, *Detective*,” I said, close enough to see his right eye twitch. It didn’t make me feel as empowered as I thought it might. It just made my stomach hurt. “You’re either my fake client while you’re here, or you’re a detective working on this case.”

“Don’t do this,” he growled, inching closer.

“Neither of which gives you free reign with my name,” I continued, ignoring the scent of him swirling around me. The same smell I’d been wrapped up in last night. “Call me Vi, or don’t call me anything at all. But right now, I have to go, so if you don’t mind . . .”

I spun away and reached for the door, the sudden need to get away from his aura overtaking me.

But he stayed on me, his heat still in my proximity. “Where are you going?” He grabbed my arm and turned me back. “You’re not going alone, are you?”

I shook him off. “Of course not. Jonathan is taking me, Charli, and Beth to a spa thing, but that isn’t your concern anymore,” I said, averting my eyes. “Nothing I do is your business. Nothing you say—”

“Nothing I say?” He bit out with a fierce growl. “How about *I love you*?”

I froze as those words landed on me, warm and cold, soft and hard, pulling and pushing all at the same time. Stealing the air from my lungs.

No.

Slowly, I let my eyes trail up the planes of his face until we were gaze to gaze, mine filled with tears.

“How dare you say that to me,” I breathed, my voice low and stupidly emotional.

“Why? It’s the truth.”

I barked out a laugh as the tears spilled down my cheeks. “*Now* you want to be truthful?” I shook my head and batted his hand away as he tried to wipe the tears from my face. “How convenient. It doesn’t work that way. You don’t get to pull the sentiment out like an ace to play when you don’t have anything else.”

“An ace?” he said, his eyes flashing again. “You think my words are worth less because I’m saying them to you in the middle of your big exit?” He stepped into my space again, so

close I could kiss him if I wanted to. Or stab him. That was definitely an option.

“Hell, yes.”

“Fuck, no,” he said at the same time. “*You’re* walking away from *me*. Running from everything we’ve created, so I’m grabbing the only fucking chance I have. I’m in love with you, Violet Reed. I didn’t plan it. I sure as hell didn’t want it. It just happened. But please do me one small favor and don’t undermine my integrity by dismissing my feelings.” He tipped up my chin and forced me to look into his eyes. “Look at me, *cher*.”

I tried not to, to shut my eyes tight or glaze over . . . anything but look into those depths that showed so much that it physically hurt.

“You know me. I know you do. I kept some things from you for too long, and that’s on me, but it doesn’t make this any less real.” He brushed his thumb over my lip. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “For not telling you sooner. For what he did. For not being able to undo it.”

“You can’t undo someone else’s evil.” The tears were suddenly choking me, and I pulled his hand from my face, backing a few inches out of his space. “But I can’t look at you now and not see my father hanging from a rope. So, there’s that.”

His eyes fell shut as he blew out a defeated breath.

“More than that,” I added, “how many times have you asked me to trust you—while you *lied* to me?”

“I know,” he said.

“You *know*?” I said incredulously. “And you still have the balls to do this? Trust is everything to me, Detective,” I said, my voice breaking. “*Everything*.”

“And I broke it,” he admitted. “I know, and I have to live with that. But know that I’ve spent the last decade separating

myself from everything my family stands for. I'm not them. I'm not him."

"Maybe not, but you're just as manipulative," I said, my voice hoarse. "All this *creating* we did? *You* did that with full knowledge of who I was. I didn't have that." I poked a finger at his chest. "You had a choice, and you kept it from me. When were you planning to let me in on your little secret? When you brought me home for Christmas?"

He dropped his head as regret raced across his features.

"You didn't give me that same right, Lucas," I said. "*You* didn't trust *me*."

His eyes opened slowly at my use of his name. "You're right," he said finally. "I didn't." He shook his head. "I don't trust easily, either. And once I realized what I was feeling, I was in too deep. I was afraid I'd lose you."

My eyes fluttered along with my heartbeat, but I held his gaze, refusing to blink.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Stay strong. Don't fucking break.

He nodded finally. "I did anyway," he said. "And I'm sorrier than you'll ever know." Leaning forward, he brushed a kiss to my cheek and whispered, "But know that I see you, Violet Reed. I see you, and I am in love with every perfect part of you."

My body trembled as I desperately held on to whatever vestiges of pride I had left. Drawing in a shaky breath, I waited for him to back away before I dared to look up into those eyes again.

"I'm nowhere near perfect," I whispered. "And you don't love me."

"Yes—"

I laid a hand on his chest and dropped my gaze to focus there instead of the soft depths that were hell-bent on taking me down.

“I’m sorry about your sister’s problems, Lucas. I really am,” I said. “But you don’t love me. You love the idea of me. Someone broken and beneath your caliber to fix and take care of so you can make things right. Someone like your sister.” I swallowed. “Well, I may be damaged and flawed and tarnished, but I’m not broken, and I don’t need fixing.”

For once, he didn’t move forward as I backed into the foyer and put my hand on the door. Something deep inside of me mourned that realization.

“I’ve never seen you as broken, Violet,” he said, his voice low and pained.

I gripped the door like it was the only tangible thing in my universe. The only thing keeping me sane and rooted to the ground beneath me.

“Goodbye, Detective,” I said, shutting the door between us with a click.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Lucas

VIOLET WAS JUST on the other side of the door from me, but she might as well have been half a world away. I stared at the thick slab of wood for several long moments before I spun away and stormed to the Land Rover, my mind spinning. I'd just laid my heart bare to her, told her every ounce of truth I had, and she'd shut me down like it was worth nothing. Nothing.

You don't love me. You love the idea of me.

I. Trusted. You.

I wanted to call bullshit on it. On all of it. But I couldn't. I'd betrayed her trust. I knew I was guilty, but—

But what?

What was I going to do? When *was* I planning to tell her the truth? Did I secretly hope I'd never have to? That maybe, just maybe, she'd never find out, that this case would close, and I could somehow get her away from Cameo and into my life on a permanent basis without divulging that sordid little detail? The problem with that was it wasn't a little detail to her. It was the one thing that defined her. The fork in her life's road that made her who she is.

That made her into the woman I loved.

My family had done that to her.

What a mindfuck.

I revved the engine, headed toward Cameo, then activated the Bluetooth to face what I'd put off for too long.

My dad answered on the third ring. "Broussard here."

"Hey, Dad."

"Lucas?"

"Yeah."

"Well, hey, son. How are you?"

"Good. Working a big case." I cleared my throat and sped up. "So, listen, I need to ask you about something."

Papers shuffled in the background, and he took a moment to respond, clearly distracted. "Uh . . . sure. What is it?"

"Do you remember several years ago when the company took over an apartment complex in the Bywater neighborhood?" I asked. "There were problems with the tenants. One family in particular. The Reeds."

"Okay . . ." He sounded far away. Unfocused.

"Dad!"

"What?"

"The *Reeds*?" I ground out. "Charles Reed. The name ring a bell?"

"No, can't say that it does, son. He an associate?"

"Jesus, Dad. It made national news when the man hung himself after your company forced him and his family out on the streets. *Now* do you remember?"

The line went quiet. "Vaguely."

"Vaguely," I deadpanned, suddenly feeling ill.

"What is this all about, Lucas? Can you make it quick? I only have a few minutes before I'm due in a meeting with your brothers and our accountant about a big investment and possible acquisition."

Rage began to boil so thick and hot in my gut, it threatened to choke me and spill over the line, but I reined it in. For now. “Sure, Dad.” I clenched the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turned white. “Let me remind you about Charles Reed. He was a good man with a wife and a daughter. And because Broussard Land Development just had to have that fucking piece of property for a fucking strip mall, you forced them and several other families out for next to nothing. He lost everything and never recovered. In the end, he lost his hope, and he killed himself, leaving a teenage girl behind to live in a car with his mentally unstable wife.” I barked out a sarcastic laugh. “And for what? Nothing, Dad. Because you sold off that goddamn strip mall for pennies on the dollar a few years later when it tanked as an investment.”

He huffed on the other end of the line. “That’s business, Lucas. I’m not sure why—”

“I’ll tell you why!” I roared. “Because your business ruins lives just so you can get rich. And one of those lives? Charles Reed’s daughter? I just so happen to be in love with her.”

The words I hadn’t meant to say sat between us like an uncrossable ocean of ice.

Finally, he inhaled a deep breath. “Lucas . . .”

“No.” I stopped him. There were no words he could say to fix this, I realized then. I had no idea why I’d even called. Did I think he’d change? Apologize? My father would always be my father, and I knew that. Maybe I just needed to get the words off my chest and out of my heart for my own peace of mind. “Don’t.”

“It’s business,” he repeated, not a trace of remorse in his voice.

“Yeah, Dad. I know. My question is, when do you stop seeing numbers and start seeing people?”

I hung up without saying goodbye, knowing I might never speak to him again, but also knowing I’d have to be okay with

that because my job, my life, was all about saving people, not hurting them.

I pulled up to Cameo more focused than ever before. I sidelined my issues with Violet for now to focus on the case. Maybe once we caught the killer and things cooled off, she'd forgive me, and we could talk things out. If not, I'd have to accept that I'd fucked things up beyond repair and try to find some semblance of a life without her.

Either way, I had a job to do.

I walked into Cameo to find the place eerily quiet and lit up. No music. The mood lighting that normally had the place feeling like sex on steroids was gone and the houselights were on, giving it a very normal, sterile feel. No dancers. No bartenders. No extraneous staff. Just the minimum Kane security and the PD forensics still working the latest crime scene.

On instinct, I made my way upstairs to Ms. Vaughn's office, where I found Gideon pacing, texting like a madman. JD sat on the leather sofa, broody as always.

I tipped my head in greeting. "What's up?"

Gideon glanced up. "My sister won't answer my messages. Neither will Jarod."

I glanced to JD. "Nothing?"

He shook his head.

"He's got Chris out looking for them now," Gideon said as he looked down when his phone pinged, but his face fell when it was clearly not what he was looking for. "I'm going to fucking kill him when I find him. He knows better than to not check in. So does she, for that matter."

I yanked out my phone. "I can get an APB out on his vehicle."

"Yeah, thanks."

I took care of that, then glanced back up. “You know they’re . . .”

Gideon’s sharp gaze darted back up to mine. We stared each other down for several seconds before his expression softened just a fraction. “I’m not as blind as everyone thinks I am, Detective. Of course, I know Sophia is fucking her security. She’s feisty and unpredictable, but that does not negate the fact that he has explicit instructions to always take my calls and to check in regularly. Particularly while we have a murderer on the loose and he’s in charge of her wellbeing.”

“Duly noted. We’ll find them.”

He nodded and rolled his head to loosen his neck muscles. “Fuck, I’m tired.” He looked at me again. “Tell me you got something on those fingerprints. Hell, tell me you’ve got *anything*.”

The cop versus mobster issue stabbed at my conscious, but I shoved it in a box in the spirit of being on the same team. For now. “They’re still working on the fingerprint.” His expression dropped in disappointment. “But something else has been nagging at me.”

“What’s that?”

“The DNA.”

“What about it?”

“I’m not sure. Something’s off. I’ve looked and looked at it. Figured it must be lab error or a contaminated sample since Charli works here; of course her DNA would be saturated all over the place, right?”

“Right.” But the hesitation in his voice gave him away. He could feel it was off, too.

“Still. That many anomalies?”

“What’re you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I need to lay out the evidence one more time and look at it again. From scratch.”

“Right.” He raked a hand through his hair, desperation oozing from his pores.

Something about that got to me. I understood him in that moment. I found myself going against everything in police protocol and opening my mouth. “Care to give me a hand? Fresh eyes might be helpful.”

His dark gaze shot up to mine gratefully. “Let’s catch this bastard, Detective.”



WE GRABBED SOME leftover sandwiches from the fridge in Sizzle and a couple of cold drinks then went back to my hidden office. We rolled up our sleeves, ate, and poured over the evidence from top to bottom. All of it. No matter how small.

We re-enacted potential scenarios of murders based on the body positions.

Gideon re-examined the security footage while I reread witness statements.

“This is weird,” he said about an hour in.

“What?”

He pointed at the screen. “This. The fuzz on the screen.” He glanced over. “It’s like it’s been erased and re-recorded. Or —”

We looked at each other. “It’s playing on a loop.”

We rewound it and played it again. Sure enough, the tiny, telltale fuzz was there. Miniscule but noticeable if you were looking for it. How had we missed it before? Only someone good with tech could’ve pulled this off. More importantly, someone with *access* to the tech and security in the first place could’ve doctored the footage.

I made a note to have the IT department begin a forensic dive into that. I glanced up and found Gideon studying the pile of crime scene photos.

“What does your gut tell you?” I asked.

He crossed his arms over his chest and was quiet for a moment. “That it’s personal.”

“I think so, too.” This never felt like just some random murderer who got off on killing women. The wounds, the carvings, the body placements—they weren’t crazy slashings. Each one was meticulous and almost intimate. Everything about each of these murders felt personal and closely tied to Cameo somehow. “But how? Why?”

He glanced over. “That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? I mean, we both know I have more than one potential enemy who might like to see me dead. But this doesn’t feel like it’s about me.”

I shook my head. “No. Men of your . . . *caliber* . . . don’t typically do their business this publicly.”

“No. And you said another key word there. *Men*.” His eyes hardened. “I might do some things men of your *caliber* frown upon, but I don’t brutalize women. Ever.”

I nodded. I’d seen enough to know that was a fact. “Then that brings us to Ms. Vaughn.”

“It does. But as far as I know, she has no enemies and no family left alive that she’s aware of.”

“Her father?”

“She never knew him, and as far as she was told, he never knew of her either. Her grandmother had a sister that she never met, and she has no idea if she’s still alive, but even if so, she’d be too old to have anything to do with this—” His phone pinged with another text. He glanced at the screen and pecked out a terse reply before glancing back at me. “JD found Jarod and Sophia. They’re fine.”

I could only imagine what he told JD and what he had planned for Jarod, but I didn’t have time to worry about that now. “Good.” I looked back at the evidence, then something in the photos caught my eye.

The baby shower pictures.

Brutal, yes.

Disturbing, most definitely.

I pulled one out of a poor mutilated kitten and studied it closer. It screamed personal in a way that even the murders hadn't.

Family.

This was most definitely about family.

The DNA had to be right. It had to be.

I shuffled through the stacks on my desk and found the reports, examining each of them, one by one again. Every victim, every blood sample, every member of Kane Enterprises, every employee of Cameo . . .

Nothing matched. Nothing even close.

What was missing?

“What're you thinking?” Gideon asked, his voice low.

“I'm not sure . . .” I shuffled the papers again. “Something . . .” I glanced up. “Is this all of them? Is everyone here? We didn't miss anyone?”

“Let's check.” He yanked up the exhaustive list we'd put together when we started this case of every person who had access to Cameo. Once I dropped the bomb about the secret DNA collections, anyone left had been ordered to give a sample. Everyone should've been accounted for, and therefore, excluded as suspects.

One by one, we cross-checked each and every DNA sample against the names on that list. Everyone was crossed off.

Except for one.

So close, he was right under our noses with access to everything. The women. The case. The tech and security.

We glanced at each other as realization thundered through the small room like a sonic boom, and the papers fluttered to the floor.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he ground out, his voice hard and raw with pure rage.

I said nothing. There was no point. I simply holstered my weapon and grabbed my badge out of the drawer as a calm resolve poured over me.

Finally.

Fucking *finally*.

Game on, motherfucker.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Violet

“**H**AVE A DRINK!” Jonathan said, pulling a small cooler from the front passenger floorboard onto the seat next to him.

I rolled my head on my shoulders, feeling antsy. It wasn't just about Amy. It wasn't just seeing the bloody bracelet I'd given her. It wasn't even the detective and his lies, or his sudden declaration of—of *that*.

Something was just—I couldn't place it—incomplete, maybe? Like, why were we running off to a day spa just hours after finding out about our dead friend? We'd gotten burgers and tried to have a lunch in Amy's honor, but none of us were really feeling it. For the first time ever, I'd left a Frank's burger mostly uneaten. It was a day for curling up and crying and sharing memories. Not getting massages and pedicures. This was ridiculous and silly and leaving an incredibly sour taste in my mouth.

As Jonathan drove, the three of us were side by side in the back seat of Charli's SUV, the newly replaced baby car seats that Gideon installed now relegated to the trunk area on top of some big blankets. Something about that poked at my heart, like once again they were afterthoughts, and everything in me just wanted to pull over and secure them back in and take an Uber home.

Charli eyed the drinks in the cooler from her spot sandwiched between Beth and I, sliding her eyes shut as she rubbed her belly. “I so wish I could.”

“It’s mama-safe.” He lifted the lid and pulled out fruit-infused water contained in an adorable mason jar. “Made these myself at the Oral Treats bar. Just water for you,” he said, handing it over his shoulder and grabbing the next one. “These two have a bit more bite.”

It could bite and nibble and eat me alive as far as I cared. Knock me out. Kick me into the next state. In fact, that wasn’t a half-bad thought—leaving Vegas behind. I had money saved. Not as much as I’d prefer, but enough to start over somewhere far away with a small place and a credible job where no one knew me, wanted to kill me, or pay me for a fuck.

No detectives to mess with my head.

Why did that sound worse rather than better?

“It smells funny in here,” I said, wrinkling my nose at a sharp odor. “What have you been eating in here, Charli?”

“Seriously?” she asked, sipping her water. “Like I’m ever in here alone, and Gideon’s the health police lately, making sure I eat nothing fun.”

“Oh, this is good,” Beth moaned, tasting hers, and then gulping half of it down.

“I have a couple of talents,” Jonathan said with a wink in the rearview mirror. “One of them being taking care of my favorite girls. Why don’t you give me your necklaces, and I’ll hang on to them while you’re getting pampered?”

“It’s in my purse,” I said, taking a healthy swallow. Beth was right, this stuff was legit. “It’s fine.”

“Mine, too,” Beth said.

Charli pulled hers off immediately and tossed it over the seat, unscrewing her lid and gulping back her water. “Take it. I love the idea of them, but I hate chokers.”

“Should make them into pendants,” Beth said, eyeing Charli sideways as she ran both palms along her hips. “Are you okay? Maybe we should just take you home. Or bring you to—”

“Exactly,” I said, jumping on the idea. “This isn’t the time for this. Jonathan, this was sweet of you, but Charli’s not up for this and—wait, wasn’t that the road?” I craned my neck as we took the green light right through where we should have turned left.

“You all need to relax,” Jonathan said, breezing through the intersection. “Sit back and enjoy your drinks. Let me take care of you.”

“Charli’s not—” Beth began, her voice getting softer.

“Miss Vaughn will feel just fine in a few minutes,” he said, smiling at me in the mirror as he drove through yet another intersection, then putting on the blinker to get on the highway.

The goosebumps came back, stronger this time, accompanied by the sound of my heartbeat skipping in my ears and picking up speed. My spidey sense was correct. Something was wrong. I felt it in my blood, my bones, my pores. And not just because things were beginning to tilt sideways.

It was his eyes. They didn’t match his smile. I’d always thought they were pretty. Too pretty for a guy. But not now. Now, they were something . . . else.

“I’m gonna take a nap,” Charli said next to me, her voice soft and whispery, like she was telling me a secret.

“No!” I yelled. Or tried to. All that came out was a weird little squeak. “St—stay—awake.”

“Sleepy,” she said, letting her head slide to rest on Beth’s, which was already on Charli’s shoulder, out cold.

Jump over the seat! Overtake him! My brain was screaming solutions, but my body was limp. My arms felt like gym weights.

“Awake!” I breathed, repeating the word, my voice sounding like it belonged to someone else. “Awake.” I forced my heavy eyelids open to meet his again and twisted my lips to form speech. One finger lifted in my lap. “You.”

He winked at me again, and I caught the sight of desert zipping past as my head bobbed and rested against the window, and my eyelids gave up the fight.

“Nighty-night, Vi.”



SOMETHING EVIL TRIED to slam its way out of my skull. Waves of pain, followed by a nauseating rush of something vile, jolted me upward toward the light streaming through the window. The move was too fast, yanking me back by whatever held me down, and the nausea revolted, bucking my meager stomach contents out and onto my chest.

The acid burned my skin, making my eyes burn and tear up more as I choked and gagged and struggled to draw clean air into my lungs.

But the air wasn't clean. It was rancid. And hot. I was on my back. Why couldn't I move? Why couldn't I see? The light from the window was so blindingly bright and spinning, but everything else was dark. Dim. A blackish, muddy gray, tinted in a mucky haze that matched the smell. Something like grease and mold and sour mud, mixed with rust. And vomit. With the brilliant light in my eyes, it was as if heaven and hell had joined forces.

I tried to wipe my face, but my hands were . . . bound. It only took another couple of seconds for that realization to shoot adrenaline straight to my pounding brain.

My whole body stiffened, pulling upward, my skin burning again and registering every sensation with hyperawareness. I knew all about kink, and this wasn't it. I knew what *tied up* felt like. This was hard, sharp, cutting. Zip ties. My wrists and ankles, both spread wide. Too wide for a bed—a table, maybe —

“Jesus, you stink,” came a voice to my left, just before a harsh spray of water hit me square in the face.

Screaming, I turned away, choking on the burn in my nose and throat. The icy cold was like fire on my skin. On my

breasts. My belly. My—

Jesus.

I was fucking *naked*.

My mind spun, logic and memory working their way back in, images of brutally slaughtered, naked women flashed across my foggy mind. Horrible deaths made very public. Amy. Jade. Stormy and Cherry.

The fucking Lady Killer.

Eyes in the mirror.

Oh my God, it's Jonathan.

My breathing got faster, shallow, as the cold water blasted my bare skin, washing the vomit from me. Making me shake with cold and vulnerability. With terror that I never thought I'd be weak enough to feel.

He won. He got me. I gasped as clarity slammed into me.

He got *us*.

“Charli!” I screamed, my voice barely more than a hoarse croak. “Beth!”

An eerily demented laugh filled my left ear. Entirely too close. The deluge of water left me and landed somewhere to my right, filling the room with new shrieks that both relieved and horrified me.

They were alive. Or someone was.

But they were waking up to live this nightmare, too.

The babies.

“Charli!” I yelled.

“Vi?” came her panicked cry. “Vi! Where are you? What’s—what the—where’s Jon—oh, *fuck!*” she wailed.

“What’s happening?” I yelled, yanking at my restraints. “What did you do to her, you sick fuck?” I screamed in every direction.

“I haven’t touched the golden girl—yet,” he said, followed by the sound of a pull chain.

Lights flickered on, filling the room with odd, orange light from multiple bare bulbs. I swiveled my head back and forth as far as I could move. I couldn’t see Jonathan, but I caught sight of bare legs to my right. I twisted slightly to see Charli. Naked as well, her arms chained over her head, holding her up. Her swollen belly pulled tightly into a ball as she writhed in agony against her restraints.

When the worst of the pain passed, dull, glazed eyes scanned the room, her own body, then met mine, wide and freaked as the reality set in. Those eyes spoke a million terrors for her children alone.

“What the fuck?” she choked, attempting to gain better footing.

That’s when I saw it. The trickle of blood dripping down her thighs.

“Oh, my God, you’re in labor,” I cried.

“And you’re bleeding.”

I looked down at my bare body, shaking violently like I was watching it from afar. Hot tears filled my eyes as I saw the reason for the burning sensation. Curly lines had been carved into my flesh. Not deep, just enough to leave their bloody marks. To sting. My breasts, down my belly, nearly down to my clit.

“I’m fine,” I said weakly, shoving that fear back. I refused to give him that. I had to stay strong for her. “It’s Jonathan, Charli. He’s the—” Emotion overtook me for a moment as I thought of all that would be lost today. “You just breathe. Where’s—” I twisted around further. “Where’s Beth?”

“She’s—” The clink of chains filled the room as she tried to look around her. “Oh, my God, Beth!” Charli yelled, panic in her tone. “Beth!” Tears filled her voice as her body stiffened into another contraction, her back arching as the ball of babies made their wishes to exit known. Once her screams stopped,

she lifted her head to look at me. “She’s on the floor over there. It doesn’t look like she’s breathing.”

I dropped my head back and sobbed, praying. Something I hadn’t done in years. Whatever he’d drugged us with, it had only taken a few swallows to put us down. Beth had ingested nearly her whole jar, and she was half my size. And the babies—they were even smaller. None of them deserved this. They didn’t deserve to end this way.

“Where are we?” Charli cried, breathing hard.

“You’re in your boyfriend’s world,” Jonathan murmured from somewhere behind us. “I thought it had a cool irony to it, don’t you?”

“You motherfucker!” Charli yelled, pulling against her bonds like she wanted to personally rip his head off. “I trusted you with everything!”

Those words landed on me like another blast of cold water to the face. I’d said nearly the same thing to Lucas. How lame that all seemed now. He’d told me he loved me, and I’d walked away. Straight to this. Just because his *father* was an asshole.

“Yes, I know,” Jonathan said, running his fingers along a sledgehammer handle leaning against an open cabinet. “You were a saint. Saint Charli of the Vaughns on high.”

I followed the direction of his gaze to that cabinet. Gideon’s world? In seconds, my eyes registered it all like a checklist. High warehouse ceiling with exposed beams. Rolls of plastic. Bottles of cleaning supplies. Stacks of duct tape. Metal chairs hanging on a hook—the same hook holding the water hose—and an open cabinet of all kinds of tools.

“Fuck,” Charli breathed, probably landing on the same conclusion.

“It’s—”

“I think JD calls this his *office*,” Jonathan said, rounding Charli’s side and running a finger over her belly. She spat at

him, but he just wiped it off and kept walking toward me. “Where all his best work is done.” He stopped at my feet, leaning between my legs so I could watch him take me in. “Hello, beautiful.”

Nothing about this man was pretty anymore. His golden locks were plastered to his head with sweat from the stifling heat. His peach-fuzz-colored scruff just looked dirty, and his azure-blue eyes had become empty orbs of icy hideousness.

I was practiced at turning off the sexual context when a man was between my legs, but I’d never encountered pure evil looking back at me.

“Fuck you,” I seethed.

“Oh, it would be my pleasure,” he ground out, climbing up on the table to leer at me from below.

Don’t shake. Don’t fucking cry. Don’t give him that. Don’t give him you.

Shut. It. Fucking. Down.

It was like being a teenager again with my first john. Everything went numb. But he didn’t go there.

“You never even gave me a second look, princess,” he said, pulling a small knife from his pocket. My heart sped up. *No. Down.* The razor-sharp tip ran along the inside of my thigh, lightly piercing the tender skin as I clamped my teeth together so hard I thought they’d break. “Cherry didn’t either. Such poor choices.”

He studied my pussy like it was a science experiment. “Maybe I’ll cut this cunt wide open. Make it big and floppy so no man will want you again.” His evil eyes slid up my body, his erection bulging in his jeans. I wished I could slam my knee into it and crush his fucking nuts. “Or maybe I’ll mess up your pretty face. I’ll bet the detective wouldn’t want your mouth around his cock if your lips looked like hamburger meat.”

Charli bowed up in pain again, and Jonathan licked his lips at the sound.

“What the fuck, Jonathan!” I spat, repulsed at his nearness and gritting my teeth at the sharp new pain he added to my other thigh. “Why are you doing this? Get her some help, please!”

“Don’t you see?” he said, dipping his head to give my clit one brutal and insensitive flick with his tongue. I shut my eyes tight and bit my bottom lip so hard it drew blood. “God, you taste good,” he said under his breath. “Like fear.”

My eyes popped open to see a smirk slowly spreading on his face.

Hell. Fucking. No.

Rage coursed through me, covering everything else with a sheath of pure fire. He would not see fear in me. Not ever. Not even when he got around to slitting my throat.

“Don’t I see *what*?” I asked through my teeth, bringing him back to his original question.

“That it all has to stop with her,” he said.

“What does that even mean?” Charli screamed. “What are you talking about?”

“What matters the most to her,” Jonathan continued in his calm, creepy tone, looking into my eyes, “is family, ironically enough, and we’ll get to that. But you . . .” He narrowed his gaze.

“Fuck you, you twisted fucking prick,” I bit out. “I don’t care what you think of me.”

“What you’re most afraid of,” he said, ignoring my vitriol. “What would hurt you more, is seeing the people you love get hurt.”

“I will kill you somehow,” I said. “If you touch her, if you killed Beth—” My voice cracked, and I swallowed it back. *Show nothing*. “I’ll end you. If I’m dead, Lucas will. Gideon

most certainly will. JD will make sure it's excruciating. Probably in this same room."

"Such big, brave words for a little girl who loves her momma," he said. My blood ran cold. "I'm bored with Las Vegas. Maybe it's time for me to go visit New Orleans," he said, his eyes glinting with evil victory. "Pay that sweet lady a visit."

My throat closed as Charli bowed up in yet another primal wail.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Lucas

GIDEON AND I stormed out to the main lobby and found JD waiting like the silent, deadly ninja fucking enforcer that he was, materializing as per usual at his boss' text.

"The women?" Kane barked. JD shook his head, his wary gaze shooting to mine in question. "Fuck, JD," Gideon snapped. "We don't have time! Check their cameo necklaces."

JD yanked out his phone and pulled up an app. His eyes narrowed in puzzlement before darting back up. "Their GPS trackers are offline."

I reared back at hearing JD speak, but nobody seemed to care.

"Offline?" Gideon roared, snapping me back to the moment. "Holy hell." He spun in a circle, his hands on his head.

I'd never seen him like this . . . so frazzled. He was on the verge of losing it.

"Jonathan is there," JD reasoned, his voice quiet and gravelly. "He cleared the spa."

Gideon folded over, his palms to his knees like he might throw up. "Jesus."

JD's sharp gaze shot to mine, demanding I explain and fast.

I realized in that moment that all three of our women were in jeopardy. And that Violet was mine. Whether she agreed or not. She had hold of my heart until the day I died. Which very well might be today.

“It’s Jonathan,” I dropped the painfully jagged truth like a bloody bomb. No point in sugarcoating it. “He’s the Lady Killer.”

JD stared at me, murder on his face, as I quickly explained about the DNA, the personal evidence that pointed Jonathan’s way, and the fact that he was conveniently not answering Gideon’s calls either.

For the span of several heartbeats, JD was stone-still, his expression filling with a primal, animalistic rage that I’d only ever seen during the throes of war. I knew why he was utilized for his brute violence as a mob enforcer, but in that moment, I understood his focus. His fury was directed toward one man, and we were fighting this particular battle together. Slowly, he turned to his boss, everything in his body language barely holding on to reason.

Gideon stood and faced us both. “We find them, and we find them alive. There are no other options.” He swallowed and stiffened his spine. “He’s got the girls, but he also has my children.” His voice quavered just a fraction on that last word.

I heard him loud and clear. He was speaking as a mob boss, protecting the women of this establishment from a monster, but more than that, he was speaking as a man who loved his family fiercely. They were his life now, and his eyes told me what his words couldn’t—that he would have nothing—*be* nothing—without them. Failure was not an option.

JD clearly felt the same way.

As much as the revelation should scare me, I was right there with both of them. I hated that it skewed my focus, but I had to embrace it. Embrace every single thing that Violet had brought to my life.

I turned back to JD. “Who did you send with them?”

“Stone.”

“Can you get ahold of him? Or track him?”

He was already on his phone when I turned back to Gideon. “Do you remember the name of the spa?”

He closed his eyes as he tried to remember. “*Tre* something? Off Littlefield, she said. I’m not sure.”

Good enough. I did a Google search and found the only spa that fit that description and called in an anonymous disturbance call to 9-1-1 to get the uniforms en route.

Gideon leaned on the counter, his fingers curling into fists. “I can’t lose them. I fucking can’t.” He looked up and glanced around the room, unseeing. “You know I was willing to give all of this up for her. Everything. I still would.” He faced me. “I’m not the monster you think I am, Detective.”

“I never said you were a monster.”

The barest ghost of a smile whispered over his ravaged face. “You didn’t have to. It’s wired into your DNA. You’re a cop. I’m a Kane. You’re trained to take down men like me, who live in the shadows and the gray areas. I can accept that because I chose this life and the risks that come with it. They didn’t. I won’t accept any harm coming to them. Period.”

I hadn’t lied. I’d never thought of Gideon Kane as a monster, but I’d also never thought of him as much of a man. He was simply a gangster who dealt in illegal shit, who I, as a police officer, was obligated to despise. But I couldn’t despise him anymore. I understood him. Even respected him to a point. I’d save the rest for another day.

I nodded. “I swore an oath to protect and serve, so we’re in agreement here. And, for what it’s worth, I managed to fall for your fiancée’s pain-in-the-ass best friend, so I’m on board.” Our eyes met. “Let’s catch this son of a bitch and end this.”

He opened his mouth to reply just as JD rejoined us. “Stone isn’t answering my texts, and his phone is offline.”

Gideon snapped his mouth closed and glared.

I scrolled through my police scanner app to check on the call we'd placed to the spa. They hadn't found anything unusual there. In fact, it was closed for the day.

I glanced up. "They're not at the spa."

Gideon roared and spun to pace, his hands back in his hair as all hope that this could've been a misunderstanding and the necklace thing a mistake evaporated like smoke.

JD's jaw began to tick like he was about to explode.

I forced back my panic and focused.

There was no telling where Jonathan would've taken them. We knew next to nothing about him really. He was the perfect killer . . . he'd been right under our noses the whole time, so fucking helpful and appearing totally innocent.

Too innocent.

God, I couldn't believe how stupid I'd been, wrapped up in Violet and blinded to what was right in front of me the entire time.

We still had no clues as to how he was related to Ms. Vaughn or why he'd be killing women, but at this point, it didn't matter. He was the missing piece . . . he had access to literally everything. The video surveillance, the employees, and Charli. He was also the only employee who'd bailed on the DNA testing. How we'd missed that was a mystery. He'd probably made sure of that, too.

I spun to JD. "Any idea what vehicle they took?"

"They were supposed to take Stone's SUV." He scrolled on his phone as he spoke, most likely pulling up the GPS app on the Kane security vehicles. "It's still in the parking lot."

My mind ticked through possibilities. "And you have GPS trackers on all the cars, right?"

He nodded, already reading my train of thought as he glanced back down and pecked a few things on the screen.

“The only vehicle unaccounted for is . . .” He looked up sharply. “Miss Vaughn’s Escalade, sir.”

“Can you track it?” I demanded.

His eyes were stony. “He disabled the internal navigation system.” Gideon growled next to me, and I nearly had a coronary, but JD went on. “But the stupid bastard didn’t know I had backup GPS installed in all the vehicles in case of any computer malfunctions or tampering.”

“You did?” Gideon and I asked simultaneously, to which we simply received a sarcastic brow lift.

JD pecked a few more buttons on his phone and twisted it to our view.

Gideon and I studied the movement history of the Escalade. He had bypassed the spa, moving on quickly. The women probably realized something was off at that point. I clenched my jaw at that thought. Knowing Violet, she wouldn’t have taken it lying down.

I squinted at the screen where the tracker’s movement stopped. “Where the hell is that?”

It was the middle of nowhere, surrounded by desert.

Nothingness.

Clearly, he intended to take his time with them and leave his bloodiest masterpiece behind now that he had his ultimate prize in hand.

Gideon looked up, his dark gaze desolate. “He’s got them at an abandoned Kane Enterprises warehouse that we keep to use for . . .” His eyes shot to JD, meaning soaking the air between them, thick and heavy.

No words were needed. I got it loud and clear.

It was an interrogation site—a fancy description for a torture chamber. And the sickest fuck I’d ever seen had our women in its bowels.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Violet

MY MOTHER.

The thought of this demented fucking demon anywhere near my mom made my stomach clench. But he could do it. He could kill us all here right now and head to New Orleans to start his sick tryst all over again.

As my mind spun with those thoughts, I suddenly realized that the zip tie on my right wrist was looser than the other. Not enough to pull my hand out, but—maybe—

“They’ll find us,” Charli said, sucking in a breath between contractions. “Your stupid necklaces—”

“Are destroyed,” he interrupted with an evil grin. “They’ve been run over by a million cars by now.” He climbed off my table, and I was hit with both relief and terror as he strolled to Charli. “Face it, cousin, it’s just us here. Let’s have a little family time, shall we?”

Cousin? What cousin?

“Ohhhh,” Jonathan crooned, leaning his head over to study her like she was an animal at the zoo. “Looks like you’ve sprung a leak, mama. Your water must be breaking.”

A sob escaped my chest as I heard hers. “Jonathan, please! In the name of all that is holy, please find something decent inside you and call an ambulance! You can leave! No one will ever find you! Just get her to a—”

“No, no, no, you don’t understand, princess,” he said, his voice maintaining that eerie calm that he always had—that I now realized was psychopathic all along. “This is the end game.”

“What end game?”

“It’s over,” he said. “A little sooner than I’d hoped, granted, thanks to that stupid bitch finding your friend last night. But that’s my fault. I was sloppy then. I just have to speed things along now.” He ran a hand over Charli’s bulging belly, and she screamed a string of curses. “And my baby cousins coming early are just the ticket. It’s time that debts are paid.” He leaned in, lowered his voice to a sadistic pitch. “Maybe I can just do a quick C-section for you and put you out of your misery.”

It was like listening to a foreign language accompanied by my panicked heartbeat slamming in my ears.

“Don’t you fucking touch her!” I hissed.

Damn it, we were running out of time. He was bored with playing with us and about to do something crazy to entertain himself, I could feel it. No one would get to us in time, if they even knew to be looking at this point. They thought we were at a spa.

I thought of Voldemort finding the love of his life cut open, his dead children next to her. Of JD finding Beth. Of—of Lucas finding me. He’d be the one to work this scene. To find us like this. Beaten and bloody and mangled like all the others.

I closed my eyes and focused on the searing pain as I worked my now bloody knuckles methodically through the sharp plastic. Tried to make my hand smaller. Tried to keep moving through the excruciating burn as the tie sliced into my skin.

“What the fuck are you babbling about?” Charli yelled, her voice high-pitched and hoarse. “I don’t owe you shit, and my children aren’t your anything!”

“Beg to differ there, cuz,” he said, patting her leg. “Your Kane spawn would be my . . . third cousins? Something-something removed?” He flailed a hand. “I don’t know, it gets confusing with old Blue Eyes being baby daddy for both my mother and yours. That whole sister-cuz thing.”

“*What?*” she cried.

“That’s right, sweet pea,” he said, laughing as another contraction wracked Charli’s body and I used the cover of her scream to cry out myself as one knuckle was sliced to the bone. But it was almost free . . . “We have the same grandfather! You must have heard the same story growing up. About how my Gigi and her sister Camille wanted to start a burlesque business during Prohibition, and charmed him into helping? Charmed him so fully that he got them both pregnant—but Camille got the guy. And the business. She got everything.”

“She—” Charli stuttered, breathing heavy. “She what? Gram and your—*Gigi* was Georgia? She was her twin?”

“Keep up, sweetheart,” he said, tapping on her table. “We’re past that part. Your Gram may not have held on to that slippery snake, but she held on to everything else. She got Cameo. Gigi got nothing. You have a normal legacy and a mother who loved you—sort of, from what I’ve heard. I had a bitter grandmother and an even more bitter, drugged-out mother who left me with her. We lived in a leaky mobile home that smelled like ass and feet.”

It suddenly clicked. I remembered the conversation between Gideon and Lucas as they struggled with DNA that was a familial match to Charli but that didn’t seem to make any sense. Nobody would’ve known. How could they? But there was no time for that now. We had to focus on survival.

My hand slid out in a bloody mess, and it was all I could do to move slowly and not catch his attention. Because he’d made two fatal misjudgments. One was underestimating me. The second was leaving that knife of his lying between my

legs. I twisted my head back and lifted my hand slowly to show Charli, hoping she'd get the message.

Keep him talking.

“You’ve done all this—killed all these people—destroyed all these lives, because you had a crappy childhood?” she huffed between gasps. “Because you *what?* Want Cameo for yourself?”

I palmed the knife, flipping it in my slippery fingers. I knew it was sharp from personal experience. I knew it wouldn't take much. Across the room, maybe ten or twelve feet away, that cabinet offered anything else I needed. Hammers, knives, picks, pliers, drills . . . all the things he wanted to use on us. Further down was a table of guns. I didn't know if they were loaded or if I could even make it that far, but I could go old school with an electric drill.

“It's half mine by birthright,” he growled. “I'll prove it after you're dead, play the grieving, clueless cousin, and I'll have it all.”

“From your grave?” she said through her teeth. “Because you know they'll figure it out—*fuck, shit, oh Goddddd!*”

That was all I needed.

One swipe had my other arm free, and as I sat up, he spun. But not before I drove the blade into his side with a sickening rip.

He bucked and roared, giving me another half second to slice my feet free of their ties.

The second I scrambled from the table, however, my head was yanked sideways by my hair, the knife clattering to the floor.

“You think you can best me, bitch?” he snarled, pulling me to him with strength I would have never thought he had. “You forget who you're dealing with.”

“You forget where I grew up, *Goldilocks,*” I hissed, using the nickname he hated. “I've broken bigger men than you

before lunchtime.” It was babble, but it distracted him long enough for my superhuman knee jab to his manhood to hit its mark.

He screamed and gagged then backhanded me so fast, I didn't see it coming, hurtling me into the cabinet and sending various tools clanging to the cement floor. I sunk to the cold concrete with them, Charli's primal screams echoing in my ears as the room began to spin once again.

I felt him on me before my eyes could register the movement, my senses knocked a little wonky. My hand closed on the handle of something, and I swung with all I had, not caring what it was. A mallet slammed into his jaw in slow motion as if someone else was doing the swinging.

Blood spurted from his mouth along with his curses, but my ears rang louder. He yanked the mallet from my hand and slung it behind him, slamming his fist into my cheek on the return. He straddled me, his hands squeezing my throat as my hearing returned and time caught up.

“I'll have the last laugh, Vi,” he said, his lips curled into a sneer as he squeezed harder. “I'll fuck that pussy after you're dead. My cock will be the last thing your body knows.”

And he found it. My new greatest fear.

“No!” I heard Charli cry out.

I spat in his face, bucking underneath him as I clawed at his fingers. “You fucking coward,” I ground out, sucking in a gulp of precious air. There was only one chance. “You can't get it up for a live woman, you have to wait—”

“Shut the fuck up!” he roared, adjusting a little, giving me another tiny breath.

“Fuck me now if you're such a man!” I screamed, pulling at his hands to no avail. “I'll never feel your little needle dick, you puny little prick!”

“Fuck you!” he yelled, his face beet red.

“You can’t get it up now, can you, you fucking pussy?” I hissed, kicking him in the back with my knees. “I’m too alive!”

His thumbs pressed harder against my throat, cutting off the sound of my words. “I’ll split you apart!”

“Try it,” I sneered, my vision going black at the edges. My limbs grew heavy. Charli was screaming my name in the distance, but I couldn’t keep my grip on his hands.

It was happening.

The clarity was so real.

I would be dead in seconds, I knew that, and then yet *another* stranger’s dick would be inside me. This was how my life would end. The irony was brutal.

Lucas.

My Lucas. His face filled my mind, shutting out the ugliness in front of me. The only man I’d ever let in. The only man I’d ever loved. And he never got to hear that. He didn’t deserve what he’d find here. To see the woman he loved left like this.

I love you, he’d said.

“Me too,” I mouthed, my lips forming the words.

I could taste them.

Another shriek sounded. Angrier and more primal, ripping through the haze. Followed by an ear-splitting explosion and the spray of warmth on my face as the vise on my throat suddenly released. My eyes slid past the shocked, mottled face of Jonathan and the giant hole through his shoulder.

To Beth.

On her knees.

Gripping a smoking pistol in her shaking hands.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Lucas

GIDEON, JD, AND I sped toward their “warehouse” in silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts, though I’m sure they were along the same lines.

Get there.

Lay eyes on the women, safe and sound.

Take down Jonathan.

I, for one, refused to let my mind assume anything different on the second point.

Against my better judgment, we were going in alone. We had no idea what we were walking into, or what we’d find when we got there, but that was the plan. We agreed to tread lightly, fairly certain he had no idea we were onto him. Lights and sirens barreling down on his ass might make him do something rash if he hadn’t already, and going off of his previous M.O., he was more interested in taking his time and getting the most demented, torturous bang for his buck than he was with rushing the kill.

The sun was just beginning its long, lazy descent into oblivion when JD turned onto the deserted, dusty road that led out to the warehouse. He slowed to a crawl to keep the noise down, and we rolled down our windows and listened as we prepped our weapons.

Stillness.

He came to a stop about twenty-five yards from the building and killed the engine. It looked vacant except for a murky light shining through a lone window in the far corner.

My sixth sense began to pound my skull like an angry banshee.

I slowed my breathing. Intentionally focused.

Silently, we stepped out and headed that way, our feet crunching quietly on the gravel as we rounded the building.

Gideon nodded toward Ms. Vaughn's Escalade, parked under the cover of a lone scraggly tree. I loped over, leaving them by our car, and felt the hood. Cold. Damn it, they'd been there a while. I pushed those thoughts away and circled around to the back. The hatch was open, and I lifted it, recognizing the sour, almost metallic smell.

You don't forget it.

Blood.

The brand-new child car seats were tossed on top of a mound of blankets, but I knew they weren't just blankets. My stomach clenched as Gideon and JD rounded the vehicle, and I pulled the blankets away, sending a silent prayer up to whoever might hear me.

"Fuck," JD muttered, turning away.

It wasn't any of the women, and the relief that crashed into my chest was quickly followed by a more urgent fear for them. Stone's lifeless face looked upward, his eyes unseeing, his throat slashed.

Gideon was already moving.

JD made hand motions to indicate the best point of entry, which was slightly ajar. Clearly, Jonathan wasn't expecting—

A woman's guttural scream filled our ears just before a loud pop of gunfire.

Without another thought, I bolted inside, throwing the door open so hard it smacked against the wall with a slam. I

sprinted down a long corridor, following the sound of screaming and the only source of light, and skidded into a large, open room, my heart in my throat.

The first thing I saw was Beth, color drained from her skin, dropping the gun and crumpling onto the floor like a deflated balloon as Jonathan shrieked and writhed. Blood was everywhere, wrapped in the sounds of pain.

“Help her!” Charli wailed to my right, and I nearly buckled to my knees at the sight of her. Naked and held up by chains at her wrists, a puddle of bloody fluid at her feet, her eyes wild with pain and fear and rage.

Then a naked and blood-soaked Violet scrambled from beneath Jonathan as he toppled off-balance, gasping and clutching his mangled left shoulder, and my brain shot back into action.

“Violet!”

She didn’t hear me, or couldn’t, hell-bent on crawling to her friend. Gideon and JD stormed into the room behind me, just as Jonathan lunged toward Charli with a surge of ferocious energy, a knife in his right hand, the blade aimed directly toward her stomach.

I moved on instinct as Violet’s terrified shriek filled my ears, rushing him, using all of my body weight to take him to the ground.

He roared and bucked beneath me like a crazed man.

“It’s her fault!” he screamed, his voice hoarse, his eyes wild. “That fucking cunt owes me everything! It’s her—”

I shoved my forearm to his throat to silence him, grimacing at the flash of white-hot pain that seared into my ribs as he turned all of his uncontrolled rage toward me.

In that moment, I was no longer a police officer. I was barely even a man. I was simply a human being—a warrior—in survival mode. Zeroed in on the predator that hurt the innocent, and I was ready to make him the prey.

Jonathan's face began to mottle an angry purple-red. His eyes bulged as he glared at me, hate filling his stare.

Noise began to infiltrate my brain, bringing me back from the brink.

"Lucas!" someone yelled. "Stop." Gideon's harsh voice broke through the haze of my fury, and I glanced up, releasing my choke hold just a fraction so Jonathan could grab a breath.

Gideon's dark, dangerous glare told me all I needed to know. "Don't cross the line now, man. We've got this." He held Charli, wrapped up in his jacket, as she shivered in his embrace.

I looked past him to JD, who held Beth like he'd never let her go again, her arms wrapped around him in a death grip.

I pushed back and sat on my haunches, my breath coming in short bursts as I searched the room for Violet. I found her sitting on the floor against the wall, hugging her knees, her head down, trembling violently.

Trying to be strong all alone, because she had no one to be strong for her. Because I'd been focused on taking out Jonathan.

"Get the women to the hospital," Gideon said, nodding as I turned his way, my mind reeling. I knew what he meant, and why. I did not need to be around for what came next. For once, none of that mattered. I just needed to get to Violet.

"You're coming, too," Charli said with a grimace, doubling over now that she could. "Fuck, these babies are on their way."

Gideon's gaze widened at her. "What? But it's—"

"I don't care what it is, they're ready," she said, moaning as she looked like she might break his hand in half. "And they were drugged with something, so we need to get there. Now."

Jonathan squirmed on the ground as blood pooled beneath him. He choked out an evil laugh, but Gideon ended it, kicking

him square in the teeth, making him spit blood and knocking him unconscious.

In one smooth move, Gideon swept Charli up off her feet and was out the door, leaving no doubt that I needed to be on his heels, and *now*.

“I’ve got this,” JD said, meeting my gaze as I grabbed a blanket off the floor and knelt to wrap it around Violet. I held her face gently in my hands, but she still wasn’t looking at me. “You need to go, man. Can you make sure Beth gets treated for me?” he added.

He turned his attention back to the woman in his arms as she let go of him enough to look up into his face. The murderous man looked completely broken with relief that she was still with him. I knew that feeling.

“It’s okay,” Beth said softly, nodding at some unspoken communication between them. She swayed a little on her feet before she found her footing, still holding his arm. “I’m fine,” she whispered, cupping his jaw. “Just end this. Please.”

He pressed a fierce kiss to her forehead before turning her over to me. I saw the look in his eyes. It was one of complete discomfort in having to trust me with what was most precious to him.

“I’ve got her,” I said, pulling her to my side as Violet rose to her feet, the blanket wrapped tightly around her. I held her close to my other side, grimacing. “I promise, she’ll be okay.”

“You’re bleeding,” Violet said, her voice gravelly and coarse as she pulled back and looked up at me with exhausted and pain-filled eyes. Pain that I instinctively knew wasn’t physical.

Something more than her body had been tortured here. I wanted so badly to hold her and make it all disappear, but she blinked away so quickly, I knew she was still holding me at arm’s length. I reluctantly looked down to the darkening bloody stain in my side where he’d sliced into me, and finally felt the sting.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Now I have to file a report.”

“No. You were never here,” JD said, meeting my eyes before touching Beth’s cheek and then turning his massive back to all of us as he stared down at Jonathan. “Now go.”

His office and all of its accoutrements were about to get a very, very long workout, courtesy of the Kane Family enforcer and the Lady Killer. I didn’t even feel bad about the fact that I was happy about it.

I tipped my head at his back, knowing that I’d veered so far over the line there was no return, but I’d deal with the repercussions when and if they came. For now, my conscience was clear, and because of these men, my woman was safe. That was enough for me.



I BIT MY tongue when Violet refused to let me check on her wounds as we left the warehouse, even though it was clear she was bleeding. I knew enough about stab wounds to know mine didn’t hit anything important, so that was the least of my concerns. I just wanted to know that she was okay.

She had a weird vibe going on. Different from her anger from before. She wouldn’t talk to me, or meet my gaze, but she stayed close. She busied herself comforting Charli the entire drive to the hospital, but twice grabbed my arm in the ER lobby when the space between us grew too large. She refused treatment—only accepting a pair of scrubs in order to ditch the blanket—until Beth was checked in and Charli and Gideon were safely in a room in Labor and Delivery and she knew that the babies were okay.

Then, and only then, did I get her to agree to be checked. And only if she could be in the exam room next to Beth’s.

There, under the unforgiving glare of the fluorescent lights, I finally got a good look at the damage Jonathan had inflicted as the nurse began to examine her.

“Sir, can you step outside while I—?” the nurse began.

“No,” Violet said quickly. “He can—” She averted her eyes and blinked rapidly. “Please stay.”

I sat on the stool, nearby but out of the way. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She visibly relaxed.

Her left cheek was bruised and swollen, the bloody knuckles of her right hand looked cut to the bone and swollen. There was dark bruising across her throat that told me everything she wasn’t talking about, and the cuts—

The motherfucker had carved her up in shallow cuts from breast to thigh.

I had to swallow back the boiling, lava-hot rage that filled me. It took everything I had not to drive straight back to that warehouse to join JD in whatever torture he was inflicting.

Violet insisted on sitting up instead of lying on the bed, and looked away as the nurse applied ointment to the cuts, staring vacantly at the far wall as she answered questions and fed the young nurse the story we’d concocted about her being attacked by a man in the park. They didn’t question it since I was a cop, and we were already in this far, so . . .

“Did he rape you?” the young nurse asked.

Her eyes darted to meet mine, and my stomach threatened to revolt as I waited for her response.

“No,” she answered quietly.

Thank fuck.

“Okay.” The nurse shot me a quick glance. “The doctor will be by in a bit.”

I nodded, and she stepped out.

“How’s Beth?” Violet asked me, knowing I’d checked on her just a few minutes prior.

“Good. Sleeping.”

“And Charli? Have you heard anything?”

“Nothing more than I told you fifteen minutes ago. You can go visit once they discharge you.”

She nodded, her fingers playing with the edge of the sheet, her gaze suddenly far away again. Her right hand was treated and bandaged, and I recalled the deep cuts over her knuckles.

I’d seen the table and the smears of blood around a zip tie. That had been her particular hell at his hands. No wonder she didn’t want to lie down and be studied.

I sat quietly next to her bed after her IV was put in and the doctor did his examination. I wasn’t sure what else to do. Or say. Or if I should say anything. This woman had me turned so inside out, it wasn’t funny, and nearly losing her today had only crystallized for me how fucking much I loved her.

“Violet—”

Her hiccupping sob stopped me cold, and I froze. Violet—my Violet—was crying. Sobbing so hard, her cries were nearly silent, as her body was wracked with tremors.

Worst of all?

She wasn’t even trying to hide it from me.

My baby had been broken—stripped—pushed to the brink of death by someone she thought to be benign and safe. And now the crash of the come down was descending on her with a fury.

Shaken with the need to fix things, I crawled right up into the bed with her, maneuvered around her IV tubing and other lines, and curled my body around hers so that she could lay on my chest. I absorbed her tears and pain the best I could. I kissed her temple, her jaw, the tracks of her tears, even as more came.

“I’ve got you,” I murmured, hoping that was a comforting idea. “You aren’t alone, ever again. I love y—”

“Stop,” she gasped, drawing in a deep, shaky breath as she sat up and put a hand on my chest.

“No,” I said, making her frown. “I won’t stop. I almost lost you tonight, Violet. I feel that in my bones right now. Every time I blink, all I see is you under his hands. I’m not going to dance around it anymore. I fucking love you. If you want me, I’m yours.”

She stared at me for an interminably long time before she closed her eyes.

“My last thoughts were of you,” she said finally, her voice a whisper.

I never saw that whiplash coming.

“Everything went black,” she continued, tears leaking from beneath closed lashes. “Sound . . . filtered out. Everything was quiet, like a buzz. All I could think was that this was what death looked like. No white lights or music playing. Just quiet and—regrets.”

I swallowed, watching her. “Regrets?”

“You said those words,” she said, more tears falling. “And you never got to hear them back. I was going to die, not telling you that I loved you.”

All the air rushed out of my lungs, and I opened my mouth to speak, but her hand stilled me. Her eyes opened, spilling new tears down her cheeks. “I do, I can’t help myself,” she said. “But it’s not that simple for me, Lucas. I can’t—unknow what I know.”

Then it hit me. “So, you’re saying—”

“I don’t know what I’m saying,” she said, swiping under her eyes.

Long after her tears had dried up, our words still reverberated through the room, but she was silent.

Too silent.

I took her unbandaged hand in mine and threaded my fingers through hers, studying the union. She didn’t fight it, but she didn’t further it, either. And I could no longer blame

my family or the company. It wasn't about what they did all those years ago. It was that I'd kept it from her. Intentionally.

That was on me.

"I'll do whatever you need me to do, Violet," I said. "You need time? You've got it. Want me gone? I can do that, too."

She met my gaze with the clearest one I'd seen on her in weeks. "You'd leave?"

My heart sank. "If I have to. Transfer out of the precinct. The county. The state, even. I have contacts." I took a deep breath and let it go. "I'll walk through hell itself for you, *cher*. Whatever will make it easier on you."

She looked awestruck. Relieved even.

I guess I had my answer.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Violet

MOST OF THE knife damage had scabbed over and looked like I'd drawn doodles on myself with a brown Sharpie. Some, on my belly, were a bit deeper as he'd gotten more confident and giddy with it. One had needed stitches, but most were just enough to still be sore. All were enough to remember for the rest of my life, and never feel sexy again. The scars would make sure of that. The one over the knuckles of my right hand were particularly ugly, as the skin would never grow back quite right there. That was okay, though. It was another reminder, in a good way. That I would always find a way to survive.

And as I watched my best friend nurse her two-week-old, perfectly healthy babies, no lasting damage apparent on her, none of that mattered. I was glad that I'd drawn that psycho's attention away from her.

Gavin, the first one born, had had to go to NICU for a couple of hours with an elevated heart rate, probably due to the drug in Charli's system, but he'd come out fine. Chloe arrived minutes afterward and was instantly satisfied in her mother's arms. They'd probably just set the stage for what was to come. A mini, high-strung Gideon and a chilled little version of Charli. Both dark-haired and blue-eyed so far. Perfect little angels.

We sat curled up on her couch, blankets over our legs and spit rags everywhere. Rattles, pacifiers, and wet wipes surrounded us.

“Oh, how life has changed,” I said, laughing.

“No joke,” she said, handing me Chloe to burp while she positioned Gavin on the other breast. “A week in, and I’m thinking, holy hell, there’s at least eighteen more years of this?”

“Well, to be fair, you won’t be doing this level of care at eighteen,” I said.

“True, but then there’re toddler tantrums, school issues, homework—you know I suck at math!”

“That’s what Daddy is for,” I said.

“Dating, driving, learning what their father does, oh, my God . . . the sex talk? Twice?”

“Yeah, good luck with that, Mama,” I said. “Owner of a sex club. What did your mother tell you?”

“She didn’t. Gram told me that sex was normal, but that if I did it too soon, she’d glue my legs together.”

I nodded. “That’s one method.”

“How am I ever going to leave these two for a honeymoon?” she said.

“You’ll have to leave your boobs behind.”

“Well, I can pump, but God, who wants to spend their honeymoon pumping breast milk?” She shrugged. “There was no date in stone anyway. We’ll do a wedding and honeymoon when they’re weaned, and I can stand to be away from them. Maybe just an overnight somewhere.” She laughed. “Or just a dinner out. That’d be good enough, right?”

“Hell, why go that far?” I said. “Go through the drive through at Frank’s and have a picnic at the park.”

“Perfect!” she said, pointing at me. Charli shook her head, gazing down with love at her son. “Yeah, life has definitely changed. Priorities. Plans. The future. What was I thinking?”

“I think you thought you were getting a fabulous orgasm,” I said. “Not realizing you were making people.”

“What an amazing trick, huh?” she said, smiling as she stroked his dark, fuzzy head. Envy and a deep ache of something else twisted inside me. I’d never have that look. That kind of love. But that was okay. This was my place, and I was incredibly lucky to be these angels’ aunt. Charli’s gaze lifted to mine with an eyebrow quirk. “Speaking of fabulous orgasms . . .”

“You had one?” I quipped, pulling back to reality with a smile.

She gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I did, but I wasn’t referring to me.”

I scoffed. “Well, you know I’m playing solo these days.”

Not only had I not seen Lucas since that day—he checked on me daily through Gideon, interestingly enough, but otherwise had taken me up on the space I said I needed—but I also hadn’t even mentioned going back to work. For one thing, what well-paying client would want someone on their arm with designs scarred into her cleavage? For another . . . the lasting memory of Jonathan threatening to do to me in death what I’d made a living doing in life had changed something inside me. I wasn’t sure I could do it again.

I wouldn’t allow that other thought yet. The thought that the mere idea of someone other than Lucas touching me was abhorrent.

“Have you heard from the good detective?” she asked.

“You know I haven’t, smart-ass,” I said, widening my eyes as I covered little Chloe’s ears. “He wouldn’t be funneling intel through Gideon if he was talking to me.”

“He cares about you, Vi,” she said. “He’s a good guy.”

“Who purposefully lied to me about his family basically killing my father,” I said, feeling like a broken record lately. I

was beginning to wonder who I was convincing. “How good is that?”

Charli sighed. “Vi . . .”

“What?”

She met my gaze, her head at a tilt. “You know I’m always on your side, girl. I’ll support you through anything. But we can’t hold people accountable for the sins of their fathers.”

Goosebumps went down my back at the revelation of those words.

“We?”

“Look at Gideon’s father.”

I gave her a look. “Oh, come on. There’s no comparison.”

“Isn’t there?” she said. “His dad destroyed my family, too. Killed Mom and Gram, and then conspired to have *me* taken out before I could bear these *spawn*.” She shuddered at the thought.

“That wasn’t Gideon’s doing.”

“No,” she said. “It was in the name of the *business*.” She gave me a pointed look. “Sound familiar?” She reached for my hand. “What Lucas’ dad did wasn’t on him either.”

“Gideon *shot* his dad to save you,” I said in a low voice, realizing with every word and sentence that my argument was weakening. As was my resolve. “He literally took out the beast and came clean with you.”

She blew out a breath as if reliving that memory. “Yeah, well, they can’t all be Gideon Kane, thank God. Or no one would be left alive. Lucas walked away from his legacy, Vi. From his whole family. He came here and started over. Yes, he screwed up not telling you, but damn, he’s got to have a flaw somewhere.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You just have a soft spot for him because he took a knife to the gut for you.”

She wrinkled her nose in sarcasm. “It does kind of ensure an invite to Thanksgiving dinner.”

I chuckled, but my chest suddenly felt heavy. Like I was making a mistake. Was I? Was this hesitation warranted, or was I just wasting time?

A door closing in the other room broke my thoughts, then baby-daddy sweeping into the room changed the whole hormonal vibe. “Where’s my girl?” he said in an adorable little growl that made me lift both my eyebrows as he took Chloe out of my arms and snuggled her against his neck. “Not a word,” he warned me.

I laughed. “Just wondering who dropped the daddy glitter on you, Voldemort,” I said, then gave him a sincere smile. “Honestly, it looks good on you.”

One side of his mouth quirked in a half-smile.

“I remember when *I* was your girl,” Charli said in a mock weary sigh. “I see how it is.”

He leaned over and kissed Gavin’s head and then brushed a kiss to her lips. “You’re always my girl, love,” he said softly, as if forgetting I was still in the room.

That feeling in my chest grew heavier. Thicker. I’d had *that* for a while. That amazing connection in front of me. I had it until the world fell apart around us. Or—until I blew it up.

“Did you know that Broussard left?” Gideon said, whipping my brain back to the present.

“Left—what? Left to where?” I demanded.

“Left the precinct,” he said. “Took a leave of absence while he’s waiting for his transfer.”

I was on my feet without realizing I’d moved. “What *transfer*?”

“You talk to him nearly every day, babe,” Charli said, her brows drawn together. “Like you practically need a bro code

since JD and Beth left for Aruba. And this is the first time you're bringing this up?"

"He didn't tell me!" he said, almost looking irritated by that. "I mean, he mentioned he was putting in for a transfer, but he didn't say it was *now*. And there is no *bro code*, thank you very much. But it'll be a good thing not having a cop nosing around."

"Yeah, save that griping for the cop you *don't* call every day just to see what's going on," she said, winking at him. "And next time someone in our circle *mentions* they might be leaving for good, maybe drop a hint, babe."

He gave her a snarl. "He's not in our *circle*. I just have to make sure he doesn't suddenly grow a conscience about the fact that they never 'found' the Lady Killer."

I was already at the door as she rolled her eyes. "I have to go," I said, pulling on my sneakers I'd kicked off. "I'll call you later."

"Mm-hmm," she said offhandedly. "Tell him I said hi."



HIS LAND ROVER and motorcycle were both in the driveway when I arrived, and the flip my heart did as I got out and stood next to my truck was a mix of relief and anxiety. He was still there. But holy hell, what the fuck was I supposed to do with that?

I didn't have long to ponder that question, as his front door opened, and he stopped short on his porch at the sight of me.

"Violet."

Oh, sweet God, I'd missed that. His voice. The tone of his words. The fucking use of my full name that I'd given up on fighting. It sounded so good coming off his lips.

"You're leaving?"

That's what I led with? There were ten other things I could have said, that I'd rehearsed in my head on the way over, but jump right to it there, sister.

He held an ivory envelope in his hand, and he tapped it against his fingers. “Are you okay?”

I blew out a breath and sucked it back in as he continued toward me. I crossed my arms over my chest as he got nearer and forced my chin up. “Gideon said that you’re leaving,” I said. “Is that true?”

He held out the envelope instead of answering, and my gaze dropped to it. My name was scrawled on it in his handwriting. *Violet*.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Something for you.” He reached for my hand and closed my fingers over the linen texture of the paper. The warmth of his hand on mine lingered a moment longer than it should, but not as long as I wished for. “From me.”

A coldness washed over me.

“You are,” I said, under my breath. “You’re already gone, aren’t you?”

“I’m doing what is best for everyone,” he said, backing up a step and palming his keys like they were the crux to ground him.

I stared down at my name on the thick envelope and then threw the thing at his chest, watching it flop to the pavement. “Who are *you* to decide what is best for anyone?” I demanded. “For *me*? How can you just do this?”

Lucas stared at me like I was speaking in tongues. “I haven’t heard a word from you in two weeks,” he said, shaking his head. He ran a hand over his face as if he was trying to find logic there. “How are you? How are you healing?” He glanced down. “How’s your hand?”

“You were leaving me with nothing but a fucking letter, and you want to ask me about my medical condition?”

He turned and paced in a circle, growling under his breath like I’d seen Gideon do a hundred times. They *were* rubbing off on each other. He raked his fingers through his hair as he

faced me again. “I don’t know what to say to you, Violet,” he said, his eyes burning into me. “You’re exhausting.”

I scoffed. “Well, don’t hold back.”

“Oh, I’m not,” he said, his voice rough as his eyes widened. “You tell me you love me—but that it isn’t enough. You can’t see past the other stuff and need time, but then go radio silent *like you do*.” He closed his eyes for a beat and then opened them like he’d rebooted. “I kept something important from you for my own selfish reason. For fear of losing you. And that was fucking wrong of me. That was a mistake I swear on my *life* that I will never make again. But if that’s not something you can accept, and I lost you anyway, then I have to live with that. And if that’s the case, I can’t hang around in limbo.” He gazed hard at the keys in his hand. “I’ve got to make plans for my life. If it isn’t going to be here, I have to start lining that out.”

“So, you were saying goodbye to me in a letter?” I said. “That’s a pussy move.”

“Open it,” he said, picking it up.

“No, thank you.”

He shrugged and turned to walk away, and panic threaded through me. “Where are you going?”

He turned back to me halfway, staring into the distance. “Honestly? Probably to have a beer because you are wearing me the hell out.”

Everything inside of me, all my walls, all my defenses, were melting on the spot. I shuffled on my feet and reached for the solid warmth of my vehicle. Anything to ground me. To keep me from flying into his arms like a pathetic lovesick teenager. From saying the things I’d come there to say and now couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

But he felt it. He saw my fence and where I was on it.

Slowly, he walked back in my direction. “What?” he murmured, his voice heated.

I shook my head.

“Oh, there’s something,” he said. “Tell me.”

“No.”

Those eyes. Those eyes that saw everything. Everywhere. They saw me. Damn it.

“Say it,” he said, slowing a foot from me. I could reach out and touch him if I wanted to. God, I wanted to.

“No,” I whispered again.

“Please,” he said. I backed up against my truck, and he came with me, closing the gap. “Say it, *cher*.”

“I won’t say it if you’re just going to leave me,” I breathed. “What good does that do?”

“Say it,” he whispered against my forehead, dropping kisses down my nose. Fuck, oh fuck, oh *fuck*, I couldn’t breathe with his mouth so close. My face lifted to his till his lips brushed mine. “My Violet.”

“I love you,” I said against his mouth, right before he claimed mine.

Everything made sense in that moment. All the questions. All the doubts. Anything I ever felt wouldn’t work—it all dissolved in the heat of his kiss and his hands in my hair. His embrace as he dove into my mouth, his tongue making love to mine.

I moaned into his kiss, and he started to pick me up, but my grimace mirrored his as we both started in pain and pulled back to look at each other.

“Stitches,” we said in unison, chuckling together.

“Are *you* okay?” I asked.

His hands traced my face as he looked deeply into my eyes. Looking for all the answers that I hoped I had.

“I’ll be fine,” he said, dismissing the question. “Tell me what you need.”

My old standard answer popped to the surface. “I don’t need anything,” I said, frowning and trying to push that back. To keep the five seconds of happy I’d felt up front.

“Violet.”

Damn it.

I moved back a step, but he held on to me.

“I’ve made a life of not needing anything, Lucas. It’s how I survive.” I crossed my arms, but he pulled them loose, and I blew out a breath. “It’s how I don’t get hurt. Love is dangerous.”

“Yeah, well, so is walking across the street, but we don’t live in a bubble.”

“You know what I mean,” I said.

“I know that I love you, Violet Reed.” He lifted my chin so that I couldn’t look away. “It’s raw and unpolished, but it’s real. Don’t shut me out. Tell me what you feel. What you want. I will do anything for you, but I can’t if I don’t know what it is.”

My chin trembled as I absorbed his gaze and the truth of his words. “What do *you* want?” I asked.

“Simple. I want you,” he said. “Your turn.”

I took a deep breath. “I want you. But—”

“No buts.”

I widened my eyes. “Yes, there are, Lucas. There are jobs and conflicts and probably a whole legal thing with—”

“I don’t care,” he said, stopping me. “I told you two weeks ago. If you want me, if you love me—if you can forgive me—I’m yours. You’ll never be alone again.”

“But how? Your job . . .”

“Trust me?”

I closed my eyes with a shake of my head. “You’re killing me.”

His lips tasted mine until my eyes fluttered open.

“Trust me?” he repeated.

The old me would have bailed with a *hell, no*. But the old me was fading fast. The self-sufficient don't-need-anyone-Vi was quickly finding out she could be self-sufficient and still loved. And that needing wasn't necessarily a bad thing when someone like this man was on the other end. Once upon a time, I wouldn't follow anyone. Wouldn't trust anyone but myself.

Damn it, I'd follow this guy anywhere.

And trust him?

“With my life,” I whispered.

EPILOGUE



Violet

9 Months later . . .

OKAY, I HAD to give credit where credit was due, and Voldemort had come through in a big way for my girl, Charli. Like H-U-G-E. After this, I might even stop calling him Voldemort. Maybe. Probably not, but hey, I could play nice for one day.

But seriously, I'd always known Kane Enterprises meant money and that money ran deep, but he spared literally no expense to make this—their wedding day—her dream come true.

Custom-made, designer, boujee gown that made her look like a fucking princess? Check.

Pristine, white lilies out the ass, as far as the eye could see? Check-check.

Chef-prepared, gourmet delicacies, plus her favorite downhome junk food favorites, flown in just for the occasion? Checkity-check-check.

All their friends and family, also flown in for the weekend-long festivities? In a fucking Italian villa? That he'd rented out just for us. For the entire weekend. On the Italian coast.

Yeah, mind-blown.

And that didn't even count the two-week-long honeymoon across Europe that was to come. Lucky bitch.

Actually, though, I felt like the lucky one, because not only did I get the man, who was there with me, but Charli and Gideon were letting me take the twins home while they gallivanted around Europe. I loved the idea of playing house and living vicariously with those sweet babies, even for a little while. Maybe one day . . .

I rolled over in the huge, luxurious, Italian villa bed and stared at Lucas' sleeping face.

He'd grown back a short beard that was sexy as hell, but I could still glimpse his dimples when he smiled big enough—which was pretty often since I'd officially quit working at Cameo. I never thought I'd give up that part of my life, but Lucas filled my heart so completely, so fully, it was easy. And, honestly, letting another man touch me now, no matter what the circumstances, just wasn't possible.

We'd had our own gallivanting for a time. His short leave of absence had turned into a month, and we spent it everywhere. From a motorcycle trip through the Rockies on his brand-new Harley that he bought just for the occasion, to a fabulous tour through Greece and the south of France. It was amazing, and I kept pinching myself to make sure it was real. That he was real.

It was back to business at the club now since the Lady Killer had fallen off the map. Or he had as far as the police were concerned—and none of us were going to tell them any different. Everyone was safe, and that was all that mattered.

I reached over to turn off my alarm before it went off and settled back, only to find sleepy amber eyes staring back at me.

“Hey.” His voice was deep and gravelly as he nuzzled closer. “Can't sleep?”

I ran a hand down his bicep. “Guess not. It's a big day today. Lots to do for the wedding.”

His hot hand slid down my ribs, my waist, my hip, to cup my ass. “Mmmm.”

My eyes slid shut as he leaned in to press a kiss to my throat. “What’re you doing?”

“Nothing.”

I giggled as his lips found the sensitive spot behind my ear. “Nothing? Feels like something.” Unable to stop myself, I pressed against his erection.

He licked up my throat, then moved to my lips, and our eyes met. “I love you, *cher*.”

My heart beat a little faster at his words, and I wondered if it would always do that. I traced his jaw. “I love you, too. So much.”

He shifted our bodies so he was cradled between my thighs, looking down at me, his gaze so incredibly tender, it made me feel suddenly weepy. “My Violet,” he whispered as he slid home gently.

“Yours,” I whispered back, holding him close as we made love slowly and quietly, our hands intertwined, our bodies connected, our souls merged.

Our lips met just as we both began to orgasm. I felt him spill into my body, and I quickly followed behind him, my heart thundering in my ears as tears began to leak down my cheeks.

He drew back and collected me into his arms. “Why are you crying?”

“Just happy, babe,” I said. “I never expected to have this.”

He pressed a kiss to my head. “You should always expect love, babe,” he said. “You deserve it.”

Yeah . . . well . . . that was still a tough one for me.

I lay there for a while until his rhythmic breathing let me know he’d slipped back to sleep. Then I slid from the bed and made my way to the bathroom, where I tugged on my sweatpants and his t-shirt and yanked my hair up into a bun. I

shot him one last look, then ducked out and down to Charli's room, where I had a date with the bride-to-be.

I gave her door a gentle knock. "Hello?"

"Come on in."

I opened the door to find her feeding one of the twins by an open window, looking like a serene goddess. Beth was perched on the bed, cuddling the other baby, her smile holding a million watts of maternal mojo that had me wondering if JD had already put a bun in that oven.

I closed the door and loped over to plop on the bed next to her and grinned down at little Gavin, who cooed back up at me. The only thing more sparkly in the vicinity was the rock on Beth's finger.

"Holy shit, Beth!" I grabbed her left hand. "What the hell?"

She smiled coyly. "I didn't want to steal Charli's thunder, but yeah."

Charli jumped up without disrupting little Chloe. "Excuse me? Steal my thunder?" She leaned over us. "Let me see that!" She grabbed her hand. "Jesus, Beth. It's almost bigger than you."

Beth laughed. "I told him it's a bit much."

I sat back on my hands. "No such thing. Clearly, the man has good taste. Good for him."

Charli put down the empty bottle after Chloe sucked it dry and sat down to burp her. She made everything look so natural, and I had to laugh to myself, thinking that the Charli of a year ago would never have imagined it.

"Congratulations, Beth," Charli said, beaming. "I'm so happy for both of you."

I swung my foot. "So, does that mean we get to do this whole Italian villa thing again soon?"

Beth laughed and widened her eyes. “No, I don’t think so. It will be something a bit smaller.”

“Damn.” I reached for Chloe, and Charli handed her over. I inhaled that precious baby scent, and she giggled, making my heart melt.

“—and sooner,” Beth added softly. “JD wants to be married before the baby comes.”

I lifted my head. “I’m sorry. What?”

She pressed her lips together in mock innocence. “Hmm?”

“Beth!” I exclaimed.

Her blush deepened adorably as she laughed, gazing down at Gavin. “We didn’t plan it. It just sort of happened.”

“Yeah,” I quipped. “That *happens* when you repeatedly go to remote islands on vacay and fuck like rabbits.”

JD had taken Beth on three sunny beach vacations since the day we didn’t speak of anymore. Shooting someone again, even to save my life, had shaken her to her core, and JD was her rock. He was my hero, too. Or one of them.

“Vi!” Charli admonished, settling down on the bed with us to grab Beth’s hand. “So, are you good with this?”

Beth glanced up. “I think so.” Tears filled her gaze as she chuckled. “I mean, I’m gonna have to be, right?” She rolled her eyes as she ran a finger under both eyes. “Damn, all I do is cry though, lately.”

Charli scoffed. “Get used to that. Fucking hormones.” She grimaced and did a zipping motion over her mouth as she glanced at her children. “*Silly* hormones.”

“Yeah, it was a surprise, but we’re so good,” Beth said, kissing Gavin’s head. “I love him. He loves me. We’ll figure the rest out as we go.”

“You will,” Charli assured her. “Plus, you have us. We’re a bit of a screwy family, but family nonetheless.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Beth said, winking at me.

Before we could say more, there was a knock at the door. I stood and moved to answer, Chloe on my hip. I cracked it open to find Gideon’s sister, Sophia, staring back at me, already fully dressed and gorgeous.

“Good morning,” she chirped as she lifted a bag. “I come bearing gifts for the bride from my brother.”

I opened the door wider. “Food?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, sashaying in, pressing lipstick kisses to Chloe’s and Gavin’s cheeks, before air-kissing Charli and handing her the gift bag. “From Gideon. He says to tell you, and I quote, *this day has been a long time in coming. I love you very much and I cannot wait for you to be my wife.*”

Charli grinned like a lovestruck idiot before gently removing the tissue paper to gaze down into the bag. Reverently, she withdrew the small velvet box. “I can’t believe I’m shaking,” she whispered before she took a breath and opened the lid. She gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth. “Gideon . . .”

I circled behind her to see what had her so moved.

Inside was an open cameo locket, complete with tiny photos of her mother and grandmother. It was intricate and beautiful and perfect for this day.

Damn it, he’d even made me tear up.

“Will you help me put it on?” she asked, her voice choked with emotion.

“Of course.” Sophia helped her with the clasp then she gazed down at the pictures for several moments before closing the locket and nestling the pristine white cameo pendant at Charli’s collarbone.

“Thank you.”

We all stood there, lost in emotion for a while until Chloe let out a squawk that broke the moment, making us all laugh.

“Okay then,” I said, meeting Charli’s gaze. “Shall we get you married?”

She grinned. “We shall.”

Beth stood. “I’ll put the babies down for their nap and call Bailey to watch them, because we need to get this primping started.”

“That’s right,” I said. “You have a date with Voldemort in just over an hour.”

Okay—*that* was the last time.



“I NOW PRONOUNCE you husband and wife,” Pastor Damien Patrick intoned, his voice serious, but his eyes holding a twinkle of joy. “You may kiss your bride.”

Gideon collected Charli into his arms, his hands dangerously close to her ass, and kissed her like no one was watching . . . probably slightly inappropriately for a wedding, but after all they’d been through, who cared?

When they finally came up for air, they stared into each other’s eyes for several moments before turning to the crowd.

“May I present Mr. and Mrs. Gideon Kane.”

Charli glanced up at her groom with a wicked grin. “Why can’t you be Mr. Charli Vaughn?”

He raised an eyebrow and lifted her hand to his lips. “Hold on to that fantasy, baby.”

The whoops and hollers were entirely too loud, and I, for one, nearly lost my voice, but seriously—this was my girl, and she was finally in a good place. She’d come so far.

We all had.

We ate way too much food. Drank our weight in wine. Danced until our feet ached. Overall, it was a stellar day and night. Perfect in every single way.

I swayed to the music in Lucas' arms, intoxicated by the sounds and smells and atmosphere and love in the air.

"This is so perfect," I said, gazing up at my amazing man.

He kissed my temple. "I'm glad you think so."

I inhaled the now familiar scent of him—spice and ocean and Lucas—and tilted my head in question. "Don't you?"

He didn't immediately say anything, looking at me with a deep pause in his expression that sent my blood racing with anxiety. Gone was my happy euphoria. With all my focus on the wedding and Charli, had I missed something? Was Lucas unhappy?

Was he planning to leave again and just didn't have the nerve to tell me?

The old, familiar insecurities of being alone and unwanted burst into my subconscious like an unwelcome visitor.

"Lucas?"

He licked his lips nervously, clearly preparing to say something monumental. My stomach prepared to rid itself of all that fine food. He pulled away a fraction, and by God I went the rest of the way on my own.

"You *don't*?" I asked again, more bite to my words. I hated that tears were filling my voice and my eyes.

He looked stunned, his brows drawing together in confusion as he reached for my hand. "Violet. Baby."

I didn't give him any more opportunities for pet names. Shaking my head, I turned on my heel and walked blindly off the dance floor. Out of the reception hall. I didn't stop until I was inside our room and outside on the terrace, gripping the stone wall and gulping air like there'd never be enough of it.

Something far, far away in the nether regions of my brain where logic liked to hide from me, raised its hand to tell me to slow my roll. It knew I was being an idiot. I wasn't looking for

hands or logic, however. I was looking for the shoe that was due to drop any second, and the door to bail out of when it did.

Seriously? He couldn't have done this at home? He had to wait till we were in the most beautiful place in the world with all our friends? Was he waiting till the wedding was over?

Closing the door with something just short of a slam, Lucas caught up with me. I stiffened, steeling myself for a showdown or a breakup or whatever was on his mind, but when I turned to face him, he threw his jacket on a chair, rounded on me, and caged me between the back of the terrace and his body.

Without a word, he slammed his mouth to mine, kissing me like it was all he needed to survive. He ravaged me with his tongue, his lips, his very soul. He forked his fingers through my hair with one hand while the other roamed over my body hungrily.

I gasped against his mouth, my mind and heart warring with my hands as they wandered over everything I could reach, desperately needing to feel the warmth of his skin through his shirt and the hard lines of his muscles. God, I was like a junkie for this man.

He was breathing raggedly when he drew back, his forehead pressed to mine. "Violet." His voice was raw, harsh. "Tell me now. Did that feel real to you?"

"What?"

"Did you feel it?" he growled. "In your bones. In your soul. Do you love me?"

"I told you—"

"No. Do you *love* me? I mean *really* love me. Completely. Can't imagine the rest of your life without me kind of love. Want to sometimes throw me over a fucking cliff, but you need to be with me forever more than you need air kind of love." He squeezed his eyes closed as if he was in pain. "The way I love you. Do you love me like *that*?"

Undone, I let out a shaky breath and ran a finger along his jaw. “I think I do,” I whispered. “Because you’ve got me all kinds of crazy, Lucas, and it scares me to death.”

“I don’t want you to be scared, *cher*. I just want you to be mine.”

“I *am* yours.”

“Then why do you keep doing this shit every time things get too real?” he asked, backing up. “You have ten different escape plans at the ready, and the second I hesitate to get my thoughts together, you’ve already pulled up roots and run.” He held my face in his hands to make me look him in the eyes. “Did you hear me this morning? I told you how much I loved you. I showed you. I told you that you deserve this happiness. What on earth makes you so damn convinced that I have one foot out the door?”

“Because . . .” I swallowed. “Because nobody’s ever wanted me enough to stay long term.” I closed my eyes against the burn of tears. “Even you were going to leave me and transfer somewhere else.”

He cupped my chin and forced me to look back at him. “Only because I thought you didn’t want me, baby.”

“Still—”

“Still nothing.” He grabbed my hand and yanked me to our bedroom, which was now soaked in moonlight. “Sit.” He indicated the bed.

“Why?”

He lifted an eyebrow.

I acquiesced, mainly out of curiosity, my skintight, burgundy gown squeezing me in all the wrong places. I kicked off my heels and took a deep breath.

Spinning away, he rifled through his suitcase before turning back to me, his arms crossed so I couldn’t see what he had in his hands. “I need to know, without a doubt—we’re good now? One hundred percent, you have accepted my

apology about what happened with your family and that I withheld the truth from you?”

I studied him, examining my heart. The past was painful, but it was just that. The past. “Yes. We’re good.”

“And you understand that you have my solemn promise—I will never lie to you again.”

“Okay.”

He stepped in my direction and handed me a business envelope. *The* envelope. The one he’d handed to me all those months ago and I’d thrown right back at him.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“You’re right, Violet,” he said. “I was going to walk away from you back then. But not because I wanted to. Because I thought it was what you wanted. Because when you love someone—*really* love someone—you’d do anything to make them happy, even if it means suffering for the rest of your life. I was, and *am*, willing to do whatever it takes to make you happy for the rest of *your* life.”

I glanced down at the envelope. “So, what was this?”

“This was me trying to make you happy, even if that meant without me.”

Frowning in confusion, I slid open the envelope and pulled out a sheaf of papers and a key. It took a few moments of scanning the legal mumbo-jumbo to decipher what I was looking at. And the date, which was immediately after he’d put in for his leave at the LVPD.

It hit me.

My eyes flew up to his. “Lucas. No.”

“Violet. Yes.”

“I—” I shook my head. “You—you were *giving* me your house?”

“Not were,” he said. “Did.”

The dots wouldn't connect. What the hell was he saying?

"You can't just do that, Lucas."

"I can and I did. It's done."

I picked up the key and stared at it. "But . . . why?"

"Well, because I know it's your dream to have a house like that," he said. "To have a house in that particular neighborhood, in fact, that you can fix up. Now you have it. It's been legally yours for the last nine months. Make it beautiful, make it better. Make it a home."

I looked up. "It's *your* home."

"I told you, I'll do anything for you," he said as my eyes fluttered closed. "But now . . . I'm kind of hoping we can do it together."

That's when I realized his voice had dropped and he was directly in front of me.

As in on his knee.

With a ring.

A very large, cushion-cut ring that sparkled quite nicely.

"Oh, my God," I whispered.

"I've been carrying this around for two months, waiting for the right moment to ask you to marry me, wondering if you'd laugh and say it was too soon and this was a dumb idea."

I clapped my hand over my mouth.

"I didn't expect to have to prove my love with homelessness and a willingness to be pushed off a cliff, but here it is," he said. "That's us. Imperfect and flawed and rough around the edges, but as they say . . . when you know, you know. And I know. I've known since the first time you told me to go to hell."

I barked out a laugh and a sob at the same time, as tears spilled over my hand.

This man.

“You’re it for me, Violet,” he said. “My heart, my soul, everything I want in this life until the day I die. I’d like that to not be today, but you’re killing me today, so this could be a short-lived thing.”

My laugh overtook me, shaking my whole body as I buried my face in my hands. “I’m sorry!” I cried between my fingers.

“Sometimes I’m going to say stupid things, *cher*. Sometimes, I’m going to pause to think things out first, or sneeze, or ponder the universe, so will you please stop bolting out the door every time I don’t react exactly like you expect me to?”

I nodded, clamping my eyes shut and bouncing on my toes with so much excitement I couldn’t contain it.

This was real.

It was really happening to me.

Violet Reed had finally found her happily ever after.

Lucas took my free hand in his. “Will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

My wife.

I didn’t need the ring, or even the castle. I only needed my Prince Charming, and he’d actually shown up. And, since I’m no idiot, I tackled Lucas to the ground with a squeal and a “Yes!” and I wore that ring proudly while we made very good use of every inch of that terrace.

Who knew fairy-tale endings actually still happened?

Well, I’m here to tell you they do.



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through Cameo!**

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