

THE
PROTECTIVE
Billionaire

BOSS

AND MY

*Little
Secret*



SOPHIE PEARCE

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Dedication



"Thank you for your unwavering support and for believing in the power of love. I hope this book brings you joy, inspiration, and a renewed appreciation for the magic of romance."

Contents



[Chapter 1: Violet](#)

[Chapter 2: Silas](#)

[Chapter 3: Violet](#)

[Chapter 4: Silas](#)

[Chapter 5: Violet](#)

[Chapter 6: Silas](#)

[Chapter 7: Violet](#)

[Chapter 8: Silas](#)

[Chapter 9: Violet](#)

[Chapter 10: Silas](#)

[Chapter 11: Violet](#)

[Chapter 12: Silas](#)

[Chapter 13: Violet](#)

[Chapter 14: Silas](#)

[Chapter 15: Violet](#)

[Chapter 16: Silas](#)

[Chapter 17: Violet](#)

[Chapter 18: Silas](#)

[Chapter 19: Violet](#)

[Chapter 20: Silas](#)

[Chapter 21: Violet](#)

[Chapter 22: Silas](#)

[Chapter 23: Violet](#)

[Chapter 24: Silas](#)

[Chapter 25: Violet](#)

[Chapter 26: Violet](#)

[Chapter 27: Silas](#)

[Chapter 28: Violet](#)

Chapter 1

VIOLET



It was a beautiful apartment. When I looked at the listings online, it honestly felt like it was more than I deserved. But I knew that was just the worst parts of my mind trying to weigh me down, insulting me from every shadow.

I deserved a beautiful apartment in the French Quarter.

I deserved to get to walk along the original stone brick walls to get to my apartment. I deserved to enjoy the lush garden bed and little fountain bubbling away, greeting me on my way by.

My keys jingled as I unlocked the door, though I reflexively glanced around before I went inside.

I deserved to get to walk into my brand-new apartment and know I was safe inside. There was no one waiting for me with angry looks or furious demands. There was no trap waiting for me.

There was no one here to hurt me.

I breathed out and took in the sunny sprawl of my new place. Sunlight radiated in from the balcony walkway overlooking a shared internal courtyard through the wooden doors and window sills. They were all finished in a beautiful warm blonde color, glossy in the way only good old wood could be. The walls were either stark white or exposed brick, carrying that pretty terracotta appeal inside as well. The old hardwood floors were scuffed and worn, but they'd refinished it clearly between tenants, and the gorgeous tiger-stripe coloring was so charming.

It had even come furnished with charming wooden and patterned upholstered furniture. That was my big thing; being a lone woman without anyone to call on, the idea of trying to buy new furniture and get it brought into a place was not going to work out very well for me. I was five foot four

on a *good* day, and I was genuinely worried I'd get blown away during my first hurricane season like a plastic bag in the wind. As such, manhandling heavy furniture up old staircases would not be a viable course of action for me.

And it's not like I could hire a moving crew. Well, I *could*. But my finances were already stretched so thin. I was really depending on this new job working out to be able to eat more than beans and rice again.

But just because I didn't have much money to spare didn't mean I couldn't personalize this place. This was the first place that was *mine* in my whole life. I'd never gotten to have my own place and do as I please.

So, I spared some of my limited budget to get some cute little decor items to spruce up the place. Nothing major. A few candles, a mug, some pretty soap dispensers, and even a beautiful Mucha print to hang up in my bedroom. They were modest little things, but I had realized that these little tastes of freedom were *everything* to me.

It's why I was here, after all.

I bought a candle four months ago because its scent reminded me of a bakery I'd always walk by on my way home from school. I knew I had to be careful when I lit it because Elliot was sensitive about *his* space. But he was supposed to have been gone for the weekend with his friends, and he came back earlier than anticipated because of the weather.

When he'd come home and discovered it gently pattering on the coffee table, he started another fight. I'd been napping, and he was not only outraged that I had left a candle burning unattended in *his* apartment but had even dared to burn a scented candle knowing that he had a sensitive nose.

The fights were largely one-sided. That one had been no different. What was different was the fact that when he'd thrown the candle, it didn't hit the wall like things usually did when he started chucking things around.

I lightly smoothed my hair back over my ear, my touch tender even though the cut from the glass has long since healed. I reflexively brought the shoulder-length ginger lock back in front of my ear, paranoid that the scar would show even though I know it doesn't anymore.

I sat the bag down on the coffee table and brought out the first new candle; this one was made in the bottom of an old wine bottle. They even made it a pretty burgundy color, which smelled delightfully of mulled wine even though I hadn't lit it yet.

All the candles I'd bought were seasonal flavors. Mulled wine, gingerbread, peppermint hot chocolate...

Even though it was nearly seventy degrees Fahrenheit outside, it was almost Christmas. So, I wanted to remind myself that the holidays were almost here, in lieu of having someone else to celebrate them with.

I carefully brought my cheap plastic lighter to the wooden wick, delighted as it gave a slight merry crackle and caught alight.

I crouched on the floor and admired it for a few minutes, watching the stubborn tiny flame grow into a steady taper, no bigger than my thumbnail. A dark pool of melted wax was already forming around the flame, and the aromas of clove and citrus wafted gently in the air.

I just got to sit...

And breathe.

I folded my arms on the table's edge and rested my chin there, watching the little wisps of smoke coming off of my new candle.

The past four months had been non-stop. It was a lot of work to escape an abusive partner. It was even more difficult when it was your fiancée, and all your money and worldly possessions were already under his control.

And it's not like I had a family to fall back on. They were even worse than *him*.

But I had made it.

I was out. I was alive. I was *alone*, for good or for ill.

A bittersweet whorl of emotions gently danced in my chest like the drift of glitter in a snow globe. I was finally free, starting a life that was my own after a life of struggle. But there was no one to share my little victories with, no one to keep me company and fend off loneliness and doubts.

I'd learned, over the past few months, that I was my own worst best friend. I could take on the world when I was feeling good and strong, but fear and doubt constantly lingered, waiting for me to make the smallest mistake.

But I think I had finally crossed a threshold where, when I fell, I wouldn't let myself go back.

I was done being someone's victim.

Eventually, I stood up and took the bag with me to quietly distribute the rest of my newly purchased decor through the rest of the apartment. There wasn't too much noise from the street, but I knew that would change once night hit. The old brick building my apartment was in sat on Dumaine, only a block away from Bourbon Street. I'd already learned that the sounds of the nightlife carried *pretty* far. It wasn't even the New Year yet, so I knew I was in for it in a few weeks.

Not only from all the festivities, either. I'd managed to build up a successful career as an accountant before I ran away, and I used that particular skill set to get a new accounting job at an entertainment LLC. They operated a couple of nightclubs and bars across Louisiana, but their main office was here in New Orleans. And once the new year turned over, it would be the rush season, all the way through to April. Between the new quarter turning over, consolidating the last year's financials, and going through all the tax paperwork, it was going to be *a lot*.

But I needed the money. And honestly, I needed the work. Work was one of the few comforts I'd had before I'd escaped my ex-fiancée, and that was still the case. I was a good accountant and enjoyed the sense of competence and confidence working in my field gave me.

Feeling *confident* was something I was still working on. It's hard to feel strong when everyone around you constantly tries to erode you into nothing.

But that's what this was all about. I could finally build something, a future, a new me that was all my own.

I lit the peppermint cocoa candle in the bathroom, just for the sheer pleasure of it and to have a companion for changing the hand soap out of the cheap plastic bottle into something more decorative.

Was it weird that I thought of the candles as company? Probably.

Was it even weirder that I started to sing Christmas carols to the candle? Yeah.

But did I let that stop me? No. Because this was *my apartment*, and I could do whatever I wanted here.

Once I finished stoppering the soap, I glanced up and accidentally made eye contact with my reflection.

I looked a little startled like some primal part of my brain was triggered by the possibility that there was someone else here.

But there wasn't anyone else.

It was just me.

I smiled faintly at my reflection, and 'I' smiled back, a soft knowing in my brown eyes.

"Merry almost Christmas, Violet," I tell myself. "You're doing it. You're going to start the year off without him."

Chapter 2

SILAS



I t'd been a good year. An excellent year, really. Which always made these meetings go smoothly.

“Well,” I say as I push my chair back, “I think that covers it. Thanks again for your superb work again this year, Jeremy. I couldn’t trust anyone else to care for my flagship club.”

I reach out to shake the other man’s hand, and we both share smiles and nods. Jeremy has plenty of reason to be pleased; the club doing well means *he* does well.

“Of course, Silas. It’s been a real pleasure, as always. Miss having you around like the good old days, but I’m happy to hold down the fort for you.”

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Almost seven years since you moved on to bigger and better things.”

I laughed with a shake of my head and stowed my hands in my pockets.

“When you put it like that, you make it sound like you’re some little hometown girl I abandoned for some rockstar dreams. And don’t be so humble. Palais wasn’t just my first club; it is my *French Quarter* club. If anything, you’re my crown jewel.”

Being situated in *the* party neighborhood of New Orleans was prime real estate. But that didn’t make a business there a guaranteed success; the area came with cut-throat competition and clientele that would turn even the tightest operation into a battlefield. I’d learned that the hard way when I’d bought out a dilapidated wreck of a building with scraped-up savings and a few lucky loans.

We shared another round of chuckles and started to work our way

downstairs.

“Oh, you really know how to make a girl feel pretty. But, between the clubs going well, and your other, y’know, *investments*... You think you’re gonna try to set up that other club soon? I’d hate to lose him, but I think Ryan could be a real asset to take over there. He’s got family in Lafayette.”

Anyone overhearing him might have thought I was some crime lord or something, with how airily and wryly he’d referred to my other revenue streams. Thankfully, I wasn’t some mafia kingpin.

“I’ve got people looking at potential new properties to take over, but it’s up in the air. I’ll let you know as soon as I do, Jeremy. I’ve been a little torn between two worlds lately but know that I’ll never abandon you guys. Between you and me, this is my passion. That’s more just, you know. What pays the bills.”

No, I was a... Somewhat accidental oil baron. I’d sharpened my teeth, built up money in the entertainment sector, and bought some land a few years ago for an entirely different development. But then it turned into contacting exploration geologists, and I realized I was sitting on a ‘black gold’ gold mine.

Like many of my other successes, it was hard work landing me into rare opportunities that were *even more work*.

I had a nice little upstart oil and natural gas company running that was giving the well-established big dogs somebody to worry about. That world was even more cutthroat than the nightlife entertainment sector, though, I tell you what.

But hey, when I got too tired of it, I could dry my tears with hundred-dollar bills to remind myself what it was all for.

He laughed and shook his head.

“Well, if all that drilling is keeping the lights on and the bar stocked even if we have a bad year, I ain’t complaining.”

“That’s why I love you, Jeremy.”

“Careful now, or you’ll make me consider leaving Rachel and becoming your trophy wife.”

I led the way down the stairwell but spared a glance back up to him with a sly grin.

“Hey now, you remember the policy: I don’t mess around with my employees.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said teasingly. “And it’s not just a policy, man; it’s some sort of knightly code for you.”

“Chivalry ain’t dead yet,” I bandied back.

“I still think you should’ve broken it back when Isabella worked here. She was an absolute smoke show.”

“Nope. Rules are rules for a reason. And you’re just kicking yourself that you’d already started seeing Rachel back then.”

“Hey now, that sort of language is going to get me in serious trouble.”

We laughed and chatted the whole way to the bar, and we shared a ‘shift drink’ for old time’s sake before he had to make himself busy as the club’s current manager.

The bartenders were relaxed despite my presence, thankfully. The only old guard was Richard, but the rest had been here for at least a year or two and knew I didn’t bite. Newbies usually were a little green around the gills the first few times I’d keep a stool warm around them.

My gaze passed over the bustle of staff getting ready for opening. It wouldn’t be that busy tonight, but it was just the calm before the storm. We were in that sweet little lull before the holidays. Christmas itself wasn’t usually too bad, but New Year’s always popped the next year off on a heavy note, and business stayed strong all through up to Mardi Gras and the rest of the peak season after.

I’d told Jeremy the truth: he was the only person I could see doing this club justice. He’d come into this business with me on the ground floor, and the Palais’ initial successes were owed in no small part to him.

And I **valued** my people. Even as my operations grew, each capable person that distinguished themselves in the line of action was worth their weight in gold. They were more than assets; I'd been on the bottom rung before and worked my way up to where I was. I knew what it was like to work for a boss and the world of difference between one that *cared* and one that saw you as part of their margins.

I smiled a bit as I watched one of the new hires (Maggie, I think her name was) rush across the floor with buckets for bottle service.

In some ways, I pined for those old days. It had been harder then, but it had felt simpler, too.

I nursed my gin and tonic for another sip before whipping out my phone to field emails. I was not the biggest fan of all that, but thankfully I had a scarily smart secretary who dealt with the worst of it.

If I was ever drug into doing one of those business conference talks (definitely not my scene), I think the most valuable bit of advice I could give would be this:

Running a good business is all about having the right people in the right places at the right time – aces in their places.

I'd been to one of those meetings in the past, in the early days when I was a little entrepreneur with two clubs notching my bedpost. Didn't have the taste for all the white-collar elbow rubbing and hobnobbing. I walked out when some guy kept going on about running a business like a 'family.'

Businesses shouldn't work like families.

Family was a messy, ugly thing, bound together by blood and obligation. Everyone involved in a business should want to be there and give their due for their part to play.

I idly hooked the heel of my boot on the stool and squinted dubiously down at my inbox.

"Hah... Richard, my man," I called out, looking up in time to see the burly bear of a man lumber towards my corner at the bar.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Bourbon next, if you’d be so kind.”

“Neat or in something snazzy?”

My brow furrows, the unwarranted memory from that conference meeting lingering like a bad taste in my mouth.

“Neat.”

Richard whistled, smirking a little himself. “Thought the meeting went good, Silas.”

“It did.”

“Bad news?”

“No, everything’s good.”

It was good. It’d been a good year. And the next one would be even better.

Richard eyed me a moment before shrugging in acquiescence, knowing me well enough not to go digging. “Sure thing.”

I watched him walk off, my lips pursing, and brow furrowed.

I loved Richard, Jeremy, and all my best people.

But not like family.

Chapter 3

VIOLET



Palais was apparently the first club the company had started with. Which in my mind, made it a perfect baseline to get a sense of their practices in action. If they were run half as well as I'd gotten the sense of already, the standards would be at their highest here.

I adjusted my skirt on the way in, not quite liking the way the guy in line behind me seemed to be staring a hole into the back of my head. I wasn't even wearing anything that scandalous, just a slightly gauzy linen shirt and a skirt that I thought was modest for a club since it nearly went to my knees. It'd made the wait in line far more uncomfortable than I'd like, with all my instincts on edge and ready to spring into action. I kept my brain busy thinking about writing off my drinks tonight as business expenses, half-joking and half-seriously.

Thankfully, he didn't try anything, and I felt a little relieved once I passed the big burly bouncer at the door and got inside.

It was, in fact, a nice club. It definitely had that same New Orleans spirit that infected this part of town, with the old architecture on full display but framed in by modern fixtures and moody nightclub lighting. Loud music thrummed away over speakers, and there was a bit of a crowd milling around the dance floor, though most people seemed to be either schmoozing up at private booth tables or crowding the bars.

I went to the less occupied bar, not only for my nerves with crowds but to get a drink sooner rather than later. It's not the *best* thing in the world to use alcohol as a comfort and some liquid confidence, but...

Hey, no one is perfect. And so long as I was careful not to fall into the rabbit holes I'd seen other people in my life go into, I'd be fine.

My mind was a bit of a loop of self-assurances, needing to remind myself that I wasn't a bad person for *existing*. I was only a few months into unlearning things that had been burned into me forever.

Like my tela-therapist said: I need to cut myself more slack.

She put it in prettier terms, but that was more or less what she'd told me.

So, I was giving myself some more slack. And it was easier to get my brain to loosen its death grip once I was a drink or two in.

I got myself a mint julep, as I'd discovered it was a sort of darling drink of the area and was pretty darned good. Apparently, with the bartender I'd cozied up with a few nights ago in a quiet hole in the wall, it was more of a summertime drink. But I wasn't from the south; seventy degrees was plenty warm enough for my sensibilities. Especially since this place was a bit old and suffered from the difficulties of ventilating an old building, I was definitely looking for something to quench my thirst on top of getting me pleasantly tipsy.

I took a sip and hummed pleasantly before enjoying another refreshing swallow.

"Richard makes a mean julep," a voice beside me pipes up, casual and conversational.

I spooked a bit in my own skin, blinking and whirling to the source.

Green eyes. Even with the multicolor glow from the nightclub lighting in here, I could tell they were the greenest eyes I'd ever seen. They were also set in a handsome face— if I were to pick a word, it'd be *dashing*. But the smile was *too* suave. Maybe roguish would be better. I wasn't a poet, after all. I was an accountant.

"Uh... Yeah," I replied, my tone intentionally cautious despite the blush trying to sneak past my defenses. "It's good."

Attractive men are the most dangerous. They're used to getting exactly what they want.

"But I'd say his Pimm's Cup is even better."

“.. Haven’t heard of that one,” I said. It was the truth. I said it sternly enough that if he had any social awareness, he’d know I wasn’t inviting idle conversation.

“Really? First time in the city? It’s pretty popular here.”

I narrow my eyes at him and sip at my drink warily.

He really wasn’t going to get the hint.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

He chuckled, the sound warm and rich enough that I could hear it well even with the next track kicking on.

“Don’t just take my word. Hey, Richard,” the stranger piped up, leaning forward. The big bartender made eye contact and stepped towards us before my pest went on. “Pimm’s for the lady and me?”

The bearded barman nodded, already setting to work as he strode off.

“Guess you’ll have two to drink. I only intended on having one drink tonight.” That was a lie, but he didn’t need to know that. I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction of trying to con me into his companionship with a free drink.

I didn’t have a lot of money right now, but I wasn’t so desperate for a drink that I was going to put up with this.

He quirked a brow at me and gave me a once over, that husky laughter stirring under his breath far too charming. But I was used to *charming* men. I’d had my fill of them. And some well-built pick-up artist squeezed into a leather jacket wasn’t going to change my tune.

“That’s a shame. It’s good to experience everything New Orleans has to offer while you’re here.”

This man was a regular, apparently, if he was buddy-buddy with the bartender. And I’d rather he keep believing that I was just some tourist and not another resident. The last thing I wanted was some pushy guy trying to get my number because he thought he could get more than a little bit of quick tourist tail.

I take a few deep swallows of my julep; from the hopeful glint in his eye, he must think I'm trying to queue myself up to join him for whatever cocktail he'd signed me up for. But when I lower the glass and give him another taut glare, he laughs again and seems to realize that I was *not* on board with his transparent flirtations.

"Well, I see my hospitality is unwelcome."

"Yes, it is. I am here for work, so *please*. Leave me alone."

He looked a bit amused by that, eying me again a third time over. "Work, is it? You're not one of the staff here, so you must be meeting someone here, huh? I can at least keep you company until they roll around."

I clapped my cup onto the bar with a bit more force than I intended, but I could hardly blame myself. I was practically shaking, my fight or flight at its limit.

"I am *an accountant* for this club and if you continue to harass me, I imagine security would listen to someone on payroll over some self-entitled regular. But even then, I'd hope they'd be willing to throw someone out for harassing another customer. Because what you are doing isn't *cute*. It isn't *flirting*. You are *harassing* me."

My voice was taut, but I at least kept the wavering from getting too out of hand, so I just sounded intense. You can't show weakness around people like this. They just take it as an excuse to try and take advantage of you.

But his expression looked quite sober, staring at me with those green eyes now flown wide.

Neither of us said a word.

'Richard' quietly set the drinks in front of us, spared us both a furtive glance, then wordlessly made his way off.

A laugh spilled out of the stranger, airy and incredulous.

"Well then. I imagine they would be more liable to listen to me, in that case," he remarked in a sly deadpan. "Because I sign their paychecks."

I blanked, my vigilance ready for some reaction that *wasn't this*. My

thoughts whirl to catch up—

A horrified hand covered my mouth.

“Oh, *god*,” I wheezed out. “You’re— You’re Mr. Chandler, aren’t you.”

I’d heard some of the others at the office mention the enigmatically charming employer we all worked for. One of the other girls, Whitney, had gone on and on about how handsome he was.

“In the flesh. And *you* must be the new hire the accounting office picked up.”

My stomach bottomed out, and even though I hadn’t even finished my first drink, I felt ready to hurl. I’d just insulted my *boss’ boss*.

“I’m— I’m so sorry, sir,” my voice babbled out, fear taking over.

I can’t lose my job—

“I h-had no idea, please accept my most sincere apologies—”

I wouldn’t be able to afford my new apartment—

His mouth opened, and he lifted a hand, but I couldn’t stop. I had to somehow get myself out of this before he told me I was fired—

“Sir, Mister Chandler, please—”

Why had I spent money on stupid crap if I was going to just ruin it all again—

“Relax,” his voice cut in, and my apologetic rambling died in my throat.

He made a brief calming gesture with his hand before he took up his glass, filled to the brim with some orange-gold liquid, ice, and thin ribbons of cucumber and fruit.

His expression wasn’t angry at all. Rather, after the initial shock, he seemed to look a bit soberly amused more than anything else. His free hand raked through his hair, which I’d finally figured out was dark brown; the lighting in the club made it difficult to tell if it was black or brown.

“Let’s call the whole thing a wash, huh? The last couple of minutes never

happened.”

After taking a quick swig off his cocktail, he offered me his hand. Even though he was smirking, it wasn't a condescending expression. Instead, it reminded me more of old-school cinema heroes, ever confident and smooth at every moment.

Yeah.

Roguish was definitely the word for him.

I looked down at his hand.

I then quaffed down the rest of my julep in one go, put it down on the bar, and gave his hand a quick yet formal shake. I didn't want to linger on it too long, not with how clammy my hands must be after that scare.

“So, if I remember correctly... Noland?”

“Norman,” I quietly corrected, my tone hedged to be as polite as possible. I wasn't about to risk putting my foot in my mouth further. It was practically to my digestive tract at this point. “Violet Norman.”

“Well, Miss Norman, I hope you're enjoying your new job with us so far. If you'd like it, here's a drink on the house,” he said with a welcoming gesture towards the other cocktail on the bar like he'd made it appear as a magic trick instead of the earlier kerfuffle we'd gone through.

I considered it for a moment before taking up the glass.

I would need a lot more liquid courage to get through this conversation.

“Th-... Thank you,” I said before taking a sip.

I wasn't expecting it to taste as sharp and spiced as it was. Were there bitters in this? I hadn't been paying attention to the bartender, so I couldn't determine what exactly got put into it. I eyeballed the glass before going for another sip.

“Pretty interesting, right? Very old-school, but very refreshing.”

“... Yeah,” I mumbled. “It's good.”

I would need a few more of these before I could look him in the eye again.

Chapter 4

SILAS



Jeremy must have rattled the chains of some old ghost here or called upon some karmic deity by bringing up my ‘code’ earlier that night.

Because across from me sat a girl who was *entirely* my type: small and cute, but with a sharp look in her eye and a sharper tongue behind her pretty little lips. Her naturally red hair was quite pretty, soft and slender, much like the rest of her. She was dressed conservatively for a nightclub, but that was honestly in her favor in my eyes. I liked them sweet on the outside, spicy on the inside.

The catch?

She worked for me.

Maybe if I’d caught her just before she’d gotten her interview in, I could have—

Silly thoughts. No need to go risking someone’s livelihood just because they hit your buttons, after all.

That is precisely why I smiled in the most harmless, professional way I could at the pretty woman sitting near me. She’d seemed to settle for staring into her drink like it held the secrets to immortal life. Which was a far cry from the fearless spitfire that had given me the chilliest reception I’d probably ever gotten from a woman.

“So, you said you were here for work. Are you meeting one of the other accountants here? Since I wasn’t made aware that management was talking to any of our financial staff today.”

“Oh, I-...” Her voice hung so hesitantly that I wasn’t sure if she would say anything more. “I just wanted to see at least one of the clubs in person...”

Nothing important like that, no. I just wanted to get a sense of the operations. Some contexts you don't get just from reports."

I nodded, idly stirring my drink. "Makes sense. Have you never been to one of our clubs before?"

"No. I'm new to Louisiana."

"Ah, makes sense. Wait, let me guess from the accent... Midwest?"

She looked a bit uncomfortable at that, her stare into her drink retreating further.

"... For a bit."

"Ah, moved around a lot?"

"Yeah."

She wasn't that chatty before we'd realized who each other was, but at least it was less stilted than this. Silence fell between us for a beat, and I hoped she might get the impetus to pick the conversation back up, but she seemed inclined to sit in silence and drink.

"... Is there anything in particular about the operations you were curious about? I could give you the run-down. While I'm more hands-off these days, I'm still pretty abreast of how we do things here."

She tucked her legs in closer to herself, ballet flats looking for and unable to reach the crossbar to rest on.

"... If you'd like to, there were a few things I was curious about, from what I've been able to read in my first few days...."

"It's a bit loud to talk about that sort of thing. Let's go take over one of the empty booths, and I can borrow a laptop if there's something you'd like to take a look at?"

"Oh, god, no, it's okay. Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. I don't want to make a fuss."

"You're not making a fuss. I appreciate your enthusiasm to understand the businesses you'll be helping take care of. And if it helps you get up to speed,

that helps me, too,” I insist with an easy-going smile.

She glances sidelong up at me through her lashes and gives a tentative chuckle, wheezy and strained.

It was like night and day. I suppose I couldn't blame her too much for being spooked. Being told the guy you just threatened to get kicked out is your boss must be a shock. And I hadn't exactly put my best foot forward as her new employer. How I handled my business differed greatly from how I handled my pleasure.

“... Well, I- I suppose if you insist, Mr. Chandler.”

Maybe she'd warm up after a bit. Or after a few months of working for me and realizing that I wouldn't try to act like some skeezy boss who'd happily ply her with drinks to chat her up.

Not that I'd be seeing much of her. I couldn't spare much time to visit my enterprises anymore, since managing my petroleum investments was dominating most of my day-to-day professional life. And I'd go to the accounting office in New Orleans even less routinely than any of the clubs. Usually, the most I interacted with them was through emails and maybe dropping by around tax season to check in on things and help boost morale.

Which, I considered as I began to politely lead her off from the bar, was a good thing. I'd probably be able to easily forget about my brief spark of attraction for her soon enough, lost as a humorous footnote and nothing more.

I not only wrangled up a booth, but I also harassed Jeremy to descend from his post to come to sit with us and talk with our new employee. If she felt uncomfortable alone with me, having someone else to talk shop with to make it clear that it was a business conversation would help.

And it helped, though only by a few degrees. She was making eye contact again, though it was largely with Jeremy and only sparing seconds with me that she always broke off from first.

It may be good that she was a bit skittish about me.

As I sat and listened to her and Jeremy chatter on, nursing the last of my Pimm's, I determined that I'd just dodged a bullet. Not only to avoid an

unknowing infraction of my principles but spooking off our new accountant from any temptation.

The position she was taking up had only just recently been vacated by another pretty woman. Firing anyone was always unfortunate, especially just before the busy season. But it'd been pretty necessary.

The last one had gotten it into her head that she and I had 'something.' I don't know exactly how I put the idea in her head, other than my usual courtesies to my staff. I did realize I had a certain effect on women. But I did not quite figure how I'd given her enough to go off that she started, well...

Stalking me.

It'd been relatively innocuous at first, just being quite active on my social media account and trying to strike up a conversation that way constantly or the rare times I saw her in person. But then she started welcoming herself into my life, crashing parties I was at, sneaking into my car, leaving messages pinned on the gate to my house...

Enough had been enough, and I managed to quiet it with a restraining order and a termination.

"Hey, Silas," Jeremy piped up, and I blinked out of my reverie, zero to one hundred at the drop of a hat.

"Yeah?"

"I've gotta go work for now, but thanks for introducing me to Violet here. She's gonna be a great help in the office. I can tell already."

Violet smiled, though the expression I could tell was a bit strained.

"Thanks, Mr. Walsh."

"I told you, Jeremy's fine. And come by anytime, alright? To talk shop or if you want to enjoy the club. We take care of our own here."

Her quietly tense body language, delicate proportions all locked up like a deer in headlights, made it clear she wasn't entirely on board with that idea yet. But she still nodded gratefully. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate you taking the time out of your night to talk to me."

“Anytime! You be safe now. Happy holidays.”

“Happy holidays,” she chimed back, her voice so soft that it seemed to melt apart like a snowflake in the balmy Louisiana air.

I watched her for a few moments, my glass of ice and garnishes sweating away in my hand.

“... He means it, you know.”

She locked up; if she was a deer in the headlights before, she was a statue now. Her head turned on a rusty swivel towards me, and she stared at my chest, not my face. And not in the way of someone enjoying the scenery—she *couldn't* meet my gaze anymore.

“... I can tell that he means it,” she replied, tone cautious and quiet. She didn't *sound* skeptical, but I could tell she had plenty of reservations about that. Like she believed that he *meant* it, as though it was some well-intentioned platitude that would never follow through.

“Well, you'll learn it for yourself soon enough.” I slapped a hand on my denim jeans and drove myself up. “I've got to go take care of some business of my own. Why don't you enjoy the vantage from here? One of the crew will run you bottle service as long as you want tonight. On the house.”

“Well, I guess I'll be dealing with that later,” she mumbled.

I paused at that. And then I couldn't help but laugh, having not expected any humor out of her after how shaken up she was.

“Yeah, I suppose so. But what's the point of all this if I can't take care of my people every once and awhile?”

“... I suppose,” Violet replied, staring at the floor.

“Well, take care now. Tell William and all of them at the office happy holidays from the bossman. And here, take this. In case you need to contact me for any more questions or concerns.”

I put my business card on the table, figuring she'd take it of her own accord rather than trying to force it on her. The strange new accountant nodded mutely at first before she mumbled out a quick reply.

“... Of course, sir.”

I lingered a few moments more than I intended before I turned, giving a lazy two-fingered wave over my shoulder in parting.

I made my way outside to get some fresh air and clear my head.

But even when I'd made it to my car, she still lingered in my thoughts. I must've gotten a bit stirred up, myself, by the shock.

When I was stressed, I flirted. And since flirting had not only failed to reduce my stress, but crimped it up a bit more, it was no small wonder I found myself fixating on every little moment I'd had with her.

What vexed me the most, I think, was how drastically different she'd been before and after. Had she had some terrifying boss in the past that made her so gun-shy? Had I really come on so strongly that I'd scared her?

I sighed, crossing my arms on the roof of my Ferrari.

“Well,” I said to absolutely no one, “that sucked.”

After a few moments of ‘allowing’ myself to mourn the loss and let it all go, I nodded, straightened, and loaded into my car, fully intending on moving on with the rest of my night.

The engine revved to life, and I stared out the windshield, locked in some strange suspended emotion. But then I grumbled, hitting the back of my head against the headrest.

The part where I stopped thinking about her?

Yeah, that hadn't quite triggered, even though I'd taken a few moments out of my day to will the thoughts away.

But, hey, I reasoned as I fussed with the radio to keep myself busy while I sobered up, I'll walk it off.

I still had all those emails to get through. A riveting distraction. If that didn't sober me up, nothing else would.

Chapter 5

VIOLET



Going to work the next day felt like walking on eggshells.

This was made even more uncomfortable because, clearly, no one else knew what had happened. Once again, I was stuck going through a phantom minefield, but my instinct knew I'd eventually step on something. Even though Mr. Chandler had asked me to pass on greetings to my boss and the staff here, I felt a certain anxiety about even broaching the topic. Because if I brought that up, it'd just open the door for questions about how I'd met him, and I'd rather not lie by omission or even tell the truth.

It was just way too embarrassing to open myself up to. I didn't want to ruin my still new reputation with that incident.

The office for the accounting building was only a short drive away to Central City; rather than being situated in one of the skyscrapers on the horizon, it was nestled into an old brick building that had been broken up into a few different commercial renters. This was fine by me since I was spared the commute into the denser urban center and felt a bit more of the city's soul rather than a Southern-tinged metropolis.

And it was a nice office, really. A lot better than my last one. It was cozy, with a modern open desk concept and comfortable seating areas by the windows for people to take some downtime away from their work. And there was a corner well occupied by a kitchenette. It was furnished with a top-of-the-line household coffee and espresso machine, a nicely stocked little fridge with complimentary snacks, and even a little induction plate for people who wanted to cook something quickly for themselves during a break.

Mr. Chandler, or whomever he'd given the authority to furnish this place, knew that we'd have to practically live here for the first few months of the year.

I glanced up from my desk and watched my boss Mr. Marks (a.k.a. William to Mr. Chandler), walk by, and felt a twist of guilt and embarrassment in my gut like I was some school kid hiding contraband in my desk.

Just work, I reminded myself. *Just work*.

After all, it was the mantra that had gotten me through so many years.

I doubled my focus back onto my computer screen, the wall of numbers washing over my mind as I tried to get back on track.

I made a valiant effort for the next twenty minutes or so, but my thoughts couldn't hone back in with their usual acuity.

I just kept thinking about him.

It was a weird fixation that I attributed to dread; the other shoe would eventually drop with a man like that. I'd probably seen his true colors before he realized that he was my employer. He might get pushy with me again at some point, and now I knew I wasn't in a good position to refuse him.

Which put me in a severe bind. Even though he'd offered to forget the whole incident, it didn't change that it had happened, and *that* had been my first impression of him. How could I trust a man who wouldn't take no for an answer to treat me well as an employee under his authority? What's to say he wouldn't change his tune when I started to get complacent and dependent on this job?

My mind spun in place, weighing options, dreading possible futures.

Ultimately, I settled for taking my break a little earlier than anticipated. Maybe I just needed to take a moment to clear my thoughts, and I'd be able to put it, put *him*, from my mind.

As I patiently waited for the glossy chrome machine to make my automated latte, I heard a voice pipe up next to me.

"How's it going, Violet?"

I glanced over and saw Whitney's smiling face towering above me; she was probably about as tall as Mr. Chandler, though she was quite willowy

where our employer was built like a mountain lion.

“Ah, it’s, well. Going fine enough,” I hedged out. “You?”

“I’m just enjoying the calm before the storm. Things are going to get gnarly here really soon. I’m glad we managed to pick you up before the new year so you could get acquainted with things before the first quarter starts.”

“Me too.”

I stared a bit intently at the mug getting filled with the last few sputters of coffee, a particular niggling thought twisting around in my mind. When I spoke up next, I kept my volume hushed to avoid carrying to the general work area.

“... I’ve wanted to ask, but I know it’s rude... What caused the opening? Someone retire?”

I’d been through my fair share of hellish bosses and toxic workplaces. This office had seemed better than most, but these things could always lie under the surface, only for you to realize too late.

Whitney glanced aside, looking around with a brief confidential air before sidling in closer to me.

“Ah, well... It’s actually a little bit of drama. I can give you the full details later, but... More or less, the gal whose desk you took over? She got fired.”

“Why?” I took hold of my coffee, though I was too focused on the conversation to pay much attention to it.

“Between you, me, and the fence post,” Whitney drawled on in a secretive whisper, “She fancied Silas a bit *too* much.”

I felt a little slow jitter spook up my spine.

“Mr. Chandler?”

Whitney nodded, leaning a hand on the counter next to me.

“Yeah. I mean, I can’t blame her for having a little boss crush. He’s hot as hell. But she didn’t just cross the line, she played hopscotch over it.”

I gave her a quizzical look, and she chuckled wearily. I could see the faint

trace of some lingering stress, as she must have been on the ground floor of the whole debacle.

“Stalked him, you know? Full-on creep, showing up at his house and leaving weird messages. Here at work, she kinda acted like they had a thing going. I honestly thought they were some sort of secret couple for a while before the whole thing blew open. It was wild.”

Well, I hadn't quite expected that. But it didn't make sense; the pushy, flirty man I'd first seen at the bar would have leaped at the slightest flash of a woman's interest. But maybe she just wasn't his type. Or he'd lead her on in some way. Or perhaps the story had been warped, and she'd been thrown under the bus when he was done with her.

“Yeah, that-... Does sound pretty wild,” I replied, a stilted laugh tacked onto the end. “Was she really that bad?”

Whitney nodded, though she glanced at her smartwatch to check the time. “Unfortunately, yeah. It got insane near the end. Tried to break into his house or something.”

I carefully sipped my coffee, being mindful not to burn my tongue.

“And... Mr. Chandler... How did he handle all that?”

“Once she started doing illegal stuff, it got handled pretty quickly. Got canned and I heard there was a restraining order.”

“But how did he *seem* to be, emotionally? Was he upset by it? Angry?”

Whitney shrugged, shifting in to grab an empty mug to get her coffee.

“We saw him a little bit around the time it happened, and he was professional about it. He apologized for the hassle and promised to ensure we'd get a replacement soon before the busy season. I'm not sure if it bothered him much personally; he's always so calm and charming. You'll see what I mean when you get to meet him. He'll probably come around soon.”

I nodded, though I felt dubious about her effusive praise.

Was he, in fact, a good boss? All the staff I'd met had nothing but good things to say about him. But the weirdness I'd experienced had left me

feeling more jarred than not by him. Which side of him was the 'real' side? The flirty barfly or the generous boss?

I needed to figure out the truth, so I could tell whether or not I could stay here.

Whitney and I shared coffee for a bit longer, though the topic of conversation wandered off before I could pry much more information about Mr. Chandler from her.

Soon enough, though, my break was over, and I had to crack back at it. I still couldn't put down thoughts of Mr. Chandler, both in anxiety about the future and the obsessive deconstruction of every little look and smile to try and glean some truth of his intentions from my memory.

By the end of my shift, I had a bit of a tension headache, but at least I was a day's work richer on my next paycheck. My drive home tempted me to go and stop by the numerous restaurants for a nourishingly rich dinner, but I wasn't rich enough to warrant that kind of expense right now.

And when I rolled into my new, mercifully quiet apartment, I gave myself the luxury of taking a shower before cracking open the slow cooker dinner I'd put on that morning.

As I curled up on my couch and watched the endless stream of Christmas movies running on cable, chewing through yet another dinner of beans and rice as my little mulled wine candle crackled away, I felt the most relaxed I'd been since the incident the night before.

I'd work this out.

For right now, I didn't have the money to quit. But that didn't mean I couldn't ensure I had other options lined up. I'd nose around and see if I found anything better; I didn't want to be trapped. Not ever again.

Even if he seemed to be a reasonable employer, I was not about to leave my future in his hands. I was done being manipulated and used.

I put my empty bowl on the table, taking quiet satisfaction in being able to take my time with my own messes. I'd had to live like a ghost with my family and then with my ex, constantly cleaning meticulously after everyone

like it was my life-or-death responsibility.

That's what all this was for.

Dirty dishes and scented candles. The freedom to live how I wanted to, the liberty of being in my own skin.

Though, I was a bit sad at the possibility of leaving my new job. Until the unfortunate bit with Mr. Chandler, I'd been enjoying myself reasonably enough. My new boss was attentive and reasonable, my coworkers were friendly and supportive, and there was every indication that it was just a pleasant place to work.

I wondered if it was just such a standout place or if I'd been so broken down at my last job that I'd never noticed the good there. My fiancée had been pretty adamant about me not getting too involved with my coworkers—classic isolation strategy, my therapist had told me.

Things already felt much better, but I knew it could vanish if I wasn't careful.

Eventually, I stood and turned off the television, gathering my dish with a gentle clatter of the spoon, breaking the sudden quiet.

I quite literally couldn't afford any loose ends anymore. I mentally apologized to Whitney, who'd probably been the closest thing I'd made to a friend in years. If it came to me leaving this job, maybe I'd still stay in touch with her. But perhaps it didn't work like that, and work friends were lost the moment you changed jobs.

I didn't really know.

Chapter 6

SILAS



Was it really necessary for me to do the rounds for the clubs? Probably not.

But I didn't want to neglect the clubs. They got me here, and it helped ease some of the stress from my newer enterprises to know at least these were going steady without me.

The great tragedy was that I couldn't just clone Jeremy and put him in every location. But I had done my best to get good crews in every location, though some of the newer spots were still finishing off some of their growing pains.

Like the newest place in Baton Rouge, the location was as ideal as I could swing, having bought out a ludicrously expensive spot Downtown with some of the windfalls from my oil and gas profits. There had been some weird upheavals in the staff, but the turnover had finally settled out the last two years or so, and it was properly on track to be one of my better locations.

I'd finished up my meeting with James, the manager here, just a few minutes before. He was good, though perhaps he ran the club with a tighter leash than I would like. I'd teetered on the possibility of replacing him in the past, but he'd seemed to have gotten a good crew under him, and the kinks worked out.

As per my tradition, I shared a drink with him, but he quickly left me to my devices and returned to his work. I did appreciate his workaholic approach better than a layabout, so I didn't begrudge him the pleasantries.

Besides, I had an enjoyable distraction on my plate.

A pretty young thing was on the stool next to me— just my type. Blonde, with a pixie nose, a giggly grin, and bright blue eyes, seemed to hit all my buttons.

“Mm, this is so good,” she enthused brightly, sucking down the second drink I’d fed her from the bartender.

I chuckled and flashed her a charming smirk. “Isn’t it? The drinks here are great.”

A weird dizzy disquiet hit me as my mind suddenly overlaid a very similar yet entirely different interaction—

Violet Norman.

She’d been a broken record running off and on in my mind for the past few days. Hence why I was looking to chat up some cutie at the bar instead of just heading off for more work; I needed more than a little stress relief.

“Yeah, like, you go to places like this and it’s usually just not the best, right? I mean it’s not *bad*, but it’s overpriced for the experience. You get what I mean?”

I nodded, thumbing my glass idly; she was cute and charming. But she wasn’t the most witty, stimulating company.

I’d enjoyed more boring girls for a few hours before, so I chugged on regardless, letting my usual charm do its work.

“Yeah, I get what you mean. It should be worth it if you have to shell out that much per drink. Did you come here to *just* drink, though?”

She shrugged languidly, eying me with a flirtatious smile.

“Well, I was hoping to see if some hot guy wanted to ask me to dance....”

I chuckled, giving her a once-over to make her giggle.

“You know, I was just thinking that I felt a little stir-crazy. You wanna hit the dance floor?”

She nodded, downing the rest of her drink with an earnest zeal I had to admire. I took hold of her arm and led her through the mild crowds to the dance floor, already well occupied by a decent throng of people enjoying the club music blaring over the speakers. The swirl of laser lights and other such dazzling fixtures added to the energetic atmosphere, which I did my damndest to throw myself into.

She was a good dancer, too, quite spunky and eager to get up on me. It didn't take long for us to settle into some proper *club* dancing— in other words, we were grinding up on each other, stealing some touches, and sharing heated looks.

But by the second song, despite the smile in place and the momentum of another night out on the town...

I wasn't lost in the moment.

I was lost in other moments—

The moments with Violet.

She was the furthest thing from the girl writhing up against me whose name I hadn't even learned yet. So why was I thinking about her right now?

It wasn't like me to get hung up on a woman. Not at all. My romantic dealings were purely fun for me, nearly a hobby to enjoy myself and get some stress relief in little flings and one-night stands.

So, when I felt my mind wandering well away, keeping up the dance and indulging in the easy chemistry just felt...

Frustrating.

Pointless.

I wasn't enjoying this. Not really.

So why was I bothering with this?

I disentangled myself from her, and when she gave me a confused look, I flashed her an apologetic smile and pulled out my phone, giving it a demonstrative wiggle. An understanding nod crossed her face, and she resumed dancing on her own, understanding that I must have needed to take a call or send off a text. She also likely assumed that I would be right back.

I had no intention of doing so, but I imagined she'd find her own fun out there. I wasn't going to, not at this rate. My smile faded as I worked my way outside, needing some fresh air. The next hour or so was spent outside a corner store, sucking down a bottle of iced coffee and looking through my work phone to sober up for the drive.

I was really starting to spin my wheels here, and I knew it. All this stress and no way to let off steam would start really getting to me. Maybe I needed to go on a trip that *wasn't* for business or hit up one of my old flames to see if she'd want something light and easy to pass over the holidays.

I could treat myself to some new toy; being ludicrously flush with cash had made it easy to get a one-stop serotonin trip if needed. The shiny new Ferrari? That'd been a treat for myself last Christmas.

Something about this time of year always seemed to get to me, and this year was worse than the past few.

That's what this was all about, I reasoned— just feeling the pressure.

I chug through a few emails I'd let languish in my inbox throughout the day, though I furrow my brow as I get to one from my *personal* accountant.

My mother had been asking me to get a few extra hundred grand moved over to her account for a week or so, and I'd finally put the word in to get that done. Apparently, the wire transfer had successfully gone off today, and she let me know some other little adjustments she'd made for some of the investment funds going into the new year.

I hadn't really bothered asking why she needed the money anymore; sometimes, she'd tell me and go on and on about all the 'exciting' purchases she had planned, and sometimes she'd give me the run around and harp on me why I needed to know every little thing she spent it on. If she wanted to tell me, she'd tell me. And it wasn't like I was hurting for that money anymore. If it kept her happy, that was all I needed.

I spent the walk back to my car musing on what exactly she would splurge on this time. Maybe she was planning another big trip with her friends next year. I knew she wasn't getting into property; she wasn't sitting on enough liquid money that a few extra hundred thousand dollars would cover the gap, not with her tastes.

That, and she was a bit reluctant to buy any newer houses after the last one. I'd asked her a few too many times if she was planning on moving out full-time into the new house instead of just using it as a vacation home. Even though she spent most of her time jet setting around, she still lived with me at

the end of the day.

Well, at least it meant I wouldn't be alone for Christmas.

Chapter 7

VIOLET



I'd always enjoyed coffee, and I'd realized that I was in some sort of Southern Mecca for the stuff once I'd gotten to the city. There was an endless cavalcade of coffee shops and cafes throughout the city, especially in the French Quarter. And I'd never heard of *chicory* coffee before. I mean, I did realize I recognized the distinctive yellow tin that was in the office kitchen. I'd talked with Whitney about it yesterday, who gleefully informed me that the place responsible for it operated all over the city, but had one of their most famous cafes near the water in the French Quarter. She'd urged me to visit it, and I honestly felt it might be a good way to cement our friendship if I did. Was I overthinking the process of making friends with my coworkers? Maybe. But it'd been so long since I had the chance to make friends, so I assured myself that a bit of nerve and uncertainty would be natural.

It's like riding a bike, my tela-therapist had told me when I'd asked her about making friends in our last session. I might fall and scrape my knees a few times, but soon enough, I'd start feeling comfortable and naturally building bonds with other people again.

So, I decided I'd try what seemed natural: we'd talked about the coffee at work today, and now that work was out, I was here to try the coffee at the cafe. Then tomorrow, I could casually bring it up and enthuse about her suggestion.

The line to the counter was long enough that I could spend a few minutes googling chicory coffee on my phone so I'd know what exactly I was getting myself into. I did spare a longing look at someone walking by with a plate of beignets covered with enough powdered sugar to really make it a white Christmas. I'd come to try the coffee, but maybe I had the room in my stomach for three pillowy pastries.

When I made it up to the register, I knew exactly what I wanted: a cafe au lait and an order of beignets. I hadn't even tried them yet since I'd gotten to the city, as it wasn't exactly a luxury I thought I could afford. But the temptation was too much at this point.

I got myself situated underneath the big open-roofed patio framed with green awning with its many little tables, a bit of earnest excitement fluttering in my chest. Not only was this a special little treat, but I was also in the middle of doing something I could vicariously share with my new friend tomorrow. I glanced around, and honestly found myself very charmed by the atmosphere; the golden glow of the lights in the evening reminded me of a painting, and the soft chatter of some of the other customers was a pleasant backdrop that kept loneliness at bay.

I gave my coffee a light stir and felt a little worried when I noticed a bit of color sticking to my spoon. But I'd already bought it, so I gave it a dubious sip. Then, I couldn't help but smile as I put the mug down. It really *is* good. I could tell what they meant when they said the chicory made it taste like dark chocolate. The earthiness was surprisingly charming, and I could tell the milk definitely *made* the experience. It almost felt like drinking hot chocolate.

I brought out my phone and carefully arranged the mug and beignets for a picture, for later vicarious enjoyment and to show Whitney. She liked using social media, and I was torn about setting up an account myself.

If I did, it'd be easier to keep in touch with new friends I could try to make in the city, but I dreaded the possibility that *he* could somehow track me down through it. If I didn't use my real name and didn't post any pictures of myself, he wouldn't be able to, right?

I got a few nice-looking shots before I put my phone down. And just as I reached for my coffee again, I saw someone pull up the chair across from me. My entire body locked up, and I felt *sick*. I knew I should look up to see who it is but some primal part of my brain was already in a paranoid panic that *he'd* somehow found me regardless.

My pulse pounds in my ears as I finally negotiate my eyes up to the person

A stranger, mercifully. Some man, maybe in his thirties, decently dressed, with an easy smile. In a way, much like how Mr. Chandler had looked...

But this man felt different. Or at least, *I* felt different. I tried to open my mouth, firmly ask him what he wanted, or just leave my table, but I just... Couldn't.

"Well, aren't you the shy type? Or do you not know English?" His casual drawled questioning gave me goosebumps, and at least that viscerally unpleasant feeling was enough to get my mouth working.

"... I just don't expect strangers to... Welcome themselves to my table when I'm sitting alone..." I mean to sound firm, resilient, and warning. But I sound uncertain even to my ears.

"Haha, well, we're friendly down here."

He was smiling, yes, and had every air of friendliness. But I felt like a cornered animal, uncertain if the moment I bolted or resisted would doom me to some trap.

"I saw you waiting in line earlier. You know, you don't have to do that."

"Do what?" My dizzy nausea contributed to my struggle to comprehend his intentions, making me feel even more vigilant.

"Wait in line."

I glare dubiously at him; this feels like a grift. What his aim is, I'm not sure.

"I don't mind waiting in line," I manage more confidently.

"Well," he says with a bit of a laugh, "a pretty girl like you shouldn't have to stand around and waste her time anyways. But just so you know, here's a little local secret: you don't have to wait in line. If you sit down, someone will come by and serve you."

He clearly expected me to be quite impressed and dazzled by this bit of intel. But even if it was true, it's not like I'd asked him for advice. What was it with men that they decided they needed to stick their noses into a stranger's business and give them unsolicited suggestions? And why did they *constantly*

do this to me? Was it because I looked young and impressionable just because of my body type and my baby-faced looks?

He crossed his arms and leaned into the table, and I felt myself lock up and lean further back into my seat to get some distance. My gaze instinctively falls from his face to my coffee, pulse pounding in my throat.

“... I see.”

He drops his head a bit, clearly trying to get my attention back again and break into my line of sight.

“You should try your beignets sooner rather than later, too. They’re best right away. And they’re even better if you dip them in your coffee.”

I’d already been thinking about trying it, but now the idea felt sullied like I’d just be feeding into his game if I did.

“I’m just... waiting for my friend to show up,” I mumble, knowing there was strength in numbers, even if they were imaginary.

“Oh? Are you visiting the city with a friend?”

“No, he— he lives here.”

Men didn’t respect *my* space or my agency. But they respected the presence of other men, like warding off wolves with sheepdogs. I saw a little shift across his expression that spoke ill for his happiness but good for me, giving him reason to walk away.

“Classmate or something?”

I reach for my coffee and lift it when I hear the lightest clatter of ceramic from my hand shaking.

“I’m not in school,” I say, quiet but matter of fact.

“Oh, no college for you, huh?”

“I already graduated. I’m twenty-seven.”

A bit of aggression weighed into my words, and I felt a cold panic snap as soon as the words left my mouth. What if that upset him, and he retaliated? I couldn’t tell him off, I needed to be careful.

His brows shot up. Now that I was getting older, my age could sometimes be a saving grace. It would often spook off men who thought I was some barely legal or university girl they could razzle. Though sometimes it had the opposite effect of only making their interest more enthusiastic.

“Wow, you look amazing for your age.”

He looked older than I was, yet he was talking about me as though I was some vintage *thing*. Not a person, a *thing*.

I didn't know if I'd have the stomach for my treats anymore. I broke eye contact and slowly sipped at my coffee to try and buy myself time to think and breathe.

It didn't taste as good.

“... I'm sorry, but I'm nervous since I'm meeting him for a date. I really don't want him to get the wrong idea, so could you please... leave my table?”

“Ah, well,” he said with a laugh, “You'd think he'd bring you here on the date instead of meeting you here. Seems like he's kind of sloppy, in my book.”

My lips pursed, and I gave him a silent look, but that seemed to be enough to sell the impression that I had no interest in another man, even if he deemed my imaginary date as lower caliber.

“But, well, hope you have a nice time with him,” he relented, standing up. “Merry Christmas, beautiful.”

“Merry Christmas,” I muttered.

I watched him leave the premises and walk out to the street, and only once I'd lost line of sight did I finally breathe more easily. My senses focus back out, washing over the sea of faces and people bustling around the French Market.

It was evening, yes, but, for all intents and purposes, it was a busy public place. If he'd tried anything, surely other people would have noticed, right? I could have made a scene if I needed to.

But I'd tried making a scene before, and it hadn't gone well.

I was so scared of what could be done to me again that I struggled to stand up for myself however I wanted. I was just too damned traumatized, too broken— such thoughts plagued me as I blinked away tears and took a sip of coffee to try and warm the terrified chill in my gut.

I sniffled and took a bite of one of the beignets.

It was perfect, too. Pillowly and sweet, the soft texture was gently comforting to chew on in my rattled state.

Why hadn't I been able to tell that guy off like I'd done Mr. Chandler at the bar, even if the aggression was short-lived?

Was it because I was already drinking?

Was it because Mr. Chandler hadn't given me the same intuitive sense of danger as this guy had?

Was it because I'd gone to the club for work, and I tended to feel more confident when it came to my professional life?

I didn't know. Maybe I was just so damaged that I could neither predict nor protect myself.

I dabbed my beignet into my coffee, not to use the man's advice, but just in some silent senseless spite that I'd already wanted to do it for myself, first.

It was a really tasty combination, though I knew I would enjoy this so much more if I'd been left alone.

What really hurt is that I'd needed to lie that much. He'd only left because I'd implied I didn't have the romantic availability or interest in him. If I'd suggested I was meeting up with Whitney or something, he probably would have put his feet up and happily waited for another woman to show up.

My therapist suggested that when I felt more comfortable with some of the new people in my life, I could use them to help me feel safer and more comfortable at times like this. Or even just as safety nets. But I didn't think I knew Whitney well enough yet to ask her to pretend to be someone else calling me to dissuade unwanted men away.

Not yet, though. Maybe soon?

It'd be nice, I thought through a wistful bite of the beignet, if we were that close soon.

I continued silently eating and drinking my coffee, once again feeling painfully alone.

Chapter 8

SILAS



Do I enjoy long-winded business meetings for my petroleum business?

God no.

Do they make sure I'm making a lot of money?

Unfortunately, yes.

I rambled on a few more closing words as I stared down into the mosaic of bland men in suits and ties on my laptop monitor, and soon enough, I got to drop the call and got a moment to breathe.

I pulled out my earbuds and sighed, scouring a hand back through my hair. Things were going well for Chandler Energy, but every year always brought with it the pressure of figuring out how to push profits harder and make sure all my fat cat workers were well-fed enough that they wouldn't meander off to one of the more prominent, older names in the oil and gas game.

I'd learned quite a bit about the business in the last few years, but my adage of putting the right people in the right places had really saved my bacon as an oil tycoon. It just had the unfortunate consequence that most of the right people were the aforementioned boring men. At least my nightclubs and entertainment joints had interesting characters and people I could have outside conversations with that weren't all country clubs and stock portfolios.

I wasn't born into wealth; I'd only adopted it. So, while I'd picked up enough of the social queues and luxuries to mingle with that cushy white collar, it didn't feel like home. Not in the same way the motley mess my clubs were. They were full of plucky, weird people who knew a hard night's work and how to roll with the punches and had stories to tell that I genuinely

wanted to know.

But somebody had to pay for my shiny cars and Mom's fancy trips.

And speaking of the devil, I looked up from my laptop just in time to see her lingering in the doorway, her knuckles rapping on the wall to try and politely knock and get my attention in case I was still in the middle of things.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, good," she said, wandering into my home office with a growing smile. "How'd the meeting go, dear?"

"Good, Mom. Real good. Bored me to tears, though."

She rounded my desk to fuss with my hair lightly, smoothing it back into place.

"Well, work is work, and while it may not be as *exciting* for you as running your little clubs, you can't argue with the money."

"No, absolutely not," I chuckled, giving her arm a quick squeeze as I stood up.

Even though the clubs had once been my pride and joy and the real breadwinners, she'd grown more dismissive about them since our fortunes had skyrocketed off my oil business. I could understand why, hence why I let it slide again. And she was just like that, always mercurial. I figured that if I somehow stumbled into building rocket ships or running some big tech place, she'd treat this as old hat, too.

"Going to have a busy night again, Silas?"

"Yep, no rest for the wicked," I replied, flashing a glance at my watch as I made for the door. "Gotta go rub some elbows tonight with some big wigs that are in town to see me."

"Oh, you should have told me," came her voice right on my tail, clearly intent on following me through the house. "I would have kept my night open to come with you."

"You're better off going to the theater with all your gal pals anyway. I dunno if any of the gents tonight are bringing their wives to chat with or are

looking for a pretty young thing like yourself to put on their arms.”

“Oh stop it,” she tittered out, though clearly was quite pleased with the flattery. “You know I only want to help you network.”

“I know, Mom.” I walked into my bedroom, and she welcomed herself right after me, even as I started to unbutton my shirt to get ready to put on a proper suit. “I appreciate it. But I promise that I’ll survive without you for a night.”

“Next time, let me know, alright? I’ll be sure to keep my books open; the family business is important to me.”

‘The family business,’ as though this was something that’d been passed down, something she’d put her own sweat, blood, and tears into. I sighed quietly; my smile reflexively pressed into place.

“Of course. I’ll let you know next time.”

I glanced over my shoulder at her, smirking with careful intention.

“Mind giving me the room, Mom?”

“Ah, right. Though it’s not like I haven’t seen it all before,” she replies with a laugh, slowly making her way to the door.

“Yes, I know. You ‘changed my diapers,’” I reply, threading the needle of affection and derision.

“That’s right, and don’t you forget it,” came her answer, her affection paired instead with hidden intensity. She said it airy and easy right now, like we were just casually bantering along, but I’d heard her bring out every sort of sacrifice and effort she’d made for me over the years when I pushed back against her.

But the jokes that turned into threats and vice versa?

It was just what families did, in my mind.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as she walked out, though she just traipsed out and didn’t shut the door after her. I slipped off my shirt and wandered back over to close it properly, though I carefully minded the latch not to make too much noise when I did it. As a kid, I’d had it burned into my

brain that all of the house was the family's space, and no one was entitled to a shut door. But now that I was grown and it was just the two of us, I felt like I could justify some moments of privacy.

I head over to my walk-in closet, and as I pick out shirts, I look at my own reflection in the mirror.

Little Silas had grown up a long while ago, and look at me now. Important billionaire, running more businesses than I had time, sitting on more money than I could reasonably spend in my whole lifetime.

“You’ve come a long way, tiger,” I say to myself more than a little facetiously, grinning at my own careless ease.

I plucked out a tailored shirt— this was the one from Savile Row. I work it on, making eye contact with myself again. A glance at my muscular torso beneath the open shirt earns a faux catcall whistle out of me.

“Big man, big house, big money.”

All I could have ever wanted for myself when I was growing up. I’d made it.

But it was still work. I was good at work, and handling a *lot* of it. You didn’t get this far starting from nothing without being a workhorse that pushed into the right opportunities.

“Work hard, play hard, right?”

I offered the amused rhetorical to my reflection, who only offered a smarmy look back. My grin fell and I rolled my eyes, meandering deeper into my closet to pick out a suit.

“Hard to play hard when playing isn’t fun anymore, is it, Silas.”

I’d perfected the particular art of destressing, at least in a way that had worked for me. But it wasn’t working, not lately anyway. New catches didn’t excite, and old flames felt like going through the motions. I’d even managed to get a hold of one of my tried and true on-again off-again, Alice Durand, and pinned her down in the city (figuratively and literally) for a few days. But even that reliable spark had lost much of its luster. And, of course, women

weren't the only option.

There was always enjoying some of my manifold rich boy toys, like the cars, boats, motorcycles, and so on. I'd gotten a Ducati just a few months ago after I'd hung out with a CEO trophy husband who'd gone on and on about how good they were.

But sport wasn't working. Neither was drinking, socializing, traveling—

It was like a switch had gotten flicked off and I couldn't get the damn light back on.

It wasn't the first time I'd had a little bit of a slump. I'd bull my way through as always. It didn't make being in the slump any more enjoyable, though.

Especially when I felt particularly vexed by this slump, whose cause I had a strong guess for.

Little miss accountant, Violet Norman. I'd been stuck on repeat since that little bungle with her. I'd suffered at the hands of unattainable interest before, but it was always short-lived and passing. It'd only been a few days since, but this particular hook felt uncomfortably deep.

It was clearly just my mind having a tantrum, and I was better than its stupid impulses and inclinations.

She was a *non-option*. As soon as she got on my payroll, she stopped being a possible romantic entanglement and became an employee.

But she'd really gotten me with that mysterious whiplash of a personality.

Which was even more reason to forget about that *weird* little redhead and get back to living my life, I insisted silently to myself as I finished getting myself dressed.

If it kept being a problem, I couldn't exactly risk her livelihood by interfering to either gratify myself or get her out of my hair. But I definitely wasn't going to be happy if she kept being a thorn in my side, so to speak.

Once I got myself in order, I got my driver lined up for the ride to the restaurant. I felt like giving drinking another go tonight; repetition would

break the cycle one of these days, right? It was like busting down a wall. Sooner or later, it'd give.

Besides, I wasn't anticipating that the company would be especially entertaining, so it'd be on me to be the life of the party.

When I got there, I was glad I'd already decided to drink and be merry. I was meeting with three important contacts in the oil world who I'd been flirting with for the past few years.

And two of them had brought two pretty young women who I knew were their daughters.

Daughters clearly here to be thrown under my nose to see if I'd bite.

I smiled warmly on my approach, my hand already extended to go through the usual rigamarole of introductions. I made eye contact with each of the young ladies in turn, already contemplating whether or not I'd get them in my rotation. They were probably looking to get me snared up and on the way for some business deal marriage, but I wasn't looking to get caught.

But the girls looked earnest and eager, giggling as I greeted them, even though I was nothing but a wealthy, advantageous stranger their dads sicced them onto.

Ahh, the things we do for family.

Chapter 9

VIOLET



Whitney did, in fact, get very excited about me going to the cafe when I brought it up the next day. And we'd gotten talking about this and that afterward, and she'd found out that I didn't have any plans for Christmas Eve tomorrow. We'd get to enjoy Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off, giving us time to spend with our families (for those who had them) and prepare ourselves for the madness ahead.

Apparently, that was pretty heinous in her book, and she insisted that I come with 'her and her folks' to the bonfires.

According to her, going down to the river on Christmas Eve was a tradition for some public bonfire festivities. I didn't lie when I said I'd moved around a fair bit, so this wasn't my first time going to a bonfire. However, I hadn't quite anticipated the scale and grandeur going into it.

We rolled up during the daylight hours, and it looked close to a fairground already. Huge pyramid stacks, almost like Christmas trees, were queued up along the levees in regular procession. A few big ornamental pieces were put up. It was common practice for some crews to put together big burnable art pieces for the occasion. Some UTVs were lined up for the camo-clad folks working on some of the plain bonfire stacks, and families milled around to get themselves set up and ready for the night ahead. A Santa was set up nearby and taking photos with kids, and countless more kids were sliding down the levee bank on flattened cardboard boxes.

I giggled a bit as her parents loudly pointed out a real Christmas tree someone had put up and festooned with beer cans.

"This is a really festive thing here, huh?"

"Oh, you bet," Whitney replied, grinning over at me. "Would have been

sad if you missed out.”

My smile ached into my cheeks a bit; this must have been such a small gesture for her, but I couldn't help but feel deeply touched.

“Thanks again for inviting me, Whitney.”

“Of course! Come on now, let's go find a good spot for sundown. They won't light them until dark, but you wanna get here early just to get settled in and beat the crowds. There's fireworks and everything, and we'll want to be set up good for it.”

I nod, joining her, her parents, and her three younger siblings to navigate what felt more like Christmas in July. They even ran into other families they knew, and I got introduced as ‘Whitney's friend,’ which was so small but still made my heart race. I didn't know what her family was *really* like, but for all appearances, they were just so cordial and friendly that I couldn't help but like them too.

Once dark hit, things definitely got a bit more ‘laissez-faire,’ as she put it. Plenty of people were starting to bring out sparklers or set off little household fireworks, and I saw more than a couple people nursing drinks. That was another peculiarity I'd had to get used to with the city that I hadn't thought about before; there wasn't an open container law here. Apparently, so long as it wasn't glass, you were golden. So, there were cans and mysterious thermoses that could be as likely to have coffee in them as they could booze.

Soon enough, with plenty of pomp and circumstance, the fires started to get lit; by that point, I was pretty lit myself, if I'm honest.

Enough that I found myself merrily chiming into carols with strangers alongside Whitney, taking photos with her and her family by crackling fires, downing spiked eggnog her dad had brought...

Life was good.

I'd honestly been a bit worried about spending the holidays alone, but I knew this merriment was enough to keep me going through Christmas day. Frankly, I figured I'd probably spend most of Christmas Day sleeping all this off.

That was a correct assumption because after I got dropped back off at my apartment and crashed fully dressed in bed, I didn't wake up until well past noon.

Sticky-eyed and cakey-faced, I slowly wandered to my shower to clean the smoke from my hair and makeup from my pores. Eventually, I went to the kitchen to try again to make some of that chicory coffee myself. I'd splurged for a tin since I figured it would be cheaper than going there all the time. However, I hadn't entirely accounted for two things: the cost of all the extra bits and bobs to make my own cafe au lait at home and the fact that I had to figure out how to make it taste right.

My first cup turned out a bit too gnarly for my liking, but I wasn't about to waste it. Some extra milk and sugar would have to save it. And in lieu of fresh, expertly made beignets, my coffee was paired with some bargain brand shortbread cookies for my holiday treat.

Christmas candles were lit, and marathoning festive movies were put on the television to underscore some holiday cheer. I even put on the adorably garish 'Papa Noel' socks I'd gotten from the office Dirty Santa— apparently, that was the regional term for a White Elephant party. Its little bells twinkled with every step, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't make me feel a little happy every time they went off.

Once I got myself cozy, I decided to grab my poor phone from where I'd put it on to charge to keep myself busy with some lazy day scrolling.

When I finally turned it back on, since it'd died from being neglected in my purse overnight, I began to poke through the weather app as everything booted on. I was halfway through contemplating what I'd do with my next few days when my social media pushed a notification at me.

Three new direct messages.

I'd caved and joined to keep in touch with Whitney, so I figured she must be sending me some holiday cheer of her own.

But when I got to my inbox, I saw only one message from her. I had two messages from an unknown contact.

I figured it was maybe one of her family members, or even a bot, so I cracked it open just to see.

My heart stopped.

'Hi Vi, I hope you're enjoying the holidays as much as it looks like. It's good to see your face again, even if it's just pictures.'

'I miss you so much. I'll see you soon.'

Only one person called me Vi. Only one person could have sent me this message.

I could barely hear my own choked breaths as I blocked and reported the message in a hazy panic.

How could he have known?! I hadn't posted anything!

I hastily scoured my account—

And realized my folly.

Whitney was pretty laissez-faire about more than her bonfire festivities. She had a publicly viewable account.

And she'd posted pictures of us the night before.

On top of that, she'd *tagged my account*.

I stared at innocuously happy selfies, my ignorantly cheery face smiling back at me.

"You fucking idiot," I whispered, both at the image and myself.

He'd found me.

I urgently rushed to deactivate my account without thinking, knowing he wouldn't stop now.

I got up in a panic, hastening towards the door to make sure I'd been sensible enough to lock it once I'd gotten in. Thankfully, muscle memory had served me well, so I knew at least that entry was safe. And I'd already walked through the whole apartment without him appearing from under furniture like some demented Krampus, so he shouldn't be here.

It didn't stop me from scouring through the place in a cautious panic, armed with a kitchen knife, nor did it prevent me from ensuring all my windows were locked and covered. The balcony door, I knew, would *always* remain locked now.

The whole while, my mind was frantic, trying to figure out *how* he could have discovered me already. Whitney was the link, but how did he know to look for me through her? He couldn't have been looking through every single account in New Orleans, even if he somehow knew I was in that city. And what was to give him the lead that I was here?

Had he somehow tracked down my personal information through the apartment? Through my job? Through my account?

I'd changed my last name, my social security number, *everything*.

How had he found me?

I sent a wall of text to my therapist, but I imagined she wouldn't be checking in anytime soon, with it being the holidays and all.

I hurried past my little nest in the living room, my now quite cold coffee and half-eaten box of cookies abandoned on the coffee table with the peacefully sputtering candle.

I crawled down on the floor to drag my lockbox of personal documents out from under the bed, urgently paging through things as my mind turned into a logistical frenzy of trying to upend my entire life again.

By the time I got to the birth certificate, I couldn't read. I turned into a bawling, hyperventilating mess on my bedroom floor.

Even in this vulnerable state, my ears ached to hear every bump and noise, body homed in learned terror to listen for the approach of yet another person intent on hurting me. I don't know how long I sat like that, curled up into a fetal ball, crying my body weight in tears. But eventually, the visceral agony and fear subsided into a hollow husk of dread.

I trudged very slowly to the living room, my little twinkling socks providing no more simple joy.

There *was* no joy, not with his shadow casting its way back over my life again.

But just because he'd confirmed I was in the city didn't mean he knew where I lived. He somehow knew I was in contact with Whitney, so he might know where I work. I'd have to disguise myself when I go to work tomorrow. Maybe I could convince them to let me work from home? I contemplated jumping off the balcony for the courtyard to break my leg and get a note from the doctor to be on bed rest.

But if I hurt myself like that, what would I do if he found me? I wouldn't be able to run.

New Orleans was a big city. He wouldn't be able to find me right away. I'd have to figure out a way to keep myself safe while I got the money and paperwork lined up to leave again.

I'd change my name again. And not just the last name.

Maybe I'd dye my hair and disguise myself so he wouldn't recognize me if he saw me on the street. I'd somehow wrangle up the money to get foam boosters for my shoes, so I'd look taller, and wear extra layers so I look bigger. Maybe I'd pretend I got a boob job over the break and stuff my shirt.

Or perhaps I should go and turn myself into a women's shelter. They'd be able to help. Or I could try and go to the police, even though I know they'd tell me to call them when he shows up, but by then, it would already be too late.

It all felt like pulling at straws. *Nothing will work*, my darkest instincts told me. I was doomed the moment I tried to live a life without him.

I was doomed from the moment I was born.

I made my way to the bathroom, and caught my exhausted, haggard expression in the mirror. Dark circles ringed under my swollen eyes, and my pale complexion was reddened from the eyes to my nose from my crying fit.

"Well," I croaked out with a grim smile. "Merry fucking Christmas, Violet."

Chapter 10

SILAS



I stared at my mother tending to the old wreath-laden fireplace; the inferno she'd had burning in there all morning was keeping the room toasty enough that I'd dressed down to just a t-shirt and shorts when I came down from my room.

She got chilled if the temperature was under eighty, so I was accustomed to this song and dance. Hence why I often saw less of her in the winter since she tended to keep herself busy in warmer, exotic locales.

But she was always home for Christmas. Or she convinced me not to be at home for Christmas; those were her favorites. I don't think I'd ever met a woman as in love with travel as she was. Being frank, I didn't know if it was just because she wanted to make the most of how well-off we were now, or if she couldn't stand to stay still for more than a few days at a time.

"Well, come on then, honey, open your presents," she urged after she replaced the poker and the grate.

It felt nostalgic, though it was subtle and a bit cumbersome in my chest.

"Sure thing, Mom."

She giddily hastened over to join me on the couch, giggling as she grasped up one of her own presents, I'd hauled out from under the tree to sit on the coffee table for easy opening. We'd always open gifts together in a sort of easy-going flow. It was a far cry from the chaos of my youth, with all the extended family crammed into the trailer, yelling over whatever brick-a-brack we'd gotten. It usually turned into angry yelling as Mom got frazzled putting together Christmas dinner in an all-day affair of cooking, and Dad gave her hell for getting worked up on '*Jesus' goddamned birthday.*'

This was damn near meditative in comparison.

We had a proper little mountain to run through, too. Since money wasn't an object to us anymore, it was the expectation that we'd make good on it come Christmas. And there was no one else in the family to fuss over, so it just meant more for each other.

Mine were much of the usual nowadays. Meaning, it was just about anything luxurious with a ludicrous price tag my mother could find and thought a man could use. Clothes, watches, cufflinks, bottles of vintage booze for when I felt like drinking a couple of grand in a glass, et cetera.

She, of course, received much the same from me. I'd learned her tastes pretty well through all these years and knew just the sort of jewelry and the like that tickled her fancy. I heard her coo and enthuse through each one, and I spared her smirks and smiles as I expressed my own gratitude as I got into each box.

Partway through, I brought out a particularly small little number, and once I got the bow undone and the paper off, I discovered a key fob inside.

A sigh drifted out of me without my intention.

Ah, so that's why she'd needed all that money. She had either gotten it at the last minute, or she'd hurt her bank account enough by buying it previously that she had to make up the difference.

"So," I began anew with a playful tone, spinning the fob ring on my finger, "where's this one hiding?"

She smiled back at me, tossing her hair over her shoulder—the same dark brown as mine, though she sported some particularly pricey highlights that made her look a few shades lighter and luxuriously sun-bleached. I only knew the cost since she'd boasted up and down about getting in with some celebrity stylist on their regular rotation and had to fly out to Los Angeles all the time for it.

"The Lake Como house," she said with a warm smile.

"Ahh, of course. Italian car, Italian vacation home. Should have known."

I chuckled, though it was drier than it should have been.

“So,” I continued, “This your way of telling me you’re thinking of dragging me to Italy next year?”

She laughed, and I could tell from the zeal that I’d called her right out. Not that it was hard to do. In many ways, she was pretty predictable. Maybe not to someone else, but you don’t spend your whole life navigating around a person without learning how to read them like an open book.

“When you put it like *that*, it makes me sound like I’m packing your bag for you and pulling you by the ear onto the jet,” my mother bandied out with airy amusement and a light slap on the arm.

My smile tightened.

“Of course not, Mom, but you know you don’t have to lead me by the nose. You can just ask.”

“Well, oftentimes when I do, you’re just so busy with this and that, you know?”

That’s what this was about. Every Christmas for the last few, it was always a guilt trip about how I wasn’t spending enough time with her. When I’d been busting my ass before I owned the clubs, and even while I was a small-time business owner, she’d been a lot more mindful of just how damned busy I was keeping everything afloat. But maybe she’d just gotten too comfortable and cushy now that she hadn’t had to lift a finger in *years* that I had the same luxuries.

I was making sure she could *afford* the vacations and all their accouterment. I paid for the clothes on her back, the hair on her head, the nose on her face, the house she was in—

The car whose keys were in my hand.

Because it was my money. All of it was. I just did her the courtesy of taking care of her, giving her everything she wanted, and being a good son to my mother who’d given up so much and was all I had left.

My smile hurt to hold in place, but it didn’t budge.

“Yeah, Mom. I’m sorry, but I’ll try to make some time for another trip this

next year, alright?”

She smiled and leaned in to hug me.

“Thanks, honey. I know you’ll do your best. You always do.”

There came the sweetness. I patted her back, even though inside I was braced for the second swing.

I already saw it on her face when she drew back, her expression a bit crest-fallen, gaze cast aside.

“I just feel like you’re putting a lot of your effort into things you don’t need to worry about anymore.”

And there it was.

Once again, trying to bring up the clubs. My little ‘pet projects.’ But they were my pride and joy more than the oil business was. Maybe minding them as much as I did was just a hobby for me at this point, but I’d started there. So many of my years and tears had gone into them. Making sure they were well-run and kept going was a legacy I *cherished* and made me *happy*.

And she never got that.

She probably never would.

She never thought of things from my perspective. Or, for that matter, anyone else’s.

“Well, you know me, Mom,” I played off in a candid, mildly sarcastic tone, replacing the fob in the box. “I work to live and live to work.”

“Silas,” she warned in a worried keen. “You’ve always been such a hard-working young man. But we’re at a level where you no longer have to worry about fussing over little businesses. You have people for that. Instead of babysitting them, you could apply yourself to better ventures worth your while, or have more free time for things.”

Like spending time with her, my jaw flexed, and I knew I needed to mind my footing here if I wanted to avoid making this Christmas a bit *too* nostalgic.

“I appreciate your concern, Mom. I do. But I need to remain involved in all of my businesses in order to ensure they do well. And the clubs may not be the big breadwinners anymore, but they still bring in a lot of money. If I don’t keep some oversight on them, that’s less money.”

“It’s pretty negligible compared to the oil money...”

“So? You’ve told me never to put all my eggs in one basket for years.”

She pursed her lips, and I knew I had her on the ropes for just a moment. My mother didn’t do well when I threw her words in her face, because then she either had to admit to being wrong then, or being wrong now.

But she would be quick to find a workaround that suited her, so I had to be quick and keep her from launching on. I reached out and grasped her shoulder to give her an affectionate squeeze.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll be alright. And we’ll take some time to go to Italy together next year, I promise. So why don’t we get back to presents; Patrick’s in there whipping up quite the Christmas feast for us, and I gotta say I’m getting pretty peckish. Quite tempted to go in there and sneak a few bites, and I’m sure he’s got some of his usual little plates to keep us busy and fed until it’s dinnertime.

I’d never felt comfortable with bringing our private chef in for holidays. I wanted him to get to enjoy his own time. But my mother often joked that she’d cooked enough for this lifetime and either ate out or relied on an employee to make sure she was fed. I’d told her time again that I wouldn’t mind doing something myself for Christmas, or having him make something we could throw in the oven and warm back up. Still, she always insisted that we needed it fresh and deserved to not have to worry about cooking, especially for the holidays.

I don’t think Patrick much minded, though, not with the holiday bonuses I gave him every year.

She chuckled and shrugged lightly.

“I suppose that’s fair. Well, don’t let me hold you up. Open the next one, dear.”

With that, I went and grabbed the next one, and when I opened it to find yet another set of custom Italian dress shoes I made sure to give her a smile.

“Aren’t these dashing,” I say, reflexively using her own language for it. “Thanks, Mom. Appreciate it.”

She smiled and reached over to pat my cheek.

“Of course, honey. You know to trust your mother’s eye with things. You only look like a proper businessman when you wear what I’ve gotten you. You’re thirty-five, on top of being a man of means; you really can’t keep wearing leather jackets and jeans forever.”

I could have said plenty of things to argue the point, but the point *wasn’t* to fight on Christmas.

So I huffed and put my shoes away in their box, making a mental note to wear them to the next little function I dragged her to so she could pat herself on the back for getting them.

But that’s what you did for your family, I remind myself. And she was the only family I had left.

Soon enough, we get gifts all torn through, and she excuses herself to go through the usual cavalcade of phone calls to touch in with her friends. It was always more of an excuse to brag about what I’d gotten her, and what she’d gotten me, but it made her happy.

I waved her off, making my way to the kitchen.

Patrick smiled up at me from where he was manning four different sauté pans and appeared to have a Wellington roast in the works on the counter.

“Merry Christmas, boss,” he greeted, the homey creole twang to his voice making him sound eternally hospitable. “Got your snackables out for you already.”

My vision passed over the charcuterie and finger food, and I decided to grab a short glass of bourbon and poured one for him as well. I offered the drink to him, he chuckled and gave me a toast for good measure.

“Thanks, Patrick. Merry Christmas.”

Chapter 11

VIOLET



I felt more than a little ridiculous going into work wearing my impromptu disguise, but the anxiety that he could be watching me at that very moment was more than enough to overwhelm any sense of shame I might have.

When I got into the office properly, I flinched a bit when glances came my way, but awkwardly smiled as I started to unfurl the scarf I'd done up a little too high.

"You get sick with a Christmas fever or something, Violet?" Whitney piped up warmly from her seat, tone friendly and playful.

But I felt so brittle, especially since some part of my mind wanted to blame her for him— even though I knew it wasn't her fault. Maybe if I'd trusted her more and told her what was happening, she would have been more careful, but what's done is done.

"Ah, yeah... I'm feeling a bit under the weather, unfortunately."

She tutted her tongue, though her smile turned less teasing and more commiserating.

"That's a shame. Well, don't push yourself too hard today."

"That's right," my boss chimed in, smiling as he walked towards me. "We need you in fighting form for the first quarter."

I nodded, peeling myself out of the excessively baggy jacket that I'd hoped made me look like someone else and not a child crammed into their parent's coat.

"And did you... Dye your hair?"

I chuckled nervously and bit back the perhaps somewhat snarky comment

that a man would look at me going from red to black and not be sure if my hair was different.

“I, uh, had a little accident with some box dye. It looks horrific if I do say so myself, haha. So, I’m wearing a wig until I can sort it out.”

“Oh, I see. My cousin’s a stylist, works over by West Riverside,” he goes on, so warm and helpful. “She’s usually busy around the holidays, but I can ask and see if she has any openings to squeeze you in.”

If I wasn’t already sweating from the wig and the clothes, I’d probably have been sweating from lying so much at work. “Appreciate it, Mr. Marks, but I’ve got something in the works.”

“Well, you let me know. I know how rough it can be to go around with a botch job. When my cousin was still in beauty school, she mauled my hair so bad it looked like I stuck it in a lawn mower. I wore a hat through the dog days of summer to spare myself the looks.”

I laughed softly, this time a bit more earnest. Mr. Marks — William — did seem so nice from my time here so far. There was a twist in my gut as I looked up at him, earnestly considering whether or not I wanted to bring up my current predicament. I didn’t need to tell him the whole truth, but if someone else knew what was happening, maybe it could help me be a little safer.

But what if he waved off my worries?

There was a sickening twist in my gut, and I looked down at my own feet.

“Sir, could I actually talk to you for a moment?”

“Oh. Yeah, absolutely.”

I trailed along with him to his room, the only real enclosed space in the office. After shutting the door, he gave me a warm, mildly worried look.

“Is it about being sick? ‘Cause I know you just started here, but if you’re feeling under the weather, you can take some extra time now to rest up. I wasn’t kidding that we need you in fighting form.”

“No, sir, it’s not about that.”

“Ah. Well, sit and you can tell me what this *is* about.”

I shuffled my way to the chair across from him and resisted the urge to scratch at my scalp.

“I just... I know the office has had problems with stalking in the past, right?”

He looked very tense, and I felt more than a little apologetic.

“Ah, I guess someone must’ve spilled the beans to you. Yeah, unfortunately, we had to let someone go for being an issue. Is someone-...?”

My hands dug together on my lap.

“Not someone else at work, no. I just-... I might have a stalker, so if anyone comes around asking about me, could you....”

“Aaah. Yeah. Absolutely, Violet. And I’ll make sure everyone knows not to disclose anything about any personal information about other employees. I mean, they already *know* that, but everyone can get a little relaxed about that sort of thing when the consequences aren’t right on the brain. And after that whole hooplah, it’ll be fresh enough that I shouldn’t have to do too much prodding to remind them why it’s important.”

I exhaled a bit more shakily than I would have liked.

“Thanks, Mr. Marks. I appreciate it.”

“You don’t gotta keep calling me Mr. Marks, you know. I mean, I appreciate the respect, especially with how lippy some of this lot can be towards me,” he remarked with easy-going humor. “But you don’t gotta mind your Ps and Qs as much here as you might’a needed to elsewhere. We’re not some hoity-toity big brand branch, just a little office of paper pushers.”

My mouth twitched in the effort to try and smile.

“Yeah, I-.. I’ve noticed. And I appreciate it, too, but I guess I’m just not accustomed to how... Friendly everyone is down here yet.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a bit of culture shock, ain’t it?”

“More than a bit,” I chuckled out breathlessly.

We spent a couple of minutes ‘shooting the breeze’ before I slunk my way out to my desk. I still wasn’t feeling *comfortable* since I knew danger could be lurking around every corner. But at least I knew I had covered at least one of my bases.

I set myself in for work, relying on steady momentum to ground myself. Losing myself to spreadsheets and reference documents might not be the best coping mechanism,, but at least it made me feel structured and productive. After the last day and a half I had, I needed even just these small victories.

But my smooth and easy workday started to go off the rails too.

It started small, as these things always did.

I found an odd little discrepancy running over some of the financials for one of the nightclubs in Baton Rouge that had been in my predecessor’s workload. I figured it was something mild, a little dropped figure. But just like pulling a thread on a sweater, I soon found myself frazzled, staring at several open sheets with cells I’d highlighted and matched up running back *months*. Years, even, with the pattern starting shortly after the place had opened.

It wasn’t so obvious that just anyone would have noticed, at least if they were inclined to take things at face value and plug-and-chug along through the work. These were the little issues that took a more holistic and meticulous eye to notice, but that was one of my particular expertise as an accountant.

To my eyes, it became quite clear after a few increasingly intense hours of footwork:

Someone was embezzling money off of this nightclub.

It was more than a little nerve-wracking to come to the conclusion surrounded by my coworkers. Had none of them looked at this and noticed it in the past? Was this something my predecessor had just overlooked, being too busy chasing around Mr. Chandler? Or was she complicit?

Were the people *here* complicit?

Was Mr. Marks aware of this?

Was *Mr. Chandler*?

How far did this go up?

I began compiling my evidence, sweating bullets for more than a few reasons now. I probably really did look like I was working through a cold, because I got spooked by a few people giving me warm regards on their way out or even bringing me some honey tea from the kitchen in Whitney's case.

Who was I going to give this to? If Mr. Marks was part of the conspiracy, he'd show his colors and probably get me fired right away.

Mr. Chandler could very well be part of it too, but he was the ultimate authority here, and I figured he had the most to lose if someone else skimmed off the top of one of his enterprises. And given how much Whitney had sung his praises about being some big oil tycoon these days, I hardly figured that he would have bothered skirting the law for what must be chump change in comparison.

The worst part was that I even had a way to get ahold of him. He'd slipped me his card when our first meeting had turned to business.

But did I want to *actually* reach out to him?

No, not really. But I had a professional and ethical obligation to rectify this situation now that I was aware of it.

I stared at the blank email draft and dreaded what was inevitably going to come.

If he decided to fire me for this, I could sue for wrongful termination if I found someone who'd do it pro bono, since I'd be hemorrhaging money without a job. But in a weird way, the idea was comforting in that it meant my bridges here would be entirely burned and I'd have no reason to stay here any longer. I could go on the run with only pennies to my name and live out of my car for a few months while I pieced my life back together again.

I hemmed and hawed over it for the rest of my shift and spent the last ten minutes staring at it before I finally pulled the trigger. The lingering nerves from that definitely did not make me feel comfortable as I made my way out of the office again today, but at least Mr. Marks was kind enough to wait

until I was done to head out with me and walk to my car. I hadn't even asked him to. He just politely offered it.

I hoped he wasn't involved because I did want to believe that he was just a good guy and a good boss.

But you never really knew what darkness was hiding under the surface.

Chapter 12

SILAS



I slid down my sleeve and squinted at the brand-new Rolex on my wrist (courtesy of Mom).

Violet was late.

Well, not really. It only felt like she was because I showed up to our scheduled meeting early. I didn't need to, logistically speaking. But the fact that she'd reached out to me first had kick-started my hang-up with her into high gear. Mercifully, she hadn't hit me up to try and drum up my interest. With how pent-up I felt lately, I didn't need to have my personal code tested. Not that she had ever seemed interested. Before she'd tucked tail upon realizing I was her employer, she'd been decidedly *disinterested* in my advances.

Which was part of the problem.

I'd lost the window to woo a difficult catch before she'd been put in the forbidden category.

That was the theory my mind had settled on.

And now I would have to spend this whole conversation trying to subvert it and treat her as an employee. But I needed the chance to interact with her again, I considered. Allow my mind to put my curiosity to bed.

And I had a nice crutch in that I did need to pay close attention and act like a proper employer for this meeting. She'd emailed me with some very worrisome information; I'd reviewed it as best I could before passing it on to my personal accountant, whose preliminary interpretation was that she wasn't just talking out of her ass.

Someone was sneaking money out of one of my Baton Rouge clubs.

Which meant I had a rat. Maybe a few. Somebody was quite comfortable sneaking money out from under my nose. If I didn't have the safety net of the oil money, that sort of thing would be extremely dangerous to ensuring my enterprises stay afloat. But even if I could compensate for the loss by funneling money into the clubs, it didn't dissuade me from wanting to crack down on this.

After all, I didn't tolerate people trying to play me.

Which made me quite a kindred spirit to Ms. *Norman*. Hadn't forgotten that name again.

I watched her approach me among the crowds at the cafe, kicking back with my own cup of coffee. Despite how warm it was, she really was wearing a lot of clothing. She was a rather slender, short lady, but with her heavy Christmas knit and long skirt, her silhouette looked rather different. And had she dyed her hair?

She really did move with a sense of *wariness*, didn't she? Those big brown eyes of hers missed nothing, and she moved like a cat ready to swat at the nearest thing that looked at her crosswise.

Small and spicy.

Why did I have to have such an annoyingly specific type?

"Good afternoon, Mr. Chandler," she greeted in a hushed, deferential tone.

Fire went out like a smothered candle. Where did that woman go when she was around me? Did she really have to put on such a facade? I couldn't help but wonder what she must have gone through before that she tucked her tail so much around me.

"Good afternoon, Ms. *Norman*. Good to see you again, though I wish it were under better circumstances. Other than the business I called you to discuss, have you been settling in well?"

She nodded warily as she settled in across from me.

"Yes. The other accountants have been very, um, hospitable. I felt quite concerned about noticing these patterns and determining whom I should

report them to.”

“Well, you did the right thing,” I replied, smiling over my black coffee. “I appreciate you jumping the chain of command, so to speak, on this issue. It’s, as you said, ‘concerning.’ Would rather be able to nip this in the bud myself than let it get lost because it got put into the wrong hands.”

Violet gave another cautious nod, glancing worriedly out the window.

My brow furrowed a bit. She didn’t just look uncomfortable. She looked a bit *paranoid*. I recognized that wariness of being watched, looking for someone in shadows and around corners.

“You alright, Ms. Norman?”

She tensed up and whipped her gaze right back on me, the momentary surprise settling out into her previously polite and measured demeanor.

“Yes, sir. I’m alright. So, what did you want to discuss in person that we could not resolve over email or a telephone call?”

Her question was framed very formally, but I could tell she wasn’t enthusiastic about being around me again. Which, while it felt a little irksome, I knew it wasn’t entirely unwarranted. She didn’t know me well enough yet to realize I wouldn’t be some skeezy asshole boss who’d try to make a move on her.

I sighed, reaching for my briefcase.

“I just wanted to run over the paperwork that you saw together. I’m a more, well, hands-on kind of man. My accountant ran me through it, and I’m no stranger to the books myself, but I wanted to ensure I followed your thinking. I’m gonna be twisting the screws on, making sure that if this is what it looks like, it’s all handled squarely. But I also need to make sure that I’m not prematurely calling in the hounds if it’s a false flag, you understand?”

“Of course, sir. I would not have brought this concern to you if I did not think it was substantiated.”

I flashed her a smile as I began to bring out the folder of paperwork I’d printed out for this.

“Good. I appreciate people who do right by me. I do right by my employees. I make sure everyone under my payroll is given their due respect and courtesy. I take care of everyone. But I do expect them to take care of me in turn. And even though you’re a new hire, if this is true, you’ve really earned your stripes, and I’ll owe you a great deal.”

“I’m just making sure I do my job properly, sir.”

“I know. And I genuinely appreciate that. So, why don’t we get you a coffee ordered, and then we can hash this out. I know this isn’t a *standard* presentation format, but I prefer to be more personable if that’s not obvious,” I say with a disarming and easy chuckle.

“... Yes,” she replies in a stilted tone, hands held low on her lap. “It is.”

Tough nut to crack, this one. She just seemed so on edge all the time. Hopefully, by the time we got through all this paperwork, she’d feel a bit less wary of me. I don’t like having my employees be scared of me.

Well, at least for the wrong reasons.

If someone really was stealing from me, there would be some *warranted* fear going on here in the next bit.

She was a consummate professional, Violet. Once I managed to get her going, she definitely seemed a bit less *reticent* about showing off her chops and opinions. I definitely got the impression she was still minding her tone and keeping herself on a tight and timid leash, but I saw glimmers of that steadfast, certain woman who’d told me off at the bar under the surface.

It was right there in the numbers if you closely watched them. It seemed so obvious when she laid it out so neatly, but I knew how hard it was to see the forest for the trees and vice versa when you were up to your elbows in expense reports and tabs with suppliers.

I already had a shortlist of involved suspects. While I wasn’t *enthusiastic* about cutting the club manager, James, out right before rolling into a new year, my gut told me he was the one trying to cook the books a bit. But I didn’t know how much further this went beyond him, and I was going to make sure that when I ‘sent my hounds’ through to investigate, I got them all

in one fell swoop. If I was lucky, only one person was involved in all this and everyone else who handled the numbers and reports just hadn't noticed. I didn't like the idea that everyone was ignorant enough to not catch it, but I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

I had to resist the urge to try and play dumb and get her worked up just so I could see more of her *real* personality. At least, what I thought (and maybe hoped) was real. This whole meeting was also about building back good faith with her and being a good boss. This wasn't a *personal* dynamic, just a professional one.

But as I stared at her finishing off her second cup of coffee, I knew I was more than tempted to make it a personal one after all.

She was *interesting*. She amused me and intrigued me, and I wanted to figure her out. And maybe her wariness triggered my protective instincts a little.

But that just meant I had to do a good job protecting her *from me*.

"Well, Ms. Norman," I said with a sigh, "I think that's the last nail I was looking for. I'm extremely fortunate that we hired you. Really, I'm grateful for your care and attention in handling this. I'll have to give the hiring manager a raise for picking you up. You're clearly an asset and a top-notch accountant."

Her lips pursed at that, and I had to bite back a grin from seeing her take a compliment. God damn, she had no right being that cute. But I was losing the point, so I focused back in on the serious matters at hand before I spent the whole time mooning over her.

"I'm going to ask you to do me a favor here, and I don't want you to take this the wrong way."

She perked right up at that, guard raising back up. I raised a hand in a calm, stilling gesture.

"Relax, Ms. Norman. I need you to not turn up at the office for the next bit."

Her brow knit together at that, and I couldn't help but find the expression

more than a little endearing.

“... why?”

“I need to do some rooting through for bad apples, and I don’t want you caught in potential crossfire, you know? That, and I want to reward you for your hard work and initiative. Like I said earlier, I take care of mine. So, take the next few days off. Paid, of course.”

“Sir, I was just doing my job...”

“Doing it very well. So let me reciprocate that effort. Besides, I imagine you might like to get some more free time before shit hits the fan. Still, I’ll expect you back in that office bright-eyed and bushy-tailed come the new year,” I drawled out with a lazy smile.

She tensed a little around the shoulders, and I wasn’t quite sure of it, but there *might* have been a blush on those faintly freckled cheeks.

That, or she was just overheating in all those thick clothes.

“Thank you, Mr. Chandler. I’ll... accept your generosity.”

“It’s not just generosity, Ms. Norman.”

She looked at me a little dubiously at that. All the same, my lips split into a toothy grin.

“It’s an investment.”

Chapter 13

VIOLET



I really should be staying cooped up at home. With the threat of Elliot potentially trying to hunt me down in the city, it would be smart not to step outside my door. It's one of the reasons why I took Mr. Chandler up on his offer of paid time off because it spared me from having to deal with him finding me out through my place of employment.

But, was I really *free* of him if I turned my apartment into a prison? I was going to have to leave it eventually. That and after the first two days, I was going more than a little stir-crazy. Being stuck alone in my apartment, dreading every sound and knock on the wall, was going to send me over the edge.

So, I took a walk. A long one, meandering through the Quarter, enjoying the anachronistic and colorful architecture in broad sunny daylight. The weather really was pretty pleasant, but it still felt like it was supposed to be summer still to my more northern sensibilities.

Well, as I'd have to leave the city sooner rather than later, I probably wouldn't be dealing with the heat too long.

Which was a shame. This place was so charming, with a tempo all its own. Walking the streets you could immerse yourself in the babble of crowds and the *clip-clop* of the occasional one-horse carriages touring the city.

I watched one of the red-painted carriages roll by the pale-coated mule pulling it along going at a leisurely walk. My gaze wandered over the starry-eyed tourists leaning towards the edge of their cushioned rows to see the sites and I couldn't help but smile a little myself.

Maybe once I was free of Elliot once and for all, and had a stable life of my own, I could go on a vacation too. I'd never gone on one. Not a *real* one.

My family was too poor and maladjusted for a family trip to ever be on the table. And once I left them to live with Elliot, my money wasn't my own. It was his, and he'd much rather put it towards bills and buying what *he* wanted than going on romantic trips together. When he went on trips with his friends, I was left at home for one reason or another.

Why hadn't I seen it for what it was earlier? Why hadn't I broken the cycle sooner?

I took a centering breath and schooled myself back to the present.

My therapist had warned me not to blame myself for being a victim of abuse. It was all I'd ever known; how was I to know it was wrong, if it was the only world I'd lived in?

I crossed the street and passed beneath curved iron balconies to head into a neon-lit seafood restaurant. The extra windfall from getting some paid days off was going to save my bacon in more ways than one, and I was getting a little worn out on rice and beans. Grabbing a cheap po' boy sandwich from a shop wouldn't break the bank, not with all the other pennies I'd been pinching.

As I chewed through the fluffy bread and sauced fried shrimp, I stared out the window and found my mind wandering back to Mr. Chandler.

He was the whole reason I could justify splurging on a *sandwich* right now and put me at enough ease that I felt like I could stand to get out of my apartment for a few hours.

He'd been very *reasonable* in our meeting, though I still didn't know what to make of him. One good business meeting doesn't redeem a man from suspicion, at least not in my book.

And I had plenty of reasons to find him suspicious. A handsome, suave man like that? Definite womanizer. And I wasn't about to fall for it. He could give as much lip service as he wanted about being a fair boss, but it didn't change the fact that he had power and could feel entitled to use it to his advantage.

But I had at least some evidence to support his innocence if he kept

proving himself.

I wiped at my mouth with a napkin and absentmindedly looked down at the crumbs left over from my sandwich. I'd spent the whole time eating it thinking about Mr. Chandler, so I hadn't actively enjoyed the meal as much as I'd intended.

"So much for that," I mumbled, kicking myself for letting my mind wander and autopilot through my treat.

But I once again found my skin warming and stomach tightening at the memory of his effusive praise and show of support. Had anyone ever complimented me in earnest like that before? I'd been praised before, obviously. And there was a time when I desperately clutched at every stray compliment I'd earned from the people around me, even if those words had only been meant to wrap me around their little finger and keep me on a leash.

But there was something about Silas—

Mr. Chandler, that had made me want to believe his praise.

I gathered myself up and made my way back out to the street with some irritation in my step.

I was *not* about to get tangled up in whatever *inclination* my irrational feelings wanted me to wander into. If I really did have some critical weakness for handsome men telling me sweet things, it wasn't one I would let anyone exploit any longer.

So instead of letting myself get worked up into a froth about one man or another, I endeavored to use the rest of my walk to *actually* relax. Otherwise, I'd just be heading back into my apartment more spooled up than when I'd left.

I eventually idled beneath the bright yellow and white awnings of an old building, sitting on a bench by a fountain just to take in the atmosphere of the French Quarter.

My phone chirped in my purse, sending my heart up to my throat. I'd been jumpy at every notification since *he'd* messaged me.

Thankfully, it was just a text message from Whitney.

> *Hey Violet, I know you said you had to take a few days off to rest up and handle some personal stuff*

> *But do you think you'll be back around in time for the NYE party?*

I furrowed my brow and tried to remember what she was talking about—

Right. She'd gone on about it during one of her enthusiastic conversations about Sil— *Mr. Chandler*. He treated the accounting office to a VIP booth at one of the clubs for New Year's Eve if they so chose to attend. And given that I didn't have anyone else to spend it with, it was either that or I pop open a beer on my couch and listen to everyone go hog-wild outside.

> *I should be. Can you send me the details for that?*

> *Palais @ 9, be sure to eat dinner, we go HARD, and you do not want an empty stomach for this*

I chuckled, shaking my head in amusement. My fondness cooled when I remembered the truth behind my absence and the fact Whitney could be involved in the plot I'd uncovered.

As sweet as she'd been to me, I'd feel bad if I got her fired.

> *Should I pregame for this?*

> *Not at all lol the drinks are all comped by Mister Boss Daddy himself.*

Well, if he was so generous, I supposed it would be a waste not to use his hospitality.

Chapter 14

SILAS



This meeting wasn't *necessary*. I could do the mental tango and limbo all I wanted to justify seeing Violet Norman again, but I was scratching an itch by bringing her out for a business lunch.

She didn't exactly need to be kept abreast of the situation. But maybe if I paid just the right amount of attention to her, I'd win her trust and be able to put this hang-up to bed. I'd be able to treat her as the valuable asset she should be in my mind and move on with my life.

All business, I reminded myself as she wandered in towards me through the mildly crowded restaurant floor to me.

"Mr. Chandler," she greeted cautiously as she took her seat across from me. "Do you routinely bring your employees out for business meetings?"

"Very routinely, as a matter of fact," I answered with a smile. "I don't like stuffy phone calls or quiet offices. I don't know about you, but I find it easier to come to the table when there's food on it."

She made an airy noise at my casual passing joke. Not nearly a laugh or a chuckle, but it still made me light up inside to see anything resembling mirth in her. Poor woman seemed either cagey or joylessly demure most of the time.

"Suppose so. So... what is this about? Did you need more context for the investigation?"

"No, that's going along well. I just wanted to properly thank you again; now that I've gotten the results, I need out of it."

Her brow lifted.

"What results... exactly?"

“Fired two people. Would have been a third, but I’ve already seen to that one for entirely unrelated reasons,” I remarked, a bit of wry self-indulgent humor on the last bit.

Her lips drew into a brief line before she nodded.

“... I know I don’t have the right to know this, so please excuse me if I’m out of line... But did you need to fire any of the staff from my office?”

My mouth twitched a bit. Sweet girl, worrying about other folks.

“No, thankfully. That was the, ah, aforementioned casualty I’d already managed. Your predecessor was apparently in on the little deal. She took a cut for fudging where she could and ignoring where she couldn’t. Had to drop a club manager and one of his subordinates for their little racket.”

She nodded slowly and let out a breath that told me that she’d truly been carrying some worry about it.

“You know, Violet,” I began, not quite liking how she locked up at that, “I’m not going to bite your head off. I’ve got yours, and all my other employees, best interests at heart. So long as they aren’t trying to pull a fast one on me. So, unless you decide to start cheating me too, feel free to let your hair down and relax around me. I’m gonna need to call on your eagle eyes going ahead, and I don’t want to feel like I’ve brought you to the principal’s office every time I want to chat with you.”

She hesitated clearly at that, and the silence afterward told me that she didn’t quite want to take it to heart. In fact, she seemed a bit *uneasy*, as though the moment she took it to heart, I was going to bite her head off.

“I... Appreciate your recognition of my talents and efforts, Mr. Chandler. But I would prefer not to be too familiar with you. I understand that your particular professional style is very, um, casual? But I prefer to be formal in professional matters.”

“I can see that,” I couldn’t help but croon out. It was perhaps a bit flirtier than I intended.

I sighed and settled back as the waiter wandered back around. Observing her interaction with him was not good for my mental health because she was

just so...

Cute.

She'd clearly gotten flustered by me calling her out for being too stiff, because she was a stammering little deer in the headlights on being called upon already.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry, I— Drinks? Water, please."

The waiter nodded with a smile.

"Of course, miss. I'll return in a sec with your water and see if y'all are ready for your order."

Violet carefully picked up her menu with a nod, lips a tight line. I had to bite back a chuckle, too endeared for my own damned good.

"That's the problem with being so buttoned up all the time, Miss Norman," I remarked casually, reaching for my water. "Easy to get off kilter, get worked up. Keeping an even keel is all about having a comfortable baseline."

She narrowed her eyes a bit at me, and I could have *sworn* the edge of a retort was about to come out of her pretty little mouth. But then she just looked down at her menu, clearly having thought better of whatever she was going to say.

Which, frankly, was a loss in my book. It dug my curiosity about her deeper, making me want to push her buttons until I saw the *real* her. Whoever that was.

"It seems to work very well for you, sir," she eventually said in a careful, diplomatic tone.

I huffed and smirked at that, seeing the implication under the surface that it does *not* work very well for others. Specifically: her.

"It does. And I think it's a philosophy others should at least try. Makes life a lot less stressful."

"Is that what you owe your success to, Mister Chandler?"

I chuckled at that, finally sparing a look at the menu.

“In part, I’d say. I owe my success to many things, many people, and a lot of work. I got really lucky when it counted and busted my ass for the rest.”

Violet nodded cautiously; her eyes mostly focused on the menu as well.

“And like last time, it’s on me. So feel free to go hog wild if you’ve got the appetite for it. The steak here? Delicious. Highly recommend the dry-aged ribeye.”

“You’re probably one of the first people who’ve looked at me and thought I wanted to order a steak.”

“Oh, are you a vegetarian or something?”

“No, I’m just-...” She gestured a hand towards herself. “People tend to think I eat like a rabbit because I’m this small.”

“Ahhh. Well, I’ve known more than a couple of skinny girls who could put away more food than I can. Suppose it didn’t really cross my mind.”

She glanced up at me briefly before returning her attention to the menu.

“... I do like steak,” she mumbled.

“Then, order up. And if you’ve got the appetite, get a little surf and turf. Grab some crab.”

“Are you trying to literally butter me up for something, sir?”

I *laughed* at that, grinning ear to ear at a glimmer of personality finally showing itself through her wariness.

“Naw, not at all. When I treat someone out, I treat ‘em. Especially when I’m doing so to commend them on a good job. So, spoil yourself; it’s not like it’s on your dime. If nothing else, consider that you’re costing me less money than you’re saving me, thanks to your detective work.”

Violet didn’t seem quite at ease with these assurances, but the fact that she wound up ordering herself a full suite of appetizer, soup, and a steak with all the fixings was evidence enough that I’d swayed her.

The conversation wasn’t quite *easy*, though. She was stilted, awkward.

There was some conflict behind those honey eyes that made me more than a little curious to know what was happening in that steel trap mind of hers.

She didn't quite seem to have an endless appetite, though, soon enough petering out and needing to box up most of her entrée. I figured she could pick at those leftovers for dinner, or even for her New Year's Day lunch tomorrow.

Depending on how much she might party tonight, I hoped it wouldn't wind up in a trashcan or toilet somewhere.

Chapter 15

VIOLET



It wasn't my first time sitting at a VIP booth at Palais. But the company was definitely a lot more pleasant than when I'd found myself trapped between the club manager and our respective employer.

It wasn't exactly *comfortable*, though. I'd had the worst of my worries allayed earlier that day when Mr. Chandler told me that he hadn't needed to fire any of the other accounting staff for involvement with the embezzlement. But I still wasn't entirely at ease with my coworkers.

But was I ever really at ease?

I knocked back another swig of my Pimm's Cup (they were pretty good), hoping that the liquor would do its work so far as that went.

"Damn, Violet," Whitney said beside me, "You really do know how to throw them back."

I chuckled lightly and flashed her a little smile.

"Maybe so."

"Should I be preparing to carry you home tonight, or are you a secret heavyweight drinker?"

"I wouldn't call myself a *'heavyweight,'*" I answered with a bit of mild humor, "But I can hold my alcohol pretty well for my size."

"Want to do some shots with me, then?" She brandished the bottle of tequila that one of the staff must have brought for our bottle service. I wasn't keeping the closest track of what was happening around me; there was just too much. The club was packed wall-to-wall with people celebrating New Year's Eve, and our VIP booth was crowded with some of my coworkers and their plus ones. While we were getting regular runs of drinks, I had a feeling

that there was a sort of understanding that we weren't going to be too needy about getting attention from the runners. Hence the full bottles of champagne and liquor festooning the table already.

"Sure," I answered, finishing my cocktail before putting my glass down.

She gathered up some shot glasses from a tray and poured us one each. After a toast and some giggling, we threw our shots back and followed them up with lime wedges that had been so kindly brought in a bowl for this purpose.

I used the last bit of liquid, largely melted ice, from my cocktail glass to clear the acidic tang a bit from my mouth.

"Hooh! That'll wake you up," she hooted out over the din of chatter and loud club music.

"No kidding. Do you guys normally party this hard?"

"Every year!"

"Is it just a New Orleans thing?"

"I mean, I suppose that's a good part of it," Whitney explained, already setting up another set of shots. "New Year's is, if you hadn't noticed, kind of a big deal around here."

"Hard not to."

"And the party's gonna keep going for weeks. You said you've never been in town for Mardi Gras?"

"Nope."

"Well, you're in for a treat. You live in the Quarter, right?"

"I do."

She grinned and passed me another shot glass and lime.

"You'll be right here at Ground Zero. Don't wear any shoes you like outside for the next few weeks."

I fixed her with a mildly confused look as I took my shot with practiced

expertise. She belatedly followed suit, licking lime from her lips as she answered.

“All the puke.”

“There’s going to be *more*?” I’d had to dodge someone already hurling their guts out on the way into the bar tonight.

“A *lot* more. Too many damned tourists that can’t keep down their Hurricanes.”

I sighed, then gave a laugh and a shrug.

“I actually haven’t tried one of those yet.”

“Really? Well, tonight’s your night to try one. Let’s see if you can keep it down any better!”

Hurricanes were pretty good. Sweet, fruity, boozy– it hit all the buttons for a frenzied night partying in a hot Louisiana nightclub.

Literally hot, because I was feeling more than a little sweaty as Whitney and I worked our way back to the booth from the dance floor. It was *packed* down there, but thankfully I was drunk enough that I just felt cramped, not claustrophobic.

Maybe it was because I was with a friend, or maybe all the drinks in me, but my omnipresent hang of paranoia had mercifully dulled.

We wormed our way through the dense standing room commotion back to the booth proper, nodding at the staff member minding the ropes to ensure the VIP area remained VIP.

When we approached the table, there was someone unfamiliar standing with his back to us–

“Silas!” Whitney chirped out excitedly, squeezing my arm as she hastened us along.

He turned.

Should have known it was him.

He was wearing a leather jacket. You’d think he’d be boiling alive in that

thing.

“Oh, hey there, Whitney, Violet,” he greeted us in turn, though I could feel his eyes snap over me a bit more intensely than my companion. “Having fun tonight?”

“Always! You swing by to check on your number jockeys tonight?”

“Thought I’d stop by, say hi, make sure y’all are having a good time. Would you say that’s the case, Violet?”

I squinted a little bit at him, appraising him in turn. Where did he get off, acting like he was the most charming man to walk this earth?

“I was, but there’s always the chance that’ll change.”

Whitney gave me a mildly perplexed look at that, but Silas grinned and laughed instead.

“Now, don’t you worry, I’m not here to be a party pooper.”

“Good, because I’d hate to have my night ruined again.”

Whitney looked downright gobsmacked at the exchange, but I could hardly care at this point.

He chuckled and stepped up towards me, offering out his hand.

“Come on now, my first impression can’t be *that* bad. Besides, I thought we agreed to shake on it and forget what happened.”

I looked down to his hand, then to his smug, roguish face.

“We did. But I know your type.”

“My type?”

I crossed my arms and gave him a glare for good measure.

“The ‘handsome and they know it’ greaseballs that think a smile and a few nice words are enough to make anyone roll over for them.”

“Uhhh, Violet,” Whitney attempted to interject, pulling on my arm. “I think you’re confusing him for someone else– that’s Silas Chandler, *y’know*, the boss?”

I stood my ground, though keeping that balance took a little bit of effort with the amount of alcohol in my system making me a little loosey-goosey.

And rather than looking offended, Silas laughed again, the sound strident and clear even with all the celebratory commotion.

“See! *That’s* what I’ve been looking for. Let your hair down and your claws out, Violet. You don’t have to be a timid little robot around me. I’d rather you tell me your thoughts and play it straight with me.”

I squinted suspiciously at him before working my way back to the table, scrounging briefly to get myself another shot lined up. If I was going to have to be around him, I might as well make sure I was sauced enough to handle it.

“Woah, hey, Violet,” Whitney whispered (not very well) by my ear. “What was that about?!”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay, but, you *know* Silas?!”

I sighed, throwing back my shot of—

I glanced at the bottle to make sure what it was.

— rum.

“Met him before.”

“When? How? And—”

I gave her a look that must have said enough because she clammed right up. That, or Silas sliding in on the booth to warmly chat up William and his wife made her bite her tongue.

“It’s fine,” I seethed out under my breath.

“That didn’t seem fine. Seems more like you were ready to take him out back and give him a switching.”

“A what?”

“Whip him with a switch.”

“Like a light switch?”

“No, silly, a switch. A tree branch.”

It was my turn to give her a confused stare.

“What, you’ve never heard of a switch before?”

“No!”

She shrugged and reached around me to help herself to her own shot of rum.

“They don’t say that where you’re from?”

“No, not at all. And you mean like a real, actual branch?”

Whitney rammed back her shot and chuckled, though there was a bit of a choke on it.

“Yeah, an actual branch. But it’s gotta be thin and whippy. When I was little, my grandpa told me that if I misbehaved too much, he’d make me go out back and cut a switch.”

“So, he could hit you with it?”

“Yeah,” she laughed brightly, tone so casual and easy.

I felt my heart ache. Her family had seemed so bright and warm, but were they as twisted as mine had been?

She blinked at me before she laughed and rubbed my arm.

“He never did, though. Just a lot of big puffed-up old-timer talk. My dad would’ve turned it right on him if he tried. He made Louis cut one down once and my dad came out spittin’ and hollerin’ like a wildcat before he could make good on it.”

I exhaled, nodding. It was a relief to know she’d not suffered that mistreatment.

“That’s good.”

It was good. So why did I feel a little hollow that she wasn’t someone I could trust to *understand* me and what I’d been through?

I’d always felt a fundamental divide between me and *normal* people like

Whitney.

But I didn't want to resent her for having lived a happier, easier life than mine.

"So, nice try getting me off on a tangent," Whitney urged in a more clandestine tone, bringing me off to the side. "How is it you know Silas, and why are you in a tizzy about him?"

I sighed, sparing a sidelong glance towards where the man had made himself quite at home among the others.

"I met him accidentally. Here, actually. And he'd tried to flirt with me."

Whitney gasped aloud, covering her mouth a full three seconds too late.

"Really? That's crazy. Did you like— did you—"

I shook my head and sighed, rubbing between my eyes.

"No. I told him off, and then we found out that he's, you know. As you said, 'the boss.'"

She winced; the expression was comically overblown enough that I had to chuckle.

"Damn. Well, that's unfortunate, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

My gaze flickered back over to the table, and green eyes met mine.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 16

SILAS



I really *had* only intended on stopping by the Palais for a little while. Mostly, I'd wanted to check in on Jeremy and give him my good wishes and the usual birthday gift I'd sneak him on New Year's Eve. He was a New Year's Day baby. I always liked to joke that the party was all for him.

But then I got waylaid. Or rather, I let myself idle with the accountant crew much longer than anticipated because of one particular person.

Violet Norman.

I hadn't brought up the usual accountant meeting when we'd had lunch earlier that day, not wanting to accidentally spook her off in case she decided to avoid me.

Which should have been an instinct I listened to and recognized meant that I should leave well enough alone.

But I was never really good at that. At least not so far as women were concerned.

I hadn't quite expected her to come if her austere and reserved personality with me was reflective of how she handled her peers. And I certainly hadn't expected to encounter the bright-eyed little spitfire I'd met previously.

I couldn't quite figure her out. Was she naturally sharp and cutting, and the tip-toeing a facade? Was she genuinely shy, but all her inhibitions turned off when she got a bit of liquor in her?

I watched her from across the booth. Not too much. Just brief looks, a couple of smiles. I didn't want to be too obnoxious. After all, I was here as their employer, not a man out on the town on New Year's Eve looking to find someone to ring out the night with.

But once I got a few drinks in, it was getting harder to quite discern where that line lay.

As we hit close to midnight, I moved around the group, handing off flutes of top-shelf champagne I'd had brought out for the occasion. Jeremy was helping me, as he decided he might as well take advantage of my being here for midnight and enjoy it together for old-time's sake.

I found myself face to face with Violet, who looked pretty sufficiently drunk by this point. Her cheeks sported a very pretty flush, and her previous surly expression towards me was muddled into the cutest pout I'd ever seen. The modest sundress she wore was a bit too big for her, but it just added to her charm.

"*Mr. Chandler,*" she greeted sternly.

"Aw, come now, Violet, you're gonna get all stodgy on me again? Here, take some champagne. Don't want an empty hand when the clock hits midnight."

She looked between the offered drink and my face once, twice, and only on the third did she take it from me.

"You know what my problem is with you, *Mr. Chandler?*"

"What's that now," I asked in an indulgent tone.

"You're *suspiciously* generous."

I quirked my brow and bit back a chuckle as best I could, not wanting to rile her up when I finally got some real information from her.

"How's that?"

"You're always handing out compliments and compensation at every turn. No one is that nice without wanting to get something out of it."

"Well, I suppose that's true," I mused out. "I do want to get something out of it."

She looked ready to swing at me, so I dropped the other shoe before this kitten showed me her claws.

“I want to do right by the folks around me not just for the goodness of it, but because it makes me happy. Dunno how much you know about me, Violet, but I wasn’t some trust fund kid. I remember what it was like to work my way up, and taking care of my employees keeps me in touch with that time. There were people higher up on the ladder than me who offered their hands down occasionally. Got me through the rough parts and made it easier for me to work my way up to them. Past them, even.”

I didn’t know what to make of the focused expression on her face; all I could really tell was that she was trying to read me.

Maybe she was just as stumped about me as I was about her.

I flashed her a grin and glanced to where the DJ was running a ‘ball drop’ track to keep the spirited NYE crowds merrily celebrating inside rather than tempted to wander out to enjoy the countdown elsewhere.

“Thirty seconds ‘til, Violet.”

She blinked and focused back in on the scenery around us, then turned her gaze right back up to mine.

“If you try to kiss me, you’ll be spending the first few hours of the new year in the ER,” she bristled out.

My grin split further, and my inebriated thoughts did wonder if it would be worth the consequences.

“Don’t you worry. I’m an absolute gentleman.”

She looked about ready to give me another one of her scintillating retorts, but then came the collective—

“TEN!”

The little spook as she realized the countdown had started was precious. I saw her gaze scan out quickly, probably looking for her friend, who she’d been glued to for most of the night. But Whitney was deeply entrenched in some of the others standing nearby.

She looked back to me, and the dreading realization on her face was as insulting as it was endearing.

“NINE!”

Her mouth pursed up.

I raised a brow, gave her a little smirk, and lifted my glass in readiness for the toast.

“EIGHT!”

She rolled her eyes.

“SEVEN!”

I chuckled and leaned in, and the way her neck craned backward was so much like a cat trying not to get poked that I started to laugh.

“SIX!”

“What are you doing?”

“FIVE!”

“Bit hard to hear right now—”

“FOUR!”

“What?”

“THREE!”

“I just wanted to be the first one to tell you—”

“TWO!”

“You don’t have to get that close—!”

“ONE!!”

I clinked our glasses together.

“Happy New Year, Violet.”

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!!”

That general collective shout was a bit less cohesive than the countdown, as a decent portion of the crowd descended into wordless hoots, hollers, or various felicitations.

Her blank expression didn't quite leave her, even as I tipped back my glass for a good drink of fine bubbly. She slowly followed suit. Her first conservative sip turned into just downing the whole thing in one long chug.

I watched, brows rising higher, and by the end, I laughed.

"What?" She wiped the back of her hand against her mouth, glowering at me over it.

"That's some pretty expensive champagne to chug. And you'll be burping like a baby here in a moment. With how much you've been drinking, you might very well upchuck."

She paled at that, and I saw her carefully negotiate a bit of gas into the most cautious belch I'd ever heard in my whole life.

"There it goes," I chuckled, lightly patting her on the back. "Why don't I get your friend Whitney for you, and she can keep you company in the bathroom in case that decides to work its way back up?"

A mildly distressed nod from her spurred me to be a bit less teasing and more overtly concerned that she *would* wind up hurling on the club floor. She'd be far from the first. But while I didn't know her well, I knew enough to recognize that she'd be *mortified* if it did happen.

I weaseled my way over, clinking glasses and sharing a few quick New Year's greetings.

"Hey, Whitney," I hollered out, since the music had kicked right back up hard for the second wave of partying.

"Yeah?!"

"You mind being bathroom buddies with your gal pal Violet? She decided to chug her champagne, and it might be fighting back."

"OH! Oh God, yeah, I'll be right there," she hurriedly answered, excusing herself before she wiggled by to hasten to Violet's side.

I watched them hurry to the bathrooms, and I felt a little worry in my gut.

Hopefully, she could rally, even if she did vomit her guts out. But I had a gut feeling that no matter what, I was going to be worried about her for the

rest of the night. She'd been hitting the drinks pretty hard, especially for a woman that small.

She might need a little help back home. And with the dense crowds on Bourbon Street right now, there was no way in hell I was going to get a taxi through anytime soon.

I sighed and polished off the rest of my champagne.

Good news: she didn't puke.

Bad news: she drank more.

I didn't know whether it was good or bad that she was still there when the bar was beginning to close for the night. She really was quite the little trooper, but she was also *extremely* drunk.

And I was more or less the same.

"Hey, little lady," I drawled out as I walked up to where she was blearily staring at the glass of water I'd put in her hands twenty minutes ago. "Time to pack it in."

She blinked slowly, *sleepily*, when she looked up at me. Like a drowsy little kitten.

"Mmn?"

"Time to go."

"Oh."

She ran her thumb rhythmically along the cup in her hand for a few moments, clearly needing some time for actual thought to percolate through the boozy soup in her skull.

I huffed and smiled, offering my arm out.

"Come on. Your friend Whitney had to scoot earlier. But she said you lived nearby?"

"Nearby? Yeah."

"Whereabout?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Not gonna tell you.”

“You know, it’ll be hard for me to be a gentleman and walk you home safe and sound if I don’t know where ‘home’ is.”

She began to extricate herself from the seat, and I hurried to catch her arms to make sure she stood steady lightly. Her expression was briefly cross, but then when she looked up at me, I was sure I saw some gratitude in her face.

“... well. I’ll be leaving.”

“Not alone, you aren’t.”

Violet took in a breath, clearly wanting to fight me on it—

But then *fear* glinted in her eyes. I was about ready to double back and hurriedly try to snag one of the female bartenders and pay her off to get this girl home, if she really was that afraid of being alone with me—

Then she grasped at my arm and nodded with a surprising amount of conviction.

“Okay.”

I wanted to ask *why* she’d changed her mind, but I felt like that was a can of worms I shouldn’t try to pry open. At least not right now, when I’d barely convinced her to let me help her home.

There were plenty of understandable reasons a woman would feel a little cagey about walking home alone, drunk, on New Year’s Eve, through the French Quarter.

But the mystery of Violet Norman just kept getting deeper every moment I spent with her.

I made sure she had all her effects before I guided her out to the streets, which were now shoulder to shoulder with all the barflies and party-goers ready to take things ‘til dawn even if some of the places were shutting down before then.

I'd realized quickly on the way out that she didn't have the best balance at the moment, and rather than take a chance I kept my arm close around her once we got outside. She gave me a brief glance but didn't say anything contrary.

In fact, she didn't say much at all on the way there. Thankfully I'd gotten her to tell me where she lived, so it was just working our way down the narrow sidewalks to Dumaine. Most of the crowds were on Bourbon Street, but given the festivities, there was plenty of spillover as we worked our way through the next few blocks.

Eventually, we seemed to arrive since the address looked right on my phone, and she even pointed the building out to me.

"This's me," Violet hummed, blinking at me.

"Great. Let's get you inside."

She looked at me for a moment, considering, before she nodded.

Negotiating our drunken legs upstairs to her place was a little work, but we managed it together.

She went for the doorknob, turning it with a very focused look on her face.

"Gotta unlock it first, Violet," I teased softly.

"I know. I jus'," she slurred, going to her purse to get her keys out, "I jus' need to make sure it's still locked."

"Smart."

At that, she *smiled* up at me. Was this the first time I'd ever really seen it?

"I know."

She went to open the door and nearly swayed herself dead into it. I hurriedly caught her, and after we got both our bearings, I clicked my tongue.

"Alright, let me just make sure you get settled in there without busting your head on something."

"Fine," she managed out. "You can do the sweep for me."

“The sweep?”

“Gotta make sure....” She paused to grunt and get her keys back into her purse, only to bring out what looked to be a can of mace. “No one’s there.”

“You commonly worry about home invasions? Or is that for me if I get uppity?”

She didn’t answer the mild teasing, just attempted to walk herself in. So, I followed suit. Her hand reached out to a light switch, causing both of us to squint as we got shunted out of the darkness.

Cozy. Nice hardwood floors, decently furnished.

“Cute place.”

“Thanks,” she hummed.

“So where am I sweeping first, boss?”

She didn’t seem to be in a humorous enough mood to laugh at the joke or was drunk enough that it passed right over her head. The mace hand pointed to a far door.

“Bathroom.”

“Alright, bathroom it is. You actually need it, or need me to look for boogeymen?”

“Boogeymen,” she said, unnervingly serious despite her inebriated voice.

I fixed her with a look.

She was genuinely worried about someone coming after her.

“Do you really live alone, Violet?”

“Yeah. So if someone’s here, stab ‘em.”

I laughed, though it was a little mirthless.

“Alright, I’m on it.”

I brought her over towards the bathroom door, pushing it the rest of the way open and putting on the light to scope it out.

Clean, with little toiletries discretely piled up in one spot. Which was weird; I was used to women's bathrooms looking like an explosion of bottles and brushes across every surface. The shower curtain was pushed back, sparing me the psycho-killer moment of needing to push it back to see if someone was hiding in there.

"Looks good to me. You sure you don't need to hit the head?"

"Hit *your* head," she drunkenly bantered back.

Alright, that made me genuinely laugh.

"Okay. Maybe don't hit my head."

"Maybe I do."

"At least don't hit me with the mace can."

She looked at the can in her hand, and I feared for my life for a split second. Or at least the prospect of a painless evening.

But then she looked up at me and smiled.

"You're a big boy. You could take it."

My smile cracked back open.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't like it very much."

We loitered in that doorway for a moment or two before there was a subtle *creak* behind us. Poor woman practically spun in place, and if I wasn't ready to catch her she probably would have fallen and hit *her* head.

"Woah, woah. Easy now."

I also looked around, though with much less paranoia than she was.

"Let's finish the sweep, alright? I'll check for monsters under your bed and everything. Between you and me, that sound was probably just the place settlin'. Old places like this make a lotta noise."

After a few shaky breaths, she nodded.

Thankfully, we managed to get through the modest little apartment in short order. By the time we hit her bedroom, I was feeling both a bit more

confident to leave her alone, and a bit more worried there *would* be someone lurking under her bed.

I gently coaxed her to sit on the edge of it, even though she looked dubious.

“You’re alright, Violet. I’m a man of my word.”

I crouched in front of her and bit back my smirk when her eyes went as wide as saucers.

But then I shimmied to the side a bit, peeled the blankets' draping curtain up, and flashed my phone flashlight underneath.

A few dust bunnies.

A lockbox.

No boogeymen.

“All clear.”

I stood up, only to find her having peeled off her shoes and working to try and unbutton her dress.

“Woah, sugar, didn’t forget I’m here, did you?”

She blinked up at me before looking down at herself.

“Oh. Sorry. Just hot. It’s so warm here. It’s December. Should be cold.”

“Not to be a contrarian,” I remarked, coaxing her purse off her shoulder and making sure the mace can on the bed was put back into it so she didn’t wind up doing something silly. “But it’s January now.”

She mulled on that for a second before nodding sagely.

“Yeah. January.”

She tore off the now quite mussed-up head of black hair—

Oh. Wig. That made a lot more sense. I’d just thought she’d gotten a dye job.

Then the wig cap beneath, fussing grumpily with loosening the bound-up

ginger hair beneath.

“Hey, lemme help with that. You’re gonna tear up all this pretty hair, grabbing at it like that.”

I crowded in around her, carefully plucking out bobby pins. It wasn’t my first time taking down a woman’s hair, so I knew how to avoid making matters worse and get them out without much fuss.

Thankfully, she didn’t put up a fuss herself; Violet just sat there while I got her hair worked down. It was a bit sweaty near the scalp, but it was also so soft to the touch. I couldn’t keep myself from running my fingers through it a few extra times once I’d gotten it loose.

“There you go. Dunno why you’re going for black; it looks nice, don’t get me wrong. But red’s definitely a pretty color on you.”

“Hates black hair.”

“What?”

Instead of properly answering me, she dropped herself down onto the bed, drunkenly trying to crawl herself up into place to sleep.

Ah, we were getting deep into the manic drunk stage.

“Hey, could’ja... Light that?”

She pointed a lazy hand towards a scented candle sitting on her nightstand.

“Not a good idea to leave a candle lit while you sleep, Violet,” I warmly chided.

“I don’t care,” she slurred out, rolling over to try and crawl and do it herself.

“Hey, *hey* now, no silly business, young lady.”

I rounded the bed to interpose myself between her and the nightstand. “I will confiscate every lighter and match in this house so you don’t go burnin’ the place down while you’re too drunk to realize you’re gettin’ smoked out.”

She propped herself up on her elbows, and the expression on her face was a tantrum in one look.

God, she was just *too damned cute* for her own good.

“Might be better off if I do anyways,” she grouched out, trying to paw around me.

“Now, none of that. You didn’t make it into the new year just to call it a wash already.”

She paused at that, and the big brown eyes that looked up at me in the soft lamplight were so gentle and aching that I felt my heart ricochet into my throat.

“... I did make it.”

“Yeah, you did,” I answered, assuring, unsure what journey her drunken thoughts were taking her on, but at least wanting to shepherd her onto a safer road somehow.

I stood in silence, watching her for what felt like an age. My own inebriation had settled in nicely by now, and though I felt steady, I was swaying in place.

“... well, Violet, you should get settled in and get yourself to bed. And I’m serious: no candles.”

I started to walk off, but then—

Her hand caught on my jacket.

I paused and looked back down at her.

Goddamn, those big doe eyes were going to be the death of me.

“Wait,” she croaked out.

“What is it?” I kept my voice gentle, and unintrusive, worried I might spook off whatever vulnerability had overtaken her in this moment.

“Don’t— don’t go.”

Ah, shit.

My throat locked up as I tried to negotiate something reasonable out of my head and to my mouth.

“... Violet, that’s...”

“Please.”

Shit. Shit shit shit.

Very cautiously, I situated myself on the edge of the bed. It didn’t seem to quite put her at ease, but she was less worked up than when she’d thought I was going.

“... What do you need, sweetheart? You okay?”

She looked damn near ready to cry. Her shoulders even shook a little with a repressed hiccupping sob when I called her ‘sweetheart.’

“I’m not okay,” came her voice, so small and wet that it damn near broke my heart to hear it.

“Oh, goddamn it,” I murmured aloud, accidentally, before reaching out to bring her into a gentle hug.

Violet’s arms slid in around me, hands fisting into my clothes. Her face nestled in close against my neck; I could feel each hot, sobbing breath drift over my skin and send tingles through my spine. An ache resounded through my chest and spurred me to hold her tighter.

What had she gone through that she was this brittle and aching under the surface?

Whatever it was, I felt the irrational desperation of wanting to do something, *anything*, if it meant I could alleviate her pain. She needed care; she needed protection—

She needs me, is what my instincts selfishly wanted to assert.

I nestled my face down closer to her hair, taking in the subtle scent of her. She turned her own face upright, and there was hardly an inch or two between us. I could scarcely see her face, though I could certainly *feel* it, even though we weren’t close enough to touch yet.

I wanted to kiss her.

Desperately.

My own breaths were shallow, forced taut by my clenching ribs. I knew I shouldn't want to kiss her. There were so many reasons I shouldn't, *couldn't*. But too much liquor was diluting my thoughts, and everything I craved was right here for the taking.

I had been desperate to know her, to unravel her guard and mysteries, and here she was, breathing in the same air, holding onto me as though I was her sole tether to this world.

I shouldn't—

I felt her nose shift a little against mine, and her hands twitch in their grip.

My breath hitched painfully in my throat with violence, though the sound was so hushed.

She sighed out vocally, in the quiet forceful way one did when drunk and overcome. The sound alone sent tremors through my spine and made my skin warm.

My lips could feel hers in the air between us, or at least felt the phantom of the kiss they wished for.

But then I did truly feel her mouth, warm and real and soft—

I hadn't kissed her.

She had kissed *me*.

I was going to regret this.

But I couldn't hold back, not from this sweetness, this *vulnerability*. Instead of rational thought, my mind was filled solely with the understanding that she *needed* me, and I could not ignore it.

I reciprocated the pressure of her kiss, and she held me even tighter, urging me on.

The woman who had hooked into my mind and set off a strange obsession was finally here in my arms.

And at least for a short while, I could slake that need to have her, to know her, even though she was still a mystery and could never be mine.

Chapter 17

VIOLET



I woke up sweaty, sticky, and naked under my bed sheets.

The late afternoon air had settled into my apartment, a bit warmer than it had been. But the unseasonable heat wasn't the sole reason for my state.

I sat up blearily, rubbing at my eyes, even though I knew it would only be smearing around whatever was left of my makeup from the night before.

The night before...

My skin heated, and my mouth pursed tightly, resisting the *flush* of memories that trying to recall brought forth. I'd drunk *far* too much last night, but some distinctly visceral memories were more than happy to filter to the surface from the tail end of it all.

I put my hands over my face and took a second to try and get my bearings properly, with a sober, though pounding, mind.

I'd slept with Silas.

He'd brought me home from the club, and I'd—

Had I started it?

Had he?

... no, I'd kissed him first. I'd given in to some strange urge and let myself get taken by the tide.

Despite the tightness of my chest and flurried confusion of my thoughts, it didn't feel like he'd taken advantage of me. We'd both been absurdly drunk, and I knew that men could be easily swayed into things when drunk just as well as a woman. I knew he'd been a flirt towards me before, but he'd mellowed his advances after I'd warned him off the first time.

Had he even wanted to sleep with me, despite me throwing myself at him?

Did I even want him to want me?

It was a mess.

I was a mess.

I slid out of bed, legs shaking at taking my weight and balance still off-kilter from my intense hangover. Honestly, I was still inebriated. I threw some dirty loungewear on, not wanting to be unprepared for whatever might be outside of my bedroom. My pulse raced at the possibility he could still be here, not knowing what I'd say to him—

Or that he'd left.

Or even worse, that he'd left and not locked the door, and then Elliot had managed to—

I breathed raggedly and armed myself with my can of mace discreetly as I stepped out of my bedroom.

The apartment was clean, quiet, and *empty*.

Instead of rushing straight to check the front door, I needed to do a full room scan first. In case *he* was here, I needed a clear route to escape. I'd learned my lesson before of trying to run from him when the front door was locked.

I made a cautious route, but the place wasn't big enough that it took me a long time to guarantee that I was, in fact, home alone.

My gut twisted, feeling both relief and loneliness.

Silas—

Mr. Chandler hadn't stayed.

Why would he?

Either I'd forced myself on him, or he'd made use of my drunken loneliness and had no obligation to linger. All people ever did was use each other or be used, and nowhere was that more obvious than sex.

Tears beaded my eyes as I padded to the front door. I had sworn that I would never let myself be used again...

The deadlock clicked obediently at the turn of my hand.

I should have known better. I should have been more cautious. But I'd let myself get carried away; the stress of everything lately had pushed me to drink too much, and I'd thought I'd be safe in the company of my coworkers.

I dabbed at my eyes and went to take a shower, desperate to clean the grime of liquor-laced sweat off my skin. As I stripped down and got the water running, my thoughts spun and spun ceaselessly around Silas.

I didn't know what to make of him. Was he kind? Was he cunning?

When I'd been drunk, I'd clearly trusted him enough to let him bring me home. Not only that, but I'd let myself reach out for him, kiss him, and even more. He had felt—

He had felt *safe*.

The whole time, I'd felt *safer* with him. He'd held me in a way no one else ever had; he'd been so *gentle* to me. No man had ever kissed my eyes as I cried, or the palms of my hands, or held my hand as we—

I stopped scrubbing shampoo against myself and squashed the memories from replaying out in my mind, feeling hot from more than just the shower.

But it was just a drunken fantasy, lost when dawn broke. I would never be able to be safe with him, and he would never want me in a *real* way.

I sighed, taking in the scent of cheap dandruff shampoo I'd gotten on sale to help with all the itching from my now chronically itchy scalp from all the wig-wearing I'd been forced to do.

I still need to leave this city.

As soon as possible.

Elliot was closing in. If I wasn't quick and careful, he'd close the snare.

And I didn't know if I could endure a confrontation with him, one way or the other. Either he broke me for good, or he *broke* me for good.

I had to keep running. It was all I could do.

The heatwave really didn't make the disguise any easier. I was sweltering as I walked up the stairwell to the office, but I didn't need him to recognize me at a distance. If he knew who Whitney was, he could be stalking her to figure out my association. Thankfully, I'd asked Whitney not to post about me on social media in the Christmas aftermath, but she was so much more public about her life than I was. I couldn't burden her with the information about Elliot, and I didn't want to talk about it at all, but she seemed understanding of my intentions without needing a full-blown explanation.

I'd triple-checked her posts from the work party, and thankfully, she'd been courteous enough to wait until the morning before to post pictures, and none of them included me. So, if I was lucky, Elliot might not think I'm one of her coworkers and not be looking to bark up this particular tree.

It was only a matter of time, though. He had a lead with Whitney. He knew I was in this city. New Orleans would never be safe for me.

Nowhere would, not unless I managed to properly vanish without a trace.

I'd already sent in paperwork to get my name changed and applied for several new credit cards to cushion the damage to come. I would be in the hole for a bit, but I could survive off of nothing. I'd live out of my car and ride off public Wi-Fi to look for jobs. I'd go somewhere else in the country, *anywhere*.

I carefully opened the door, and just like the past few days since we all returned to work, the air was taut with industry. We could finally process the end-of-year documentation and prepare everything for tax season. Gone was the much more lackadaisical air the little crew of four everyone had enjoyed before the turnover. I off-loaded some of the worst layers, though I still had to suffer the black wig.

Whitney glanced over at me from her computer with a greeting smile, though she didn't pipe up and just returned to task once I nodded back.

It was good to have so much important work to do at a time like this, when I was stressed and genuinely despairing.

Elliot could be around any corner, keeping my paranoia on edge. And he was not the only evasively omnipresent pressure in my life:

Silas hadn't reached out to me at all, even though it had been days.

As I went to make myself some coffee to keep me company for the shift ahead, I tried in vain to push him away from my thoughts. I didn't have the luxury of worrying about him. Not with an escape to plan.

I was still trying to figure out how I would amicably split from my brand-new employer, but until I could leave for good, I was better off getting what money I could from it. I also felt bad about departing prematurely and leaving them with an unexpected absence right as things got busy.

As for my alibi, I was currently musing on one. My current thinking was to cite a family emergency that needed me to relocate across the country. It wasn't a lie; I did need to relocate, and as a family of one, it was a family emergency.

Chapter 18

SILAS



I didn't get careless.

Sure, I might seem rather spontaneous and lackadaisical, but I was quite disciplined.

So how in the *hell* did I find myself sleeping with *one of my employees*?

It was a thought that had circled in my mind, continuously, shame repeating like a flogging. But there was no penance for what I'd done, infringing one of the few pillars of my personal code.

I'd been drunk. But even when I was drunk, I should have been able to control myself better.

"Silas," I heard my mother's voice call out from outside my closet, distant enough that it might even be from the hallway, "Oh! You're packing?"

She must have seen the open luggage case on the floor.

I paced out from the closet, a pair of ties I'd been attempting to choose between held limply in my hands.

"Yes, Mom. I have a business trip to Texas."

"Oh? Where?"

"Irving," I answered, lazily tossing both ties into the luggage case. I could pick later.

"Well, even though you're so busy, I'm glad at least you're focusing your time on the important things."

Yes, because my clubs weren't *important*.

I bit it back and smiled, though I returned to the walk-in to get my

restlessness out.

She piped right up though behind me, tutting.

“Oh, honey, you can’t just throw them in there like that. They’ll get wrinkled! You need to look your best when you go to meetings. Where are those tie cases I got you?”

“Probably in here somewhere,” I answered, a bit of disinterested tension slipping into my voice.

Which I winced at on realizing because I knew what was going to happen

“*Silas*, do you really not appreciate the gifts I get you? I know you don’t care much for looking *proper*, but the least you can do is respect me if you don’t respect yourself.”

I sucked on my tongue and felt my face twitch into my masking smile.

“Mom, you know I do. You gave those to me, what, four years ago? I can’t keep track of every little thing all the time,” I said in a playful yet placating tone, flashing her that smile.

She looked at me from the doorway of the closet, frowning faintly. But then she sighed, passed in with heedless authority, and began rummaging around.

The sound of every clatter and thud grated at my senses and sent a low thrum of uncomfortable adrenaline through my spine. I was a grown man, so I did not cower and hide away from her, but I did not turn to look at her as she made her displeasure known by manhandling my possessions.

“Where could they be? We have maids for a reason, and things should be more organized than this.”

“Housekeepers, Mom. That’s the preferred language for old money types nowadays, remember?”

“Right. But it doesn’t change the fact that your things aren’t well-kept enough that you can’t find anything!”

At least she’d turned her focus to railing on the staff instead of me, but

that was in its own way worse. I could endure her tirades and indignity all day, but they really did deserve better than to be scapegoated for every minor inconvenience and conflict that passed my mother's path.

I sighed, turning away from the rack of shirts to approach her.

"Let me look, Mom. I'm sure I saw them here a little while ago. Why don't you pick out some outfits for me instead? I'll find them, no problem. I was always better at finding things than you," I offered, with a light disarming joke at the end to shift the atmosphere.

She looked up over her shoulder at me and gave a heavy short laugh.

"You always were. I never know if it's luck or smarts with you," my mother replied, turning fully to squeeze my cheek.

"Could always be both," came my easy-humored response.

She broke off with a chuckle and busied herself with a far more pleasant task for her sensibilities, and I crouched to resume the busywork of finding these tie cases. That, and try to put some of the chaos to rights.

At least not all of my messes were ones *I'd* made lately.

My thoughts once again strayed to Violet.

I'd felt dread in the aftermath, having braced myself for the other shoe to drop. She was going to use the incident to her advantage in some way, or so I'd thought. With her apparent convictions, it was not *likely* that she would try and blackmail me into being with her or giving her concessions. But it wasn't *impossible*. There wasn't exactly anyone she could *report* me to for it unless she decided to take herself to the police and frame it as a crime against her. I was a wealthy man, after all. She might think that I would settle out of court to spare the scandal and net herself quite the purse for her trouble.

But instead: nothing.

Not a word, a call, a menacing email, or even a text to try and beat around the bush.

Nothing.

But that's what I really wanted from this, isn't it?

Nothing.

I wanted to leave it to lie and act like it never happened. I wanted control, and I wanted to police it to my fitting. It's why I hadn't reached out first, using the cold shoulder to tell her without words that I was not going to follow through on that mistake. But she was leaving me in the dark in turn, and the ambiguity was leaving me more than on edge.

I pulled a drawer out and sighed, lips pressing together as I looked at the tie cases neatly stacked beside some other travel-fit containers for other accessories and odds and ends. They were both tooled and gilded with twenty-four karat gold leaf with my name:

S. Chandler

Because, of course, the family name was most important to her. We were new money. I was born in poverty, and she raised me in a trailer for God's sake. But that was all the more reason for her to push it towards prestige.

"Silas, we should get you some new suits made in Italy. These are *nice*, but part of being fashionable is keeping up with each new season."

I sighed.

"Maybe we'll go around and do it during our Italy trip. And, good news," I answered, holding the long leather cases up as I turned towards her in my crouch, "I found them."

My mother glanced back at me and made a pleased titter.

"Wonderful!"

I smiled.

Chapter 19

VIOLET



I was too paranoid to find a way to stay home, but I was also too paranoid to have any peace of mind leaving my house.

So once again, I found myself in the office, sweating bullets and trying not to disassociate as I sat at my desk.

Just *being* in this place put me on edge. While I'd been able to eke out some sense of refuge here, after what had happened on New Year's Eve...

This wasn't *my* place.

This place was literally *owned* by him. The acquaintances– the *friendships* I might have managed to cultivate here were all fundamentally flawed. If Mr. Chandler turned on me, they would do the same. I wasn't *safe* here. I'd been a fool to ever think I was.

At least, those were the whispers that filtered up from the darkest corners of my mind and made me want to jump at every shadow.

I *wanted* to believe in the people around me. God, I was desperate to feel some sense of stability and sincerity again. But I saw everything through sickly warped glass again, freshly wounded and victimized by some *goddamned man* again. It was more than survival mode. I did not want to believe that *Mr. Chandler* had that much power over me, but it almost felt like I'd been *broken* again.

Not just mentally, either. My body was full of so many aches and ailments, and they just got worse and worse. It was a good thing the office all thought I'd been sick with something because it was getting to the point that I might as well be. Or maybe I truly was. They did say that your immune system was severely compromised when you were under stress...

And at this point, I wasn't just *under* stress. I was buried six feet deep in it.

I looked at the almost entirely full bottle of water I'd put on my desk, and just that alone made my stomach twist and knot.

I hadn't properly eaten a meal in four days.

I'd tried last night, having convinced my body to take down some watery stock and rice. But then it'd just come up by three in the morning, waking me up from a fitful sleep. The little trash can in the bathroom had taken up permanent residence by my bedside now.

Just a few sips, Violet. Just one, even. You need to stay hydrated.

I did. With how much I was sweating, and how difficult it'd been to keep anything down, I could feel it in my bones. Despite the humidity of the air, my lips were chapped, and my skin felt paper thin.

I coaxed my shaking hands to take hold of the bottle, psyching myself up the whole time. With a nervous heartbeat, I choked down two sips before my throat locked up and I had to *immediately* stop. If I tried for even a half-second longer, I'd start choking and hacking and get the whole office looking at me.

As I lowered the bottle, I realized someone already was.

When I made eye contact with Whitney, a smile quickly formed on her face.

"You good, Violet?"

I nodded as steadily as I could and moved to put the water bottle back on my desk, only to accidentally startle myself by nearly tipping it over.

"You look pretty green around the gills... Want to go get some air? Grab lunch?"

I shook my head, hurriedly standing up.

"No, I'm not— I'm not hungry."

Just the *thought* of food made me want to—

I hastened my way by her desk, making a beeline for the bathroom.

I was face-first in the toilet by the time she knocked on the door.

“Violet? Y’okay hon?”

I did my best to puke *silently*. Wasn’t entirely successful, but at least I didn’t make any pathetic or gross vocalizations.

“Fine, just— just fine. Sorry to worry you,” I replied, carefully trying to clear my throat burning with bile.

“Don’t say sorry, Violet. You want me to tell the big man you’re feeling under the weather and need to scoot home?”

“N-no, it’s— it’s fine. Just some stomach problems. I’ll be out in a— in a minute.”

“No worries... Just holler if you need anything, alright?”

I needed so much.

I needed this to stop.

I needed *help*.

But who was I to lay everything at someone else’s feet?

This was my bed, and until I could get out of it, I had to lie in it.

If only I could walk into an office and walk out with a new identity, one and done. But I supposed it was only natural that it took time to sort out this sort of paperwork and get the hoops jumped through.

The past three weeks had been an agonizing dance of paranoia. When my mind and body started to feel complacent, there’d be some small trigger that got me back up in a froth. They could be just as minor as a flash of pale blonde hair in a crowd or a man speaking in a similar tone.

Work kept me busy, and gave me a routine to structure through, but I felt like I was going *insane*. Every cagey moment was becoming more disorienting. My appetite was becoming *dismal*, to the point where I had to force myself through the bland gruel I was whipping up on my non-existent budget. My paychecks were purely going towards my preparations to depart,

especially with the knowledge that I would be pinching pennies off of savings again for the next while.

I wasn't exactly surprised when I started waking up feeling nauseous, puking up bile during my morning routines. That was to be expected, living in constant threat of danger. But the fact that my period was now a week late made me concede even a small portion of my budget for some clarity of mind.

I walked into the bathroom of the grocery store, the small plastic bag holding just one box so heavy in my hand. My heart thudded in my ears as I walked into the stall, and when I shut the door I couldn't help but give a choked laugh.

Plastered on the interior door was a domestic abuse hotline notice.

"Thanks for the reminder," I groused out to no one, mouth quirking a little as I rifled out the pregnancy test. The off-brand labeling assured five-day early notice, comparable to name brand, and so on.

I popped it open, pulled it out one of the two wrapped lengths within, and unfurled the little innocuous plastic stick that would decide my fate.

We hadn't used a condom. And I wasn't on birth control. My body reacted so poorly to the pill, and I had been tired of taking it while I was with Elliot. There were other options, sure, but it's not like I was planning on being sexually active once I left him.

The next few minutes were among the most tense and humiliating of my life. And that is saying something. I sat there, glaring holes into the reader, desperate for only one blue line to read out.

If I was pregnant, I wasn't in a position to handle it. With how much stress I was in, I would probably lose it in the next few weeks anyways. But it would be yet another complication, yet another part of this world working against me. I could never escape men, could I? One way or another, one of them would get their claws into me, and I would never be safe, never be *free*.

I blinked away tears and checked the clock on my phone again.

It'd been over five minutes.

There were two pink lines.

It was possible for it to be a false positive, right?

So, I took the second, though I knew in my gut that the doors were closing in on my escape from this too.

When the second one proudly announced itself as positive, I had to bite back my tears, desperately trying to not humiliate myself further by breaking down into tears in a grocery store's public bathroom.

I would be fine. I didn't know if the little ill-fated life growing inside of me would be. But I at least had to convince myself that *I* would be fine, or I would fall apart right here.

I stared at the paper in front of me, and my mind circled on the possibility of using it and getting myself admitted to a shelter, but...

I was so close to escaping on my terms. I just needed to get through all the bureaucratic busywork and *survive* a bit longer.

My hands grit together, shaking.

"You just have to survive, Violet. Just a little longer. Soon. Soon you'll be out. Soon you'll be gone. It'll be okay. You'll be okay," I whispered, rocking back and forth instinctually.

It had to be psychosomatic, with how small the little thing inside of me must be, but I felt a deep cramp inside my belly in answer.

Was that supposed to be a threat, a promise, or a cry for help?

One trembling hand went over my still-flat stomach, and I felt my tears roll hotter and freer down my cheeks.

I'm sorry. I don't know if I can take care of myself now, let alone you.

The sound of the door to the bathroom opening spooked me, silencing my sorrows and putting me right back into flight mode. I strained as best I could to determine who it was, some animal corner of my brain obsessed with the prospect that it was Elliot.

But the footsteps were light, shuffling. Doddering.

I glanced and saw some wrinkled feet in moccasins walk into the stall next to me.

Some old lady.

I couldn't breathe in relief, because there was no relief to be found here.

Too many countdowns were bearing over my head for any moment of safety to feel like a victory.

If I didn't hurry, at least one of these clocks was going to hit zero.

I couldn't have coffee. I mean, I *could*, but with how perpetually distraught I was right now, it could be the last straw that broke *my* back. Winding up in the hospital because I miscarried was not in my best interests right now.

But with my luck, it could happen either way.

Regardless, I stood in the little break area kitchenette in the office, staring shell-shocked at the cup of herbal tea I was steeping.

"Hey, Violet," Whitney greeted next to me in a private murmur, voice warm though tuckered.

I spooked but locked myself up to avoid making it obvious; my head moved on a jittery joint as I looked over to her.

"... Hey," I answered back, clearing my throat to get rid of its hoarseness. "How's your work going?"

"Fine enough," she said while busying herself with the coffee machine.

She spared a glance at my cup and chuckled.

"Bold choice, no caffeine."

I shrug half-heartedly with a shoulder, watching her as she fusses with the contraption to get herself a cup of coffee that I would much rather get to drink instead.

She'd been a good friend to me, in the short time I'd been in New Orleans. She'd been reasonable, warm, and didn't ask me too many questions.

The thought was leading its way out of my mouth before I properly formed it.

“Hey, Whitney...”

She glanced over to me with an interested brow.

I faltered, catching myself, but the momentum was already there, and my worries were too great.

“Could you be my medical emergency contact?”

She blanked at that, and the ensuing quiet was boisterously occupied by the hiss and rumble of the machine doing its work.

I couldn't keep her gaze at that and busied myself with picking up my mug. It was such a heavy request. Was this something that people could ask their friends? I didn't really know. But she was the closest thing I had to a support network here, and if something bad happened to me, she was the only person I could think of who could maybe help.

There was Silas, too, but—

He could hurt so much more than he could help. He'd probably run me off the moment I told him I was pregnant, or pay me off to get rid of it and keep quiet.

I could use the money and the escape, but I just—

I didn't want to hurt myself more.

“... um, why, Violet? Are you okay?”

I wasn't. I really, *really* wasn't. But I couldn't tell her that. I couldn't let it show, or I'd have a breakdown right here in the office.

“Y-yeah,” I answered shakily. “Just, ah, realizing that I really don't have anyone in the city who can help me if I wind up in the hospital or something.”

“Why would you wind up in the hospital? Is that thing you were sick with before New Year's sticking around? You're still puking like you did the other day?”

I shake my head, the dark wig tickling my cheeks.

“N-no. Maybe? I–... I’m just trying to get my bases covered. But I get it; that’s a big ask, right? So um, forget I asked.”

I hastened back to my desk, willing myself to keep everything buried. Of course, she wouldn’t want to. She barely knew me. I was burdening someone warm and innocent with my problems by even trying to ask. She didn’t need to be involved with any of my woes. Whitney deserved to live carefree and easy, far removed from these dangers and stressors.

As always, I would have to handle this on my own.

I looked past the mug in my hands to my stomach, still masked in the oversized sweatshirt I was sweltering in.

Maybe not entirely on my own.

It’s not like the life inside of me was *someone* yet, but at least I wasn’t alone anymore, no matter where I went.

When I gave my excuse for leaving this pleasant little office, I could legitimately tell them it was a family emergency now.

Chapter 20

SILAS



I really didn't need to be here in New Orleans right now. In all honesty, I should be at the Chandler Energy headquarters proper if I was in town. But instead, I found myself rolling up to the parking lot near my entertainment company's accounting office. I offloaded from my Ferrari and started to make my way inside; each step made the knot in my gut grow tighter and tighter.

I wasn't here to see her. I was here to talk to William about putting forth some proactive internal policies and adjusting how the accounting office functioned in order to prevent similar *incidents* as Violet had uncovered from slipping through the cracks again.

Could we do this over a call?

Absolutely.

But while I wasn't here to see her, if I incidentally crossed paths with her, that was fine too.

She still hadn't made any moves at all, and I was stir-crazy from the radio silence. I just needed to make sure that she wasn't going to try anything, and then I could ideally move on with my life. I'd gotten my romp in the sheets with her. While it was a severe infraction of my personal code that I'd never live down the guilt and shame from, it would hopefully satisfy the instinct that drew me towards her. All of this lingering obsession was just my paranoia waiting for her to try and take advantage of my mistake in some way. Once I was sure she was a non-factor, then I could breathe easy and move on with my life.

Or so I kept telling myself.

I walked inside to the sound of keyboards and the hum of fans circulating

air in the old brick building. In spite of myself, my gaze locked right in on Violet's back.

She was such a mystery. Why hadn't she tried anything? It'd been *weeks* now. Was she ashamed too? She'd been so proud and defensive towards my possible advances, so maybe she wanted to bury it all as well.

I walked by her desk, though I did not linger. I didn't need to make an obvious scene of it. My focus slipped elsewhere, sharing brief nods of greeting with some of the other accountants before I helped myself into William's office.

He straightened right up as I entered, smiling politely.

"Hey, Silas. Rare we get you in this time of year; I brought out the good cookies for our little meeting. My maman made them."

"You know I love your maman's cookies," I replied warmly as I shut the door.

I left William's office with my business done and my stomach well supplied with confections, but I did not feel satisfied.

I hadn't felt satisfied in quite a while now.

And all thanks to her.

Those brown eyes met mine as I shut the door after me, and I could tell by the withdrawn dart away they made that it had *not* been intentional. Her shoulders slumped defensively into herself, reticent and refusing.

She really did intend on burying it, didn't she.

There was a slight settling of my nerves, having finally gotten the closest thing to a confirmation that she wouldn't try to turn it into some honeypot blackmail, or cling to me, thinking that one transgression meant she had me wrapped around her little finger.

I walked through, slowing a bit as I neared.

She pointedly dug deeper into her work, a frown bracing on her face as she glared into her screen.

Something spun sharply in me at that; was it really so horrible for her that she was acting like *that*?

I widened my stride back out and kept walking, sucking my teeth silently.

It was just an irrational feeling. It was the same contradictory fixation on a woman who refused and rebuked me. That's all it was. I was smarter than that. I just needed to let it stop bothering me once and for all.

If she didn't want to dig it up, that served me all the better. I could continue on and do my best to salvage my code to not get involved with anyone on my payroll.

I felt some definite irritation in my hurried strides down the stairwell. I spun my keys restlessly in my hand on my jaunt back to my Ferrari—

There was a slight falter in my step as I saw some tall figure in a hoodie looming near my passenger side door.

Wasn't the first time I'd had random people scope out my car, and usually they were just genuinely marveling at it or stealing selfies rather than trying to do any *actual* theft.

As I neared, I hit the lock key; it was already locked, but I wanted it to chirp. It didn't spook the guy and make him bolt, so either he wasn't doing any foul play or had balls of steel.

He picked up on my footsteps and turned toward me, and I flashed one of my usual easy-going smiles.

"Hey, buddy," I greeted, scoping him out.

I was straight, but I knew a good-looking man when I saw one. I mean, I saw myself in the mirror every day, so my standards were high. Pale, ice blonde, sky blue eyes. While the non-descript hoodie and jeans he was wearing would make an average guy blend into the crowd, he looked more like he was some model ironically slumming it now that I'd seen his face.

"Hey. This yours?" He pointed lightly aside towards my car behind him.

"Yeah. Nice ride, isn't she?"

He nodded with a light smile of his own. "Absolutely. You don't see a

hotrod like this too often. I've always been a fan of Ferraris, but they've never quite been in my budget, you know?"

I chuckled at that; it was just some innocuous small talk, but it was just what I needed after all that tension around Violet.

"Yeah, I feel that. Used to be my dream car, too. Didn't always have the Ferrari budget."

"Really? Damn, got a lucky break?"

"A few lucky breaks," I answered, sidling by him to lean against the front of the car.

"I guess some people have all the luck," he said in harmless humor, hands tucked into his hoodie pocket. "How's it drive?"

"Like a dream. Though she can get a bit zippy if you aren't careful. And doesn't exactly handle high water very well, so she's an indoor car once we hit flooding season."

"Yeah, I bet. It's weird to think that this whole place is practically below sea level."

"Power of human ingenuity seasoned with human stubbornness. You visiting?"

"That obvious?"

I chuckled, leaning up off the car. "A couple of tells. Nothing wrong with that, though. Welcome to New Orleans, man. Hope you enjoy yourself here. If you're here early to pregame Mardi Gras a few weeks early, I can recommend a few places to you."

"Ah, really? Appreciate it."

We chatted for a good extra ten minutes or so before I managed to break off and get into my car comfortably. By the end we hadn't hit it off so well that either of us made the push to exchange contact information. We did exchange names though, just in the casual momentum of socializing.

His name was Elliot.

Chapter 21

VIOLET



It really was a mercy that I had a job. Not really even for the money it was going to get me, but the fact that it gave me something to do with myself.

It was just really, *really* unfortunate that it'd got me tangled up with Silas Chandler.

He'd visited the office earlier today and hadn't said a word to me. Which I was grateful for; the last thing I needed was for him to cause a scene in the office. At least he hadn't seemed presumptuous or flirtatious. There were no goading or promising glances that spoke of him feeling entitled to me or that we had some 'thing' because we'd drunkenly fallen into bed together.

But the absolute cold shoulder he'd given me had hurt.

Even though I was intoxicated and not thinking straight, I'd been vulnerable in the time we'd been together. And he'd thrown that right back into my face by not even trying to make some sort of amends. No apology, no check-in.

With how much he'd seemed to take pride in not making passes at his employees, he hadn't even tried to make amends for it. So, it was just lip service after all.

I rubbed at my eyes, profoundly exhausted and at my wit's end. Having work to focus on helped distract me from *everything*, but it could only do so much. My grief, my loneliness, my despair, they all kept me company. Everyone else had gone home by now, William asking me just to make sure I locked up after myself and didn't accidentally lock myself out if I needed to step out.

I made sure my documents were saved, logged out, and shut down my computer with a deep weariness in my bones. While I wasn't exactly

enthused about leaving work in the middle of the night alone, I'd made my own bed by not finishing up fast enough. And after my little faux pas with Whitney, I didn't want to ruin things by asking her to stay late with me.

I'd need to be careful, as always. That was all my life had been, especially lately. Once the lights were off and the last affairs in order, I double-checked that the door was in fact locked after me. It jostled loudly as I rattled it, and once I was satisfied, I made sure I had my phone out with the emergency call in one hand and my mace and keys in the other.

Couldn't be too careful.

I made my way outside; at least it was cooler now that it was nighttime, making my extra layers less cumbersome for my comfort. My eyes scanned around as I walked at a steady clip, not wanting to waste time but not wanting to rush. Under the glow of street lamps, there didn't seem anything out of the ordinary. But rather than that acting as assurance, it only ever ramped up my anxiety more, afraid of being caught in a moment of complacency.

I was only ten feet away from my car when I heard it.

Heard *him*.

"Violet. Still quite the workaholic, I see."

My body **froze**. My mind **roared**.

I willed myself to move. To say something. To do **anything**.

I heard his footsteps nearing—

That was enough to tip the scales of my body's defensive petrification. Some deep primal part of my brain knew there was a predator behind me, and if I stayed still, that was it. I had to **run**.

There was the skid of asphalt beneath my feet as I **bolted**, panicked fingers trying to get my car unlocked while trying to get the 911 call to kick off.

I made it one step, two—

Then there was the **impact**, and I tumbled down to the ground. My phone and my head **thwacked** the ground almost simultaneously, and some part of me had the sense to curl my other arm underneath me to try to block any

force that might hit my stomach. But that did mean I didn't have my can of mace at the ready, though it did mean he couldn't notice it and wrench it out of my grip yet.

The pressure of his weight on my back made me *sick*. Or maybe it was just the fear, head injury, or all of it in tandem. I gasped for air, the wind knocked out of me.

The furious sound of him sucking his tongue sent a learned chill of terror down my spine. I'd heard it hundreds of times before, and it never ended well.

"Hah, *fuck* Violet," he said in a hoarse, pressuring voice, "Why are you making a scene like this? If someone saw you doing that, they'd think I was some stranger trying to mug you, not your fiancée."

My body rioted against me, suffocating even though he was not putting enough physical force on me that I couldn't breathe.

I was a rabbit in a wolf's mouth, I was a rat in a trap, and I was ***done*** for.

Tears burned out of my eyes as I tried to force any air into my lungs because I wasn't dead yet even if my body wanted to lay down and accept that fate prematurely.

He pushed himself off me and hauled me up to my feet. My head hung low, unable to look up at his face; perhaps I hoped that this was all a horrible nightmare, and looking at his face would make it *real*.

"Eugh, look at you. You're an absolute fucking mess. Your forehead is bleeding and everything. And what's with this hair?"

As he reached a hand out and pulled some of the wig fibers out of the stinging line on my forehead, making me wince and shudder in pain.

"Ah, *goddamn* it. You're unbelievable, Violet. None of this would have happened if you hadn't tried to run."

I didn't know if he meant just now, or at all. Probably both. He liked to have layers to his jabs and insults.

I tucked my can of mace discretely against my side, hoping against hope

he hadn't noticed it. Maybe if I was quick, I could get him in the face, get into my car, and drive off before he could catch me. I glanced down to see if I could see my phone near me, trying to calculate if I'd have time to grab it or if it had even survived the fall. I couldn't see it from here, so it must have slid off out of my hand, and I'd have to leave it as a casualty during my second attempt at escape. My thoughts were a blur, soupy yet spiked; despite the alacrity, the adrenaline should be giving me, I felt fever drunk.

“Are you really going to play the mute now that I finally get to see you again? Jesus Christ, Violet. Do you hate me that much?”

I do, I wanted to answer, but the only thing in my throat was bile. My nostrils were full of the scent of my own blood, face hot with it running down my skin.

The pain cut through it all, shallow yet sharp.

I couldn't stand straight, the world was spinning, and everything hurt. There would be so much more pain if I couldn't get away—

My arm wrenched up, lining up the can towards his face—

But as I hit the trigger, he cracked my arm down, so I mostly sprayed the front of him rather than my real target.

We both started to cough and wheeze in the indirect cloud of it, and I tried to turn and wrench myself away from him in the distraction, even though my eyes were blurry and watering.

But I'd messed it up, like I always did, and his hand was still on my arm, and he did not let go. In fact, he wrenched me back towards him and forced the can out of my grip with the other, kicking it off to the side in an outburst of anger as he pulled me out of the immediate cloud.

“Violet, *I swear to God*, if you don't quit your shit *right now*, I will do something we'll *both* regret.”

I wretched, gagging, puking up a bit of liquid on both of our shoes.

He skidded back slightly but still kept hold of me.

“Come on now, you're tougher than that.”

I blinked through puffy eyes up at him, and saw his beautiful, horrible face. It was flushed from the pepper spray and anger, his eyes narrowed in on mine.

“Damn it. Look at me. Open your eyes.”

I spat limply, trying to get all the horrible tastes out of my mouth.

His hand went up to my face, peeling my upper eyelid up.

“Your pupils are all messed up.”

The disorienting paralyzed swirl of my thoughts made more sense with that little factoid leaking through.

As he began to haul me away, I wondered dimly if I’d ever left him at all, and all of this had been one long fever dream.

Chapter 22

SILAS



couldn't clear my head.

I Couldn't clear my thoughts of *her*.

I stared ahead in the gridlocked traffic, fingers flexing on the wheel.

And it wasn't just me spinning my wheels in irritation about her. That rogue element of concern increasingly tightened its vice on me.

What if she wasn't just evasive at the office? What if she was *afraid*?

That theory was starting to form more concretely in my mind, snowballing as best it could through the vigilant defense of my paranoia. She'd struck me as someone who had been burned before; maybe she'd been sexually harassed or even abused by a previous employer. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility and was the reason I had my code in the first place.

If I tried to structure it from that perspective, her reactions lined up reasonably enough.

We were both waiting for the other to prove each other's worst fears right.

At least, if this hypothesis was true.

But more and more, it meshed, and it made my irritation for the past few weeks begin to sour.

It wasn't the confirmed truth, though. There was always the possibility that I was giving her the benefit of the doubt, letting myself get duped and pulled in by the flashes of vulnerability I'd seen out of her.

Either way, I took advantage of the still dead traffic to try and call her cell phone number I'd seen attached to her email signature. Since I knew we didn't exactly hand out work cells, it must either be a personally owned work

phone or her own cell.

I was tempted to try and text, but just in case she did try and weasel this into some legal mess, the fewer traces involved, the better.

The call immediately went to voicemail, an automated voice chirping out the receiving number and to ‘leave a message at the tone.’

My brow furrowed. Was this actually her number? Was her phone turned off?

I really didn’t want to leave this message on someone else’s phone.

So, I hung up, tension knotting itself tighter and tighter inside of me.

I’d try again later.

I tried calling two more times that night. And then twice in the morning. The same treatment each time.

It was driving me up the wall. I needed to get in proper touch with her and put this whole thing to bed (even though that was where it had wound up anyways).

It was midafternoon when I finally broke and gave William a ring.

“Hello hello, Silas. What can I do ya for? Leave something here yesterday, other than crumbs?”

His easy-going laughter normally put me in good spirits, but it couldn’t quite remedy my mood right now.

“Hey, I uh-... Wanted to check in on that new hire.”

There was a disgruntled sigh over the line.

“You and me both, buddy. She’s no-showed today.”

My brow furrowed at that.

“What?”

“Yeah. Tried to call her—”

“Voicemail.”

“Yeah, pretty much. She closed the place last night and maybe she pushed herself too hard and slept in. I dunno. She’s been great to have, especially with figuring out that... Y’know... Old mess,” he managed, dancing a little around the fact he’d had a bit of embezzlement happen unknowingly under his nose. Which was fair, he’d gotten the screws twisted on him about it already. “But she’s been a bit under the weather lately, so maybe she’s just really sick. She even asked Whitney to be her emergency contact or something the other day.”

I stared at the entrance to the fine dining restaurant I’d driven to in City Center, knowing my mother was well inside waiting for our little ‘mother-son’ lunch date. But I knew I wouldn’t be able to mind myself if this was still pressing on my mind.

“Really.”

“Yeah. And... Between you and me,” he began in a more clandestine tone, “She could be in some *trouble* trouble. I haven’t moved on it because I don’t wanna do any overkill, since I figure she probably did sleep in... But before the New Year she requested that I keep her personal information on a tight lid. Said she might have a stalker.”

It all clicked. Horribly, disorientingly, it clicked.

She was afraid because someone was hunting her down. Maybe the old boss I suspected could have pushed things too far, or just someone else trying to pin her down in her life.

“Do you have any other way to contact her?”

“Other than sending someone over to her house? No.”

“I’ll go.”

“Silas, you really don’t have to—”

“I do,” I interjected staunchly.

He sighed after a beat.

“Yeah, hits close to home, right? Do you need me to send you her address?”

“I took her home on New Year’s Eve. I remember where it is.”

“Oh, well, that makes life easy then. Let me know as soon as you learn anything, alright? She’s good people, so I don’t wanna give her a hard time if it’s something serious. But this isn’t exactly doing her favors for her track record.”

“Mmnh. I’ll get you in the loop as soon as I figure things out.”

“Thanks, Silas. Taking a load off my shoulders. There’s always that little worry that you *should* overreact, you know?”

“Yeah. Let me do the overreacting and you just focus on holding down the fort.”

“You got ‘er.”

“Not yet.”

He gave a dry little laugh at that, and I hung up the line.

I let out a slow draining breath, centering myself as best I could.

I started the car right back up as I called my mother’s number.

“Hello Silas, where are you?”

“Outside.”

“Great, I’ll see you in a minute.”

“No, Mom. You won’t. Sorry, work came up.”

“What? You promised me we’d do this for the last *week*. You’ve been out of town and when you are here, you’re running all over the place. What work is it?”

“Have to do some legwork for CE,” I lied, glancing behind myself as I set the car in reverse.

“Legwork sounds like it’s below your pay grade, honey.”

“Not this legwork, Mom.”

“You always take all these tasks on yourself that you could delegate off to

someone else, sweetheart.”

“I delegate a helluva lot out already,” I replied, slowly backing the car out. “If I delegate much more, I’ll be sitting at home twiddling my thumbs, waiting for something to be important enough for me to do.”

“Or spending time with your mother.”

“Mom,” I sighed out, forcing myself to stay steady. “I’m sorry. I’ll make this up to you, I promise. Either dinner tonight, or tomorrow. I need to take care of this right now.”

“Silas—”

I hung up the call and ripped out of the parking lot before she could even think about coming outside. I’d be paying for this later, for a *long* time, but she could wait.

I didn’t know if Violet could.

Chapter 23

VIOLET



I hated hospital food. It was bland and depressing at best. But it was food, and the doctors were insistent that I eat.

After all, I was pregnant.

I skimmed the plastic spoon around in the Jell-O I'd barely touched.

As much as I hated being in the hospital, it had done me one favor at least: I'd been able to get away from Elliot. I'd been entirely out of sorts with the concussion, on top of the traumatized near-catatonia I'd been pushed into. But thankfully, despite his insistence that he was my fiancée, I'd managed to get separated from him. I'd removed him from my medical records and asked that he be kept out as he was my ex-abuser and was the whole reason I was in this state.

He'd gotten me admitted with the excuse that I'd fallen and accidentally set off my pepper spray, but once I managed to get myself alone and force some lucidity, I'd told them the *truth*. They'd asked me if I wanted to sign a report and get the police involved, but I declined. I decided that I couldn't afford the time and money that involved, and what little punishment he could get from it wouldn't work in my favor. And no one ever believed me when I tried to speak out about him; he was too charismatic and persuasive. This would be just the same.

I just needed to get out of here as soon as possible: this hospital and this city.

I didn't know exactly what had happened with Elliot after we were split, other than the fact he was 'removed' from the hospital vicinity.

I didn't have my phone anymore. I didn't know if he'd picked it up or not in that parking lot; after the fall was largely a blur to my memories now.

Hopefully, if it was in his possession, it was broken enough that he couldn't use it. I needed not only the phone to be broken but the SIM card, too; I didn't put it above him to jury rig it out and find another phone to put it in to get into my data.

Complication after complication.

Why couldn't my life be easy?

I slapped my spoon against the Jell-O just to wearily watch it jiggle.

At least they'd put me in a single room, probably because of the pairing of the pregnancy and domestic abuse risk. The concussion was decently substantial, and the laceration on the top of my forehead had taken four stitches to close up.

That was another scar from Elliot.

If I had any luck at all, it would be my last.

But I hadn't exactly been *lucky* lately.

I stared out towards the blinds on the window and heaved a hoarse sigh.

I needed to tell the nurse to call my job. But I'd barely woken up, and I was so, **so** tired. Worrying about that job seemed like nothing compared to the monumental weight of Elliot, my pregnancy, and my escape from New Orleans.

They must be upset, though. Louisiana was an "at-will" employer state, so they could just fire me outright if my absence made them mad enough.

Mr. Marks seemed much more reasonable than that, but...

If I knew anything, it was that you never truly knew someone.

I leaned more of my weight back into the propped-up pillows, trying to muster the energy to carry out this conversation before I hit the call button.

I just wanted to give up. I just wanted to lie down and be *done*. I was so tired of running.

Tears beaded up in my eyes, my body a hollow vessel full of only exhaustion and dread.

At least Elliot hadn't been around when my pregnancy was brought to light. If he knew I was carrying another man's child, I wouldn't walk away with scars. I wouldn't walk away at all, for good or for ill.

I was being kept for another day or two of observation because they wanted to make sure the concussion cleared up and my pregnancy remained stable. They'd seemed optimistic about the pregnancy, less so about my head. I didn't know if I wanted it the other way around.

A little thought curled its way at the edge of my heavy, throbbing head.

I could use it as a trump card. As much as I hated to use someone, *two* someones if you counted the pregnancy, perhaps it was only inevitable. I'd been used so much, perhaps it was time I turned the tables.

I could contact Silas and hold him accountable for the pregnancy. He had more than enough money to throw around, and it wouldn't be good for him if I made a ruckus about it. Especially since he tried to position himself as not the sort of employer to do that, I imagined he held his reputation in high enough esteem that he'd value it over a check.

Maybe if I even told him *everything*, not just the pregnancy but the situation with Elliot, he might be able to keep me safe from him until I could vanish.

But then he might just decide he could kill two birds with one stone and leave me out to the wolves. I couldn't let him know how disadvantaged I was right now, I needed to keep my cards close to my chest.

There was movement in the doorway, and I shifted upright. It was my nurse, and I felt both grateful that I didn't have to go through the effort of hitting the button, and a bit rushed to not have the full time to prepare myself for the conversation.

"Ah, hello..." I tried to remember her name, but it eluded me.

God, was the concussion that bad?

"Hey there, sugar," she greeted, smiling gently. "How was that food?"

I shrugged a shoulder and gave the Jell-O another lazy spank.

“Food.”

“Mhm, I can see that. Feeling any nausea, dizziness, light-headedness or anything like that, honey?”

“A bit,” I croaked out.

“You got the double whammy right now. No small wonder. Could you be a dear and let me check your eyes really quick?”

I nodded, adjusting myself to let her carry out what she needed to do. The little flashlight came again, and the tests were looking back and forth and focusing.

“Mmmn, we’re looking better. That’s good! Real good. Might still want you to stay the night, just to be safe.”

I nodded slowly.

As much as I needed to get moving, I was no longer safe the moment I stepped out of this hospital.

“And one last thing, honey. There was some tall drink of water asking about you at the desk.”

My stomach rioted, threatening to send up what little I’d managed to get down. Hadn’t she seen him last night? Didn’t she know who Elliot was?

“Says he’s your boss? Silas Chandler. The desk told him they can’t give out any patient info, but I thought you might wanna know.”

I breathed out slowly.

“... Is he still here?”

“No.”

“Can you call him for me? I– I don’t have a cell phone anymore.”

The nurse smiled gently and nodded as she gathered up the remnants of my meal.

“Sure thing, sweetheart. Do you want to call him yourself, or get the desk to tell him what he needs to know?”

I blanked, considering my options.

“... Have them call him and let him know that he can come see me if he wants to talk.”

Chapter 24

SILAS



I never liked hospitals. They were always too clean, quiet, and *manufactured*.

Or maybe it was the memories of sitting as a child and listening to my mother argue with the doctors during the few times she brought me in.

Either way, I wasn't at ease at hospitals on a *good* day.

And spending the last few hours scouring the city, trying to figure out where Violet Norman could be had only spooled my stress higher and higher. I'd been on the verge of going to the police when I finally got a call back from one of the hospitals in the city: she was there and wanted me to see her.

Well, perhaps that wasn't the most *accurate* phrasing. I doubted she actually *wanted* to see me, if her radio silence for the past few weeks was any indication.

I double-checked the note the desk had given me and referenced the tidily numbered rooms along the hallway as I walked.

As I came up to the room she apparently was in, I took a pause outside to not only tuck the paper away, but try and get myself into sorts. I was tense from my throat to my stomach; everything was *clenched*, anxiety locking me in a vice grip, which made no sense. Why should I be so nervous to see her?

I swallowed and made my way in slowly, looking around for her.

I made eye contact with those light brown eyes and my gut dropped.

She was laid back on a bed in a hospital gown, propped up on a pillow. Her red hair was on display, though it was put into a loose braid instead of falling around her shoulders. But my eyes were drawn not to her hair, but the stark white of some thick bandage dressing on her forehead, and the pallor of her complexion. She looked like she hadn't just gone through hell, but might

very well still be in it.

“Holy shit,” slipped out of me before I could catch it.

There was the faintest twitch in her expression, one I recognized well: the bitter tweak of amusement gritting through it all.

“I look that bad, do I?”

“I mean, I’ve seen you looking much better,” I bantered back gently.

Her lips pursed together at that, and I resisted the wince that wanted to form at her clear disapproval.

“Well, you can’t exactly expect people to look their Sunday best when they’re in the hospital,” came her toothless deadpan.

“No,” I said in earnest, approaching cautiously. “No, you can’t. So... how exactly did you wind up in the hospital, Violet? And why didn’t you get in touch with the office? You had everyone worried. I’ve been turning up rocks all across the city trying to figure out where you were before I had to tell the cops you were missing.”

Her face tensed, then fell, and her gaze left mine to look down at her hands.

I followed her gaze.

Her hands didn’t seem too banged up, other than a little bit of skimming on the back of one.

“... I apologize for not properly informing my workplace of my situation. Unfortunately, my phone is not only broken, but it’s also missing, and I, well...”

She sighed, worrying one of her nails against her cuticle in a fidgeting tic.

“As you can see, I suffered a bit of a head injury. The concussion was bad enough that I wasn’t really very lucid for a bit.”

“Yeah, that’s a pretty big bandage. So, what happened?”

Violet exhaled slowly and finally looked back at me. Her expression was chillingly composed; before a word left her mouth, I knew she wouldn’t tell

me anything.

“Just an unfortunate accident. Nothing you need to concern yourself with, sir. Frankly, I’m surprised to see you here. I wouldn’t expect the owner of the company to go looking for an employee who’s no-call, no-showed one shift... Especially when it’s still the day of that particular infraction.”

I felt my jaw lock up, tension rocking through me. She really was going to keep me at arm’s length, wasn’t she?

“Well, I’ve told you before, I like to take care of my employees. And I was informed there might be some extenuating circumstances that meant you were at actual risk,” I replied, approaching with a few slow strides to grab the back of the visitor’s chair.

She tensed up further, and I couldn’t tell if it was because I was getting closer, what I was saying, or both. But I could tell that I had her on the back foot. I didn’t like the feeling of needing to chase her down, cornering her into telling me the truth, but...

If I had to put some pressure on her to help her, so be it.

“A stalker isn’t something to take lightly,” I continued in a quiet, earnest tone. “I would know. And I couldn’t rest easy, knowing that you could be in danger, without anyone looking out for you.”

Something cracked in her face, just for a moment. But then she hardened back up and looked away from me.

“As you can see, I’m fine. I also apologize for making you waste your time looking for me.”

I folded my hands between my sprawled knees and fixed her with a focused look, even though she avoided my gaze.

“It wasn’t a waste of my time. I got to confirm where you are and that you’re alive and, well, seemingly alright. I would do it again, to make sure that you weren’t in danger. I’m the type to hope for the best and prepare for the worst.”

She breathed out slowly, the sound so shuddery and frail that I wanted to

reach out for her. But I knew that I not only shouldn't, I *couldn't*. Not with the distance she asserted between us.

The questions that had been brewing in my mind spun, but I did not know how to ask a woman recovering on a hospital bed about my transgressions against her. I needed to hold myself accountable for what I'd done *somehow*. I'd kept my distance, assuming that she'd try to use it against me, but I did not know what to expect from Violet.

Just who was she underneath it all?

"Well, Mister Chandler," she eventually began, not quite looking *at* me but clearly pretending she was, "I'm appreciative of the effort, but as you can tell, it was unnecessary. I was just about to get a call to the office when I was told you were asking about me."

I held my gaze on her, and despite the cracks, I knew she would stay resolute.

Perhaps that was the only thing I could expect from her.

But then there was the soft, needy woman who'd clung onto me on New Year's Eve, begging me to stay...

I craved even the slightest sign of surrender in her, wanting her to trust me enough to put herself into my hands again. But I really didn't deserve it, did I? Not with my track record. I'd assured her I wouldn't make any advances on her once I realized she was one of my employees, then I took her to bed anyways.

"... You said it was an accident, Violet. It had nothing to do with your stalker situation I was informed of?"

She shook her head.

"It was an accident. And you don't need to concern yourself with my personal life, sir. After all, you are just my employer. It isn't relevant to you until that situation interferes with my job."

My emotions spun in my chest, twisting and tangling deeper on each other; I couldn't tell any of them apart. I only knew I was uncomfortably *full*

and *empty* at the same time.

I clenched my hands together, willing some of the restless energy out into the white-knuckled strength of it.

“... I see. And, as your employer, you have nothing else you’d like to discuss with me? No grievances you’d like to bring up, while you have me face to face?”

Despite how I was the one pushing the topic closer and closer to the open, I felt so much suspense that I had to fight to keep my leg from bouncing. Instead, I willed myself intensely still, not wanting to waste a single trace of my attention on anything but her. She was too much of an enigma; I had to try and gauge every little micro expression and movement to have any hope of even *beginning* to understand her.

She locked up at me trying to point out the elephant in the room. In fact, she went so still that it was like watching a wild animal gauging to see if the predator would notice them or give chase.

The silence that took over the room was *excruciating*. It reminded me again that we were in a hospital, with the hushed drone of commercial air filtration, buzz of fluorescent lights, and quiet staff shuffling in the hallways. But despite my discomfort with this space, this very conversation, I remained steadfast in staring at her and sitting on this point until she would do something about it.

I needed to know what she was thinking, what she was feeling. I needed to know if I needed to make amends for this properly or if I needed to protect myself from whatever her intentions were.

I just needed to understand her, once and for all.

She didn’t look at me. Just the far corner.

“... No, sir. There’s nothing to discuss. I had the understanding that any *unfortunate* mistakes between us were to be forgotten about.”

An unfortunate mistake.

That’s what I had regarded it as. Sleeping with her, flirting with her—

They were unfortunate mistakes.

But hearing *her* call them that felt *painful*.

This is everything I had thought I wanted, though. I'd wanted the situation with her to not explode into another shitstorm I had to sort out. I didn't want to deal with blackmail or the nuclear fallout of sleeping with one of my *drunk* employees. So far as I could tell, she really hadn't said anything to anyone about it. And this was her chance to make good on threats, demand an apology, or *anything* from me.

But she, as always, seemed to want *nothing* from me.

What was I supposed to do?

Whether I pushed or pulled, Violet evaded me. Even when she gave me exactly what I wanted, there was always some catch, some feeling of wrongness that kept me from feeling satisfied.

I stared at this frail yet resolute woman and felt truly at a loss.

My hands loosened and went to grasp my knees.

"... I see. Well then, in that case, I suppose my business here is done."

"Yes, I believe it is, Mister Chandler."

The only time she'd ever called me Silas was when she was in my arms.

I stood slowly, finally getting to see her look me in the eyes.

"Well, I'll see myself out then. Did you contact the office yet?"

"I had the desk call them after they called you."

I nodded quietly. When I turned my phone back on, I figured I'd have a voice message from William telling me she was here.

But I really was not looking forward to turning my phone back on. My mom had constantly spammed me with calls and messages during my search through the city. So once I'd finally gotten confirmation from the hospital calling me to tell me that Violet was here, I had no reason not to turn it off and spare myself the nuisance.

I was going to pay for it tonight, though.

“I hope you recover well from your accident, Violet. Take care of yourself, alright?”

She huffed wearily.

“I’m the only one who can, so sure. Thanks.”

I hesitated, but forced myself to keep moving and leave... The instinct to fight back on it died inside of me, because who was I to tell her I’d take care of her, if she’d only let me? I was the boss who slept with her when she was drunk, disregarding the fact that I was drunk as well. I’d crossed the line we’d both agreed on and betrayed what little trust I could have possibly built during her handling of the embezzlement.

I left without another word and spent the whole walk back to my car rallying myself to go into damage control mode for my mother. Once I got my phone back on the first order of business wasn’t to call her, but to start scouring around for reservations at the most luxurious locations I could and try to plan a full day with her as soon as possible. Coming back to her with dutiful tribute and dedicating more of my time to her would hopefully be enough to settle *her* grievances.

Chapter 25

VIOLET



I scratched at the little spot of dried blood on my shirt, squinting in the harsh light of the hospital bathroom.

That was going to be a pain to wash out.

But I had more important things to be worried about than stains in my clothes.

The doctor had wanted me to stay overnight just to make sure both I and the pregnancy were stable, just to be safe. And I wasn't exactly eager to leave the safety of the hospital. But the time had come; I'd just gotten discharged and was taking the opportunity to use the bathroom before I left. I'd be even more nervous once I left, so I might as well get it out now.

I smoothed down my clothes and looked at myself in the mirror.

I looked as tired and stressed as I felt, and that was saying something. No more wig. My guess was that Elliot had ripped it off of my head before dragging me into the hospital. He hated black hair, after all.

I'd spent the whole morning going over desperate plans to try and keep myself safe once I left. I couldn't rely on Whitney, Mister Marks, and *especially* not Mr. Chandler. The police wouldn't be able to help me in a *real* way. Maybe they would if Elliot had stolen my car, but I texted Whitney, and she told me that it was still parked where I left it. He hadn't taken my wallet or my keys. It still even had the few bills I'd left in it. He must not have rustled through my things while we were on the way to the hospital; my memories from the attack were such a blur.

"Well, Violet, time to get a move on," I mumbled. The habit of talking to myself was at least slightly muted by the background awareness that I was

technically in a public place.

The front desk had been kind enough to call a taxi for me, and I'd get a lift right from it into my car. Work was understanding of the whole head injury situation and wasn't expecting me back until the next day. I wasn't going to be able to show up for it, though. Elliot knew I worked there, and he would either show up there to confront me again or follow me home from work.

I didn't really have the money to justify it, but I had to leave the city. Today. I'd have to eat the debts of breaking my lease and everything later.

I'd have to call and break the news to Mister Marks when I was on the road on my way out.

My plan was clear. First thing, I'd get home, change, and grab my bug-out bag. Then I would stop by the apartment manager and talk with them in person about terminating my lease early. Then I'd go buy a burner cell phone on my way out of the city, and then I would drive away from Elliot and *all* of this.

I'd still have part of this city with me, though, right inside me.

I didn't know what I was going to do about the baby. I'd figure it out once I was out of here. When I'd been stuck in bed for so many idle hours, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about what it would be like if I kept it. I wouldn't be alone anymore. I'd finally get to have a family of my own that wasn't full of people trying to use and abuse me. It'd be just me and my own little baby. It'd be so much harder to take care of the both of us, but the idea of not being lonely anymore was a strangely intense temptation.

Either way, I didn't have time to think about it now. Not until I had a good few hundred miles between me and Elliot.

I passed through the hospital's front doors to wait for my cab and winced a bit at the heaviness in the air. It was still January, so it wasn't *hot* hot yet, but I still wasn't used to the southern heat. But as they said, it really wasn't the heat. It was the humidity.

A male figure loitering near the entrance made me tense up already— Would he really be bold enough to try and grab me as soon as I left the

hospital? They'd thrown him out last time.

But after that first moment of fear and adrenaline, I recognized the leather jacket and the bright green eyes that turned toward me.

My pulse hammered and my stomach tweaked; I did not need to feel like the baby inside me was reacting to his presence. It was too small to move, I reminded myself. Just a tiny little thing in my belly that I had to protect, even though it was yet another risk and burden on me.

"Mister Chandler," I greeted, my surprise mostly lending to a sense of caution in my tone.

He approached me, looking me over with that uncomfortably attentive gaze.

"Morning Violet. You holding up alright?"

"Just fine. Why are you here?"

There was a slackening in his face that made me feel rather like I'd kicked a puppy, but I didn't have the time for him. I needed to follow my plan to the letter as soon as possible if I was going to escape Elliot.

"I wanted to make sure you were alright. Heard that you were going to get discharged this morning if your condition was good, so either way I—..."

I began to walk past him, nervous that I was going to miss my cab if I let myself get held up here. I heard his footsteps close behind me, which only put me even more on edge. It was bad enough to feel Elliot in my every shadow, I didn't need to be literally followed right now.

"Violet—"

"What is it, Mister Chandler? I need to catch my cab back to my car."

"I can give you a lift."

I whirled back around to him, chest swelling with the snapping fire of my temper reaching its limit.

"Seriously, *just stop.*"

He did in fact stop dead in his tracks, staring at me with such wide eyes.

“*Silas*, I’m done with whatever this is. Stop trying to manipulate me into thinking you give a shit about me when all you’ve ever done is try and use me. You’ve already gotten what you wanted, right? You got to sleep with me. Congratulations. Another notch on your belt, another conquest to pad out your astronomical ego. Because, of course, no woman could *ever* say no to a man as handsome and rich and *charming* as you, right? It’s only a matter of time before they spread their legs and let you have your way.”

He gaped at me, and his speechless shock seemed to just break down more of the levees inside me.

“What, you want another round? Is that why you’ve come back around after *weeks* of silence? Or is this your way of trying to *apologize* for what happened? Playing nice and harmless so you can get me to lower my guard again? Planning on getting me to depend on you, just so you can throw me away when you’re tired of toying with me?!”

“Violet, I—”

I threw up my hands as his voice croaked out of him, not wanting anything in return. Tears burned in my eyes as I continued to storm away from him.

“Just *leave me alone!* Or I’ll report *you* for stalking!!”

There was a little squat cab waiting patiently by the curb. I didn’t know if it was mine, but I still wrenched the back door open and threw myself into it. In my zeal to slam the door shut after me, I almost caught my own foot in it but was quick enough to lean it out of the way in time.

The rather rattled-looking cab driver looked back at me, brows raised.

I spared a glance out of the window, seeing *Silas* right where I left him.

“I’m sorry, could you please just start driving? I’ll tell you the address, I just—”

“Don’t want him following you, yeah? Okay honey, let’s get you gone.”

I sniffled, wiping away tears.

“Thank you, sir. I’m sorry.”

“S’okay doll; not the first lady I’ve picked up fresh off a fight with her

man,” he joked.

“He’s *not*.”

“Ah, sorry.”

“... I’m sorry. That was rude of me— I just—... Let me just tell you the address, sir.”

He nodded, though I could tell he was walking on eggshells now with how I’d lashed out at him.

I really didn’t have the money to spare, but I was going to have to give him a good tip for his trouble. Once the business was hashed out, I gave another few apologies, and could sit in silence, I just stared blankly out the window as New Orleans whirled by.

This was such a beautiful and interesting city. I was sad to leave it just when I’d hoped to start making roots here.

But that was me being a fool. I should have known better than to think I was safe yet.

I’d have to stay on the road for the next while until my identity change came through and the dust could settle.

And even then, I might never be safe. Even if I eluded Elliot, there’d be more men like him, like Silas—

Tears began to fall from my eyes again, and I did my best to quietly snuffle them back.

I’d been so drunk that night, when I’d let him take me home. Drunk enough I let my guard down and let my loneliness get the better of me.

I’d just wanted not to feel alone anymore. The memories were blurry with booze, more a dream than memory, but I’d had weeks to decipher them in my weaker or more introspective moments.

I’d been so desperate, and he’d been so gentle.

But the man who’d comforted me that night wasn’t the man who left my apartment the morning after.

Much like the 'loving fiancée' who was now hunting me down through this city, he'd never been real. Just me hoping for a dream when all this world would ever be is a nightmare.

Chapter 26

VIOLET



I stared at the colorful brick and black wrought iron of my apartment building, struck still and silent on the sidewalk.

I'd really fallen in love with it when I moved here. It was just so charming and pleasantly anachronistic. It was the first place that had been *mine* and no one else's.

And now it would be ripped away from me, like every other good thing I'd ever dared to try to hold onto.

I'd spend the whole drive back here with my car crying. I thought maybe I'd gotten all the tears out, but more of them burned in my swollen eyes.

I couldn't stop here. As tired as I was, as much as I wanted to collapse and sob myself into some peaceful forever sleep, I had to keep moving if I was going to survive.

My footsteps felt so heavy as I worked my way up the stairs. While my concussion seemed to have largely cleared up, my body still suffered from weeks of stress, poverty-induced malnutrition, and this damned secret pregnancy. But like an exhausted animal, I had to keep pressing on.

I made it to my door and swallowed back the knot in my throat. This would be the last time I got to go inside *my* apartment. How long would it be until I had a place like this again? Months? Years? Never?

I choked back a sob as I twisted the key in the lock. I pulled my keys back out and jammed them into my pocket, debating on whether or not I could spare an hour just to lay in my bed in the hope of getting a bit more energy back. The doorknob obediently turned in my hand, and as I stepped inside I felt a chill down my spine—

I whirled, bracing blindly, and saw livid blue eyes staring down at me, Elliot trying to shove his way into the apartment after me.

How did he know where I lived?

He must have checked my wallet while I wasn't lucid—

My body moved in blind reflex, trying desperately to ram the door shut on him. But he was bigger, stronger, despite how I had the leverage.

“*Violet,*” he hissed in seething quiet, “*Don't make a scene and just let me in.*”

“**No,**” I yelled at the top of my lungs, my teeth gritting in the force to muster my body in resistance against him. “Just leave, please, go, leave me alone!”

“**Violet,**” he ordered, sending a familiar rush of learned terror through my nerves and chilling my blood. “Stop trying to run away and open this goddamn door! You know that you need me just as much as I need you, so enough of this bullshit!”

Despite the part of me that crumpled, wanting to give up if it meant the anger would fade, I knew it wouldn't. He would always be angry, always hateful. The anger wasn't the exception to his loving side, the affection was as much the exception to his abuse as it was the enabler.

“No, I hate you Elliot, *I HATE YOU!!* I'll never go back to you! Just give up on me!! I'll never marry you! I'm done living like this!”

He shoved the door in with all his weight, sending me back onto the floor. I managed to brace myself enough that I didn't land on my full back, just my hands and my bottom.

But that meant I lost control of the door.

I couldn't breathe as he stepped in after me, towering over me with his taller, more powerful body.

This was it.

He was going to either kill me in this apartment or he'd beat me up until I was quiet again, then play a pretty tune to the police when they showed up.

They always believed him; he was too handsome and charming to ever seem like some skeezy wife-beater to the cops.

It was this same song and dance, over and over and over.

I'd wanted to break this cycle.

It was all I wanted.

But here I was again.

Without turning back to the door, his arm reached behind him to force it closed—

But then it bowled right back open, colliding into his back.

He wheeled, and I couldn't tell who it was in the doorway behind him—

“*She told you to leave, motherfucker,*” Silas' voice snapped out like a whip, seething and sharp.

“What the fuck? Ferrari guy?! What are you, her landlord or someshit?”

Panic surged through me and urged me to my feet.

Why was Silas here?! Had he really followed me home, even after everything I'd said to him? And why did Elliot call him that?

“*Elliot,*” I croaked out desperately, trying to move towards them.

He was going to hurt Silas if I didn't intervene. But they were too engrossed in squaring up on each other for me to be noticed as they launched deeper into the mounting aggressions.

“It doesn't matter who *I* am. What matters is that you just barged your way into someone's home without their consent. This is a fucking crime, and the police are already on their way. And you aren't going anywhere until they get here.”

“This isn't any of your business. I'm just trying to have a *conversation* with my fiancée, just a lover's quarrel. You know how it is. Nothing to get the cops involved with.”

Silas snapped out, trying to push his way past him to get inside to *me*. Our

eyes met and I couldn't breathe again.

But then I lost his gaze when Elliot spoke back up, those green eyes burning with fury back onto my ex.

“No, what’s bullshit is you thinking that *you* can barge your way in here. Who the fuck do you think you are?” Elliot’s attention finally whipped back to me, his anger visceral in every movement and tone. “Were you *cheating* on me with this prick? Found yourself some sugar daddy to run off with? What the absolute *fuck* Violet?!”

“N-no,” my voice fell out of me without thinking, shameful and automatic.

“**Hey!**” Silas’ bellowing voice rang through my ears like a bell, and I watched as he grasped Elliot’s shoulder and ripped him away from me, imposing himself between us. “You don’t *get to talk to her like that*, asshole! And she can’t cheat on you, because if you took a second to listen to the woman, *you aren’t together anymore!*”

Elliot glared at the both of us, and I felt myself shrivel and crackle under the weight of his hatred. I had broken myself off wanting him, needing him, loving him—

But I had lived with him, *loved* him, for years. There was still an animal part of my brain that hadn’t completely forgotten the traumatic training he’d instilled in me, as much as I hated it. I’d run from Elliot not only because the few times I had confronted him, it never ended well, but also because I couldn’t trust myself to confront him in the first place. The feeling of helplessness made me feel like a fool, a coward, but—

I wasn’t alone in this weakness because Silas was somehow here, protecting me, saying the words I wanted to but didn’t have the strength to.

“That just fucking confirms it, then. Violet, how *dare* you cheat on me.”

“**Shut up,**” Silas roared, grabbing him by the shirt. “You know what, asshole? Yeah, we’re together, so there’s no room for your bullshit anymore. You’re dead meat to her, and I’ll get you put away for a *long* time if you try to hurt her again.”

I couldn’t keep track of what happened in that next moment or two, but

there was the collision of fists and bodies, the two coming to blows.

I yelled, the violence kicking my anxiety into overdrive. I didn't know what to do, terrified that if I tried to intercede, I'd get hurt— and it wasn't just me on the line. I could doom the little life inside of me if I wasn't careful. But what if Elliot overpowered Silas before the cops came – even if Silas hadn't called them himself and it'd just been a bluff, one of the neighbors had to by now, with all the yelling. I didn't have a phone so I couldn't try and call myself.

I scampered backward towards the kitchen and hastily brought out one of the kitchen knives into my shaking hands. My brain was purely operating off of adrenaline, fear, and instinct. I had to prepare to defend myself if Elliot got through Silas—

I could hide in the bathroom, and it'd take long enough for him to knock down the door that the cops would be here—

I could try and run past them and to the door, go hide, get help—

The wordless yells and shouts of obscenities that deafened my ears piqued as I saw Silas grapple onto Elliot's back, his knee driven against the other man's spine. I'd never thought to compare them... Elliot had always loomed so large and terrible in my memory that I hadn't realized how much bigger and stronger Silas was just in visual comparison to him.

Silas grasped for Elliot's arms, even though the bruised and bloodied man under him fought and buckled.

“Stay down, bastard, or the cops will be taking you out of here in a fucking body bag,” Silas ordered in a harsh, commanding tone.

His green eyes whipped up to me, burning so vividly like an emerald fire that I felt seared by his gaze.

“Violet,” he panted out, still fighting for Elliot's hands. “Zip ties? A scarf? A belt? Anything, I just—”

I nodded shakily and lowered the knife I'd been holding in both hands, racing off to the bedroom to go grab one of my belts.

“**Violet**, you whore! How could you do this to me? How could you hurt me like this? After everything I’ve done for you! I should have never—”

Whatever abuses he might have continued screaming after were silenced by a thud loud enough I could hear it from the room away. My pulse raced in my throat as I hurried back, belt twinkling in my hand.

Silas had clearly bashed his head against the floor, a trickle of red going down his forehead where it’d caught on the raised wood threshold of the foyer. Elliot blinked up at me, dazed but enraged.

“*You were nothing when I found you, Violet,*” he seethed out thickly.

I tried to ignore him, putting the knife aside and hurrying to help Silas where he was holding the other man’s arms together in a rather painful position in the air that prevented him from getting any leverage.

“Don’t listen to him,” Silas urged in a quiet intensity.

My hands shook as I tried to lace the belt around his wrists, unsure how to fasten it properly—

“Not like that, Violet,” he spoke up again, instructive but so certain. “Loosen it back up, then fold the belt flat, with the end at the middle of the length. Buckle side should be the long half.”

I tried to reason with my hands to do it, and after a few moments and some exhausted writhing from Elliot, I managed to get it to the point that Silas nodded in approval.

“Alright, run that fold through the buckle now, okay?” His patiently focused tone got a bit gravelly as Elliot squirmed beneath him. Silas’ answer just seemed to be to lock up his legs and press the pinned arms forward to such an angle that even *I* winced to watch it.

“Y’all alright in here?”

I looked past Silas to the man in the doorway, clearly some middle-aged blue-collar sort that had been roused out of his morning sleep from the fact he was in a stained white tee and some fleecy football sweatpants plastered with *fleur de lis*.

“Getting there— this fucker tried busting in here. You wanna come give me a hand? Cops are on their way and don’t want him getting uppity while they come.”

“Shit, sure,” my unknown neighbor remarked, sidling his way in to help restrain Elliot.

“*I’m gonna kill you,*” Elliot wheezed out, probably having a hard time getting his wind back from the fight with Silas squarely on top of him.

“You just keep those arms up while I finish with the belt here, please, sir. Violet, be a dear and hand that off to me? I’ll finish it up.”

I blankly obeyed and watched, dazed as he took the half-formed loop and with a few tidy motions made a perfect self-closing set of leather handcuffs from it. The motions were so practiced that I had to wonder how often he needed to tie someone up with a belt.

Once the loops were slid over his fists, he cinched the leather through the buckle and drew it tight, locking Elliot’s wrists together.

Silas exhaled, settling his legs to be straddling Elliot more than bracing him down.

“You okay, Violet?”

I breathed out too, shaking from toe to tip.

“I— No,” I admitted hoarsely.

He huffed, flashing that wry debonair smirk at me.

“Yeah, that’s fair. But at least you’re safe now.”

As I stared at him, into the greenest eyes I’d ever seen, I wondered if maybe I finally was.

Chapter 27

SILAS



It was quiet, and I could finally take a moment to breathe.

I sipped at the last bit of the coffee Violet had made for, well, everyone sans Elliot. The police had been pretty grateful for the hospitality while they went through myself, Violet, and the neighbor for the incident report. She could make a pretty decent cup of chicory, which was surprising since she was new to the area.

I once again basked in the quiet cozy comfort of her apartment, though it felt a bit dissonant after all the chaos earlier.

I was glad I decided to listen to my gut and went to her place again to make sure she was truly alright. If I hadn't been here...

I tried not to think about it because then it just made me *angry* again.

Violet and I hadn't had a chance to really talk about things yet, not in full.

She paced out of the bathroom, freshened up and in a new set of clothes, but still gaunt and rattled.

"Hey there," I greeted quietly.

"... You don't have to stay," she answered in a soft murmur, clearly running on empty so far as her usual defensiveness was concerned.

"No, I do. I need to make sure you're alright."

She looked down at me, quietly weary.

"Do you?"

"I do."

She paused for a beat.

“Why?”

I could ask myself the same thing.

Why did I want to help her so badly that I would run all over the city twice over if it meant she was safe?

“Because I know what it’s like.”

Her brow furrowed, and I could see the contest poisoning itself in her eyes. I lifted a hand and shifted forward, putting my cup on the table.

“Hold on, Violet. It’s not in the way you’re thinking. It’s not about me having a stalker before. While, yeah, that was a bit of a spooky time for me, it wasn’t nearly as bad as what you must’ve been going through with a piece of work like that. I just...”

I sighed, and she seemed less bristly, though still waiting for my point to be made to decide whether or not to stop frowning.

“... I know what it’s like to have to face things on your own.”

That seemed to make her hesitate, brown eyes going to the floor.

She was silent, but I didn’t want to pressure her.

Eventually, she spoke up.

“... I’m used to doing things on my own, because I can’t trust the people around me to look out for me. Are you saying that I should trust you, even after everything?”

I braced myself to not wince at that.

“... I know I might not seem very trustworthy, after, well. As you said, ‘everything.’ But I’d like it if you could trust in me enough so far as this is concerned. I don’t want you to be in danger because some narcissistic piece of shit feels like he owns you.”

Violet sighed at that, arms gently folding together to hold each other.

“... I’ll be fine, so you should leave, sir.”

Even though she’d only said my name in anger before at the hospital, it

still stung that she was back to the deferential distance after everything.

“Violet, they might not keep him in for very long. We could only get him brought down to the station for questioning and my lawyer is down there to press charges, but... He might come back here.”

She locked up, and I could tell she already knew by her expression.

“You’re not safe here, and you’re not safe on your own right now. Not until we know he’s not a problem anymore.”

Violet’s honey gaze flicked back up to me, and I could see the edge of moisture lining her red-flushed eyes.

“I know. So I’m going to be leaving.”

My brow furrowed.

“Leaving?”

“Yes. Leaving. I came home to... Grab my things and leave New Orleans.”

My breath drained out of me, and I gawked at her for a speechless moment before a dry laugh worked its way back out.

“One helluva way to put in your resignation notice, Violet.”

She pursed her lips tightly at me, and before I rattled her too much, I stood up and gesticulated in an open, harmless way.

“Now, rather than skip town like you’re the one who’s at fault here, I’ve got a better strategy. Let me help you for the next while, alright? I can get you set up somewhere safe to stay, with somebody to stay with you and make sure that motherfucker doesn’t get anywhere near you until we get a proper restraining order and the whole kit and kaboodle done.”

She locked up, staring at me warily, though I could tell she was just so tired of running and fighting. I couldn’t blame her. I had no idea how long she’d been dealing with that man haunting her life.

“Violet, listen. I know you’re worried I’ll be looking for this to be a tit-for-tat thing, but I mean it. I want to help if you’ll let me. You shouldn’t have

to get run off from your life here because some motherfucker wants to hunt you down. You like it here in New Orleans, right?”

After a beat, she nodded faintly, and the way a tear dislodged out of one eye made my heart clench. What I’d give to be able to hug her right then and there, but that seemed like it’d do more harm than good.

“You’ve made friends, got a nice job with a generous boss,” I joked out dryly.

A singular wet bark of a laugh came out of her then, and I had to bite back my smile at the slightest indication of mirth from her.

“Maybe.”

“And, you remember what I told you, Violet? I take care of my people, so they take care of me. I don’t want to lose you after the good you’ve done me. So, if it makes you feel better, think about all this help as a little incentive, a bonus to not go taking your expertise elsewhere.”

She was silent for nearly a minute at that, but once again, I didn’t want to push her. If I’d learned anything, it was that I needed to be patient and careful if I was to gain any ground with her.

“... What, exactly, do you want to do right now to help me?”

It wasn’t an agreement, but it wasn’t a refusal.

I could have jumped for joy, but I kept my composure. That, and I was pretty tuckered out from all the drama earlier. It’d been a hot minute since I got into a fight, though Elliot hadn’t been that much of an opponent other than the leverage of also being a pretty tall guy. He was built like a beanpole compared to me, and clearly hadn’t been in a fight against someone that could check his ego. Probably talked his way out of those fights, but not with me.

“For right now... Pack a bag, and you can wait at my house for an hour or two while I make some phone calls. You probably haven’t eaten a proper meal since you got in the hospital, so I’ll have my man Patrick come by and make you a nice dinner while I at least get a hotel lined up for you for the next bit. That sound alright?”

Violet paused on that for a time before I saw her shoulders slacken.

“Okay.”

I took in a deep breath and kept myself from grinning.

“I’ll be out here when you’re ready to go.”

Hadn’t exactly thought I’d be driving Violet to my house today, but the world was full of surprises.

“So... why did you tell him that we were together?”

I sighed at that, draining long and slow from me as I settled deeper into the driver’s seat.

“Well, to help protect you. Guys like that sometimes back off if they realize that there’s someone bigger and badder than they are to check them. They only like to punch down. Not that I don’t think you could protect yourself, Violet. But just trying to help.”

My thumb tapped the driver’s wheel, and a chuckle drifted out of me as I spared a glance over to her.

“That, and I really just wanted to stick it in his craw. Bastard felt so entitled to you.”

She looked over at me for a small moment. I was a little irked that I had to spare any attention to the road instead of her, desperate to see those small glimmers of emotion.

When I looked back at her, she was nodding, though she was in the middle of turning her gaze out the car window to watch the traffic go by.

I stared at her profile, a sense of longing twisting inside of me. I wanted to say something more, try to coax more of her thoughts, but we were already pulling up to the cozy little mansion.

I pulled up into the garage and hoped she’d take enough time loading out that I could get the door for her, but she was already out by the time I was.

Ever independent, that one.

I opened the door to the interior hallway for her, at least.

“After you. Feel free just to walk straight, it’ll get you to the living room and you can make yourself comfortable.”

I followed in after her, and in the hallway I couldn’t help but be hit again by just how *small* she was. I knew she was tough, no doubt about it, but just the size disparity between her and that bastard put her at a strong disadvantage. He’d probably banged her up too many times to count, if his showing earlier was indicative of how he usually treated her. The scars I’d seen on her body that night we’d slept together gained a whole new ugly meaning, and I had to resist the primal urge to want to write over every trace of that man left on her.

My thoughts cleared back into focus as she stopped short to loiter awkwardly in the center of the living room.

“Go on, take a seat. The cushions ain’t gonna bite ya,” I teased casually, trying to disarm the lingering tension in the air as best I could.

She didn’t laugh, but she did shuffle to carefully situate herself on the single seater. I tried not to feel a curl of disappointment that she didn’t sit on the couch, because it would have been nice to get to sit with her. But could hardly blame her for wanting some personal space after... Everything.

“You thirsty? Hungry?”

She shook her head, eyes slowly tracing around the space in a sort of dull-eyed caution.

Her gaze stopped short on the table, sharpening back into focus.

“You brought me home to your girlfriend? She’ll probably get the wrong idea.”

There was some venom in her monotone voice, and I followed her stare in bewilderment.

One of Mom’s purses sat in defiant ownership on the coffee table, likely left abandoned after she transferred her belongings from one trendy new bag to the other.

“God, no. I don’t— I don’t have anyone like that,” I stammered out.

“That’s just my mom’s. She comes and goes as she pleases. Likes to leave her things everywhere, marking her territory.”

After the words had left me, I realized too late that it’d sounded more like I was speaking about a feral tiger that’d taken to stalking my house instead of my own mother.

But after the day I’d had, my temper was running pretty close to the surface.

Violet looked up at me, something I’d desperately wanted from her earlier. But the way she looked at me was so piercing that it almost cut. It wasn’t even the usual guarded menace she’d like to throw my way when her own temper ran hot. It was a sort of...

Scrutiny, almost. Like she was sizing me up, calculating me expertly like one of her spreadsheets.

“Not much of a ‘momma’s boy,’ are you?” She even gave the phrase a bit of mocking twang, mimicking a southern drawl of her own.

That was enough to make *me* chuckle, though it was a bit bitter and hoarse in my throat.

“Yes and no? It’s just me and my mom, so whose boy would I be other than hers? But, getting to what you’re *really* trying to ask, I suppose it’s not all gumdrops and roses between us.”

She nodded, looking away once more with a thoughtful heaviness to her face.

“... Well, if you don’t want anything, let me just get Patrick rung up and then get that hotel room lined up.”

I spared her one last glance before whipping out my phone to start making arrangements.

... Only to be interrupted by a sharp, ungainly shriek from behind that rattled both of us.

“Who is *this?!?*”

“Ah, *goddamn it,*” I hissed out under my breath.

I turned to see my mother's aghast, defensive face from where she stood in one of the hallways that led deeper into the house.

"Mom, relax. Just sit down," I urged as comfortingly as I could, despite the fact I was a bit irate that she was here. I'd gotten her settled down about missing lunch with her the day before and even assured her she'd have me all day this weekend.

This wasn't the main house where she lived, it was one of the secondary properties that we could flit between (and one I often defaulted to when I wanted a bit of privacy from her, until she realized I was staying over here). So, she must have come here expecting me to be trying to hide away from her until I was obligated to come see her. I'd had every intention of coming back home to her tonight, but if she was going to hound me for attention while I was busy with everything...

But rather than calming down, I saw her puff up, and a red heat came into her features beneath her perfectly maintained tan.

"Is *this* why you've been ignoring me, Silas? Another one of your little *flings*? She looks like some drug addict you dragged out of a gutter! God, I've been trying to help you settle down and find a good wife for so long! You need to think about our family's legacy, not playing around with cheap tramps! You're getting too old to run around with whatever little floozy throws herself at you!"

I couldn't breathe, choked by my own fury rioting to the surface. After the whole ordeal with Elliot, I didn't have the bandwidth to handle her right now, not in a sensible way.

But before I could say anything in that suffocating silence, *Violet* imposed herself between us, her slender little body drawn tall and staunch.

"Where the hell do you get off, talking to him like that? You don't sound like a mother, you sound like you're yelling at a dog. And the reason I look like this is because *your son* just *saved* me from my *abusive ex*, and instead of taking the time to understand that and be proud of your son for being a good person and helping others, you're treating him like he's turned your home into a whorehouse at the drop of a hat! And you don't get to tell him

who he spends his time with or who he has relations with. He's a grown adult. And after the day *I've* had, the last thing I want is to put up with some gaudy harpy calling me a whore just because I walked into her house. So, I'll see myself right out if this is the kind of treatment I'll get in here."

My mother's shocked expression probably looked a bit like mine. I hadn't expected that out of Violet, any of it.

But then when my mother stormed forward, fury in her eyes, arm lifting to dole out one of her signature slaps—

I stepped to Violet's side and snatched her arm right in the air, before she could get any momentum.

"Silas, you're going to let her talk to *your own mother* like that?!"

"She didn't say anything that's not true. She did get one thing wrong: this isn't *your* house."

The indignant betrayal that ran across her face made guilt twist in my gut —

But it was outweighed by two huge emotions running riot through me. First was a surreal sense of liberation, and the second was the protective fury that had made me go toe to toe with a stranger over Violet. I was also willing to fight my mother if it meant protecting this powerful yet fragile woman.

"Silas, after all I've done for you—"

"What **have** you done for me, *Sandra*? Other than mooch off me and order me around to make yourself feel important? Make me jump through all your little hoops so you feel validated? I'm sick and tired of putting up with you acting like you own my life just because I came out of you! And you've said it yourself, I was a goddamned accident you made with a drunk piece of shit, so it's not like you *meant* it! If you're going to stay in *my* house and use *my* money to afford all your frivolous bullshit, the least you can do is treat *me* and my *guests* with some fucking respect!"

I released her wrist a bit vigorously, chest heaving with righteous fury and the off-loaded weight from *years* of stomaching her behavior.

She stared at me, shaken, before drawing herself up and storming past both of us.

“I can see you’re not going to be *reasonable* right now, not while you have some bimbo to flaunt in front of. Call me when you’re done having a *tantrum*, Silas.”

“That’s *my* car you’ll be going and getting into! If you want to leave, get yourself a taxi— oh right, with *whose* money? You’ve been nothing but a parasite on my life for years and I’m done with this, done with you!”

She drew herself short, and I couldn’t breathe. For a short instant, I wondered if I had made a mistake, if I was really going to throw away the only family I had—

But then I felt Violet’s hand on my back and looked down at her. She wasn’t looking at me, though. She was looking at my mother, and there was a sense of taciturn *knowing* in her eyes that I felt for the first time that I wasn’t insane for resenting my mother.

Had Violet sensed it in the air in less than a minute? Or had she just wanted to defend me how I’d defended her today?

How long had it been since someone earnestly wanted to protect *me*?

My mother continued storming off and slammed the garage door after her. In the deafening silence that followed, I heard the sound of one of the car engines roar angrily to life.

Somehow, I’d wound up crouching down, my legs deciding that they were done standing. And Violet’s hand was still on my back, now rubbing a soft circle between my shoulder blades.

“... You okay?”

I laughed, so brittle and raw.

“No.”

She huffed.

“That’s fair.”

A smile tweaked painfully on my face, and I lifted my arm to put it around her own shoulders and lightly held her against my side. It was maybe a bit bold, but I just needed the comfort, still shaken by the intensity of my own outburst and deep exhaustion that'd been building for weeks, months, *years*.

My heart jumped into my throat when suddenly I wasn't just holding her, but she was holding *me*, embracing me so softly.

Both of my arms went around her, and I buried my face against her shoulder to keep back the tears that wanted to spill out.

Chapter 28

VIOLET



It was surreal, being in a house this nice. Whatever cramped little hotel room I would have made him get me would have been more my speed, but he'd been a bit of a wreck after that altercation with his mother. I didn't feel right leaving him alone, especially knowing how hard it'd been for me when I'd cut things off with my own parents. Thankfully, when he had a little fit of functioning, he sent off an email to the office to let them know that I wouldn't be making it in tomorrow, thanks to an escalating situation with the police that he was personally handling. I felt pretty guilty, sure, but there was a comfort in that maybe I wouldn't have to leave this nice new job after all.

It was also surreal to feel like just maybe I could finally be *safe*. I still didn't know if I could trust Silas, but maybe going through that ordeal of a day with him made me feel like I could.

I'd seen him at his weakest now, after all.

I moved through the place like a mouse sneaking through, wondering how far the hospitality he offered extended. But it was first thing in the morning, and I was starving, with no idea if he was awake. Honestly, it felt amazing to feel *hungry* again. I didn't want to overdo it by eating too much, knowing how hard it was for the body to keep food down when it'd been starved for too long.

I opened the fridge, staring cautiously at the options, debating if I'd see if he was awake and ask if I could at least borrow his phone to put in a delivery order for myself (that I'd pay for, of course). He'd already done so much for me, and I didn't want to rely on him for anything more.

"Morning," croaked out his hoarse voice behind me.

I spooked, almost losing my balance as I turned.

He looked quite roguishly disheveled, with his mussed bedhead, snugly fit t-shirt he'd obviously slept in, and loose sweatpants that left just enough shape to make the eyes wander.

"I- I'm sorry, I just--"

"Hey, hey now, it's alright. Help yourself if you're hungry. You okay?"

My eyes welled up with tears, unwanted and unexpected.

Was that all it took to ruin me now? Just a little bit of kindness? Just the slim prospect of someone *caring* about me?

His stunned, then panicked expression as he neared me in obvious concern just made those tears come crashing down my cheeks.

"God, Violet, what's wrong? I'm— What can I do? Did I do something? Did I *not* do something?"

I hiccupped a breath, wiping at my tears in a desperate effort to find any composure.

"I- I'm sorry, Silas. I'm so sorry."

"Why are you sorry? For looking through my fridge? It's not a big deal—"

"I'm pregnant."

He blanked at that.

My voice fell out of me in a breathless, frantic outpour, words churning into each other.

"I- I'm pregnant and I don't want you to think I'm telling you this to try and take advantage of you, I'm telling you this so I *don't*, because if you're going to be nice to me you should know the truth so I don't get the rug pulled out from under me once you hate me later for it. I'd rather you hate me right now and we can get this over with."

The silence after my frazzled, tearful rambling was agonizing.

Both of his hands lifted, and I did everything in my power to not flinch, but all he did was rake them back through his own hair in a slow, stunned way.

“... Why would I—... hate you for being pregnant?”

That was not the response I was expecting.

“B-because I—... You—... Because it was a mistake and now we’re both going to have to pay for it, one way or the other.”

He raked his hand over his mouth, clearly taking a second to get his thoughts in order.

“... Well, I don’t hate you for being pregnant, and I sure as shit am not going to kick you out of my house or do anything to you because of it. It’s my own damned fault and I should have— I should have been better towards you, Violet. Not sleeping with you when we were both drunk would have been a good start, but at least I should have tried to make it right after. But if I’m being honest, I was sure you *were* going to try and take advantage of me for sleeping with you. But you didn’t, and then I realized I’d put you in such a bad spot because of it. You just— I’m sorry, Violet. I really am.”

I hadn’t really thought I’d ever get an apology from him. I didn’t think I *deserved* one, deep down, but the darkest parts of me ruined by the people who’d hurt me lived there.

I nodded slowly, rubbing my own arms for comfort.

“I am too.”

Silas sighed, long and slow, and then he looked at me with those green eyes with such an earnest certainty that my heart had already started to stammer.

“Well, you know what? I think we should double down.”

“On— on what?”

“Both your ex and my mom think we’re together. If you’ll give me a chance, Violet, I’d like it if it wasn’t just an assumption. Because I’ve been thinking about you every day since we met, and I— I really bungled this. I really did. But you’re someone special, and I desperately want to get to know you and be someone you can let all those walls down for. I don’t know if I *deserve* to be, but I sure as hell want to be.”

It was my turn to stand there speechlessly.

“Ah,” he began after the silence went on too long, “Shit. Sorry, I— that all just kind of tumbled out of me. Just woke up, so I guess the filter’s still coming online. There’s so much shit on your plate, all that’s probably the last thing you want to hear. So, don’t worry about what I just said, okay? And I’m still going to help you, no matter what. We’ll figure all this out and get you safe and sorted.”

All I could do was stare at him, my brain at a critical limit. His expression twitched into a helplessly charming smile.

“So uh... You want eggs? Bacon? I make a mean Belgian waffle.”

“Yes.”

“Yes as in... All of them?”

“Yes to what you said. Before.”

Both of us were dead silent in his kitchen, bedraggled, bags under our eyes, clearly running on fumes even after sleeping in until ten in the morning.

“You mean you want to—”

“Yeah.”

His shoulders loosened, and he chuckled airily.

“What— You mean that?”

I chuckled weakly.

“Yeah. I guess my filter isn't working yet either.”

We both stood facing each other, the moment strangely anticlimactic but so real that it made my chest *hurt* with how heavily my heart was pounding.

He carefully lifted up his arms, a brow raised in tentative question.

I stepped towards him into that embrace and let myself melt into the warmth of his body, finally able to find some tentative hope of safe harbor. One of his hands ran over the back of my head, smoothing down in a tender, repetitive motion.

“... Things might not be okay right now, but they will be.”

“Yeah,” I answered softly, muffled into his shirt.

And I did genuinely believe him.

Life changed.

It really did.

It was difficult, though in an entirely different way than before. My mind, my body, my *everything* were still so tuned to survival that it was impossible to turn it off. Even once I *logically* knew Elliot wasn't going to be able to hurt me anymore, and that Silas *probably* wasn't going to change overnight and hurt me either...

I was still afraid, deep down. And maybe that fear would always be there. My therapist (I got to go to one in person now) assured me that these were understandable traumas that I would be able to work through in time. She told me that it would never truly leave me because the pain had been real and would always be there, like the scars he'd left on my body. But I could learn how to be stronger than that fear, and I could make it a smaller part of me. She told me that one day, it would be a small, starved animal that would only bite at my ankles and only be able to hurt me when I was at my weakest or wasn't expecting it.

And as awful as that sounded, it felt more *real* than any platitudes that it would all be okay, or that I'd be able to forget it all and leave it all behind.

I carried it with me.

Just like I carried our baby with me, and even when the baby was out of my body, everything about me would remember what it was like.

I carried all of the good and the bad things that had happened to me.

“Violet,” Silas called out, smiling as he approached the stoop of my nice new apartment I'd been idling in front of. I'd loved the old place, but it hadn't been safe when Elliot was still a factor, and I dreaded that the ghost of him would ruin it forever. A positively frothing bouquet of roses, violet-hued irises, and lilies was held in both of his hands.

I laughed at the sight of him, adorable and ridiculous with his clearly proud boyish grin.

“Did you decide to steal a whole flower shop on your way here?”

“I can’t very well show up to a date empty handed, can I?”

“Yes, you can,” I retorted, gathering up my purse and stepping towards him.

“Well, not if I want to be a gentleman, I can’t.”

“There isn’t a gentlemanly bone in your body.”

My teasing tone came naturally now, a comfort having been established between us over the last few months. I would have never thought I’d be capable of feeling *comfortable* around him, but I did. Most of the time, anyway. And when I didn’t, he was so kind and courteous towards me, coaxing me back from the ledge or from out of my shell.

And as much as I liked to tease him these days, it was impossible to not appreciate how patient and compassionate he was. Not just towards me— but with everyone. Everything.

Except for the people who didn’t deserve it. Like Elliot, or even his own mother. Thankfully, I hadn’t seen ‘hide nor hair’ of her, as the saying went down this way. Not in months. Silas had made very good on his threats that night we met and had been spending a while extricating himself from her. It wasn’t an easy split, but he was working through it as best he could, and he had me and even his own therapist to help shed light to his own darkest places.

“You *wound* me,” he laughed out as I took the flowers from her.

“You’ve got thick enough skin, Silas. Well, let me go run these inside. I’ve got enough to haul around already.”

He spared a reflexive glance at my stomach— hard to ignore the baby bump these days, no matter what I was wearing.

“And yes,” I continued, beginning to sashay away. “It’s all your fault, so you *should* feel bad.”

“I’ll hold your belly up any time you please, sugar,” he called out after me. “I’ll carry the whole lady if you’ll let me.”

I laughed, shaking my head.

I’d laughed more these last few months than I probably had my whole life long.

And it was all because of him.

He didn’t follow me inside. He knew I didn’t like to have him feel like he could come in as he pleased. It was still my space.

But as I brought out the vase from the last bouquet he’d sent over, I glanced down at my purse by instinct.

The spare key I’d had minted for him was practically burning a hole through it in my mind.

I wasn’t showing up to this date empty-handed either.

I didn’t have time to waste fussing and preening over the flowers, not with our busy date ahead. We were going to go get coffee and beignets together and stroll through French Market. Then he was going to take me for a drive and show me as many of the sights and secrets he could cram into the night without running either of us ragged. He was from The Big Easy himself and knew more about this city than I’d thought you could fit into a single person in a single lifetime. He really loved this place.

And I really loved him.

I hadn’t *told* him yet.

But it’d been sitting in my heart, growing and growing, right along with the baby inside of me.

Our baby.

I wasn’t ready to tell him that I loved him yet, at least right now. There was too much fear lingering in me, the shadows too long and too deep for me to feel like I could show my heart to him like that.

But maybe...

Maybe soon.

Maybe tonight, if I got carried away in the mood. I wouldn't be drunk for it, that was for sure.

With one last smiling look at the flowers, I turned back to the door and returned to his bright green eyes and wonderful smile.

Maybe tonight.

A lot could change in a year.

A lot could change in nine months.

A lot could change in just one night.

I sat in the passenger seat of Silas' car, just trying to cope with the strange tingling discomfort of my body recovering from the birth and the gauze of pain medication trying to soften it.

The door swung open for me, and I smiled up to those bright green eyes and took his offered hand. After all, the other one was busy holding the carrier for the little green-eyed girl squinting blearily at this bright new world.

"Come on, sweetheart," he urged gently, helping hoist me out as tenderly as he could. "Let's go get both of my ladies settled in. It's been a long haul."

"You're telling me."

He leaned in, kissing my cheek, and I kissed him in turn by sheer affectionate reflex.

"Alright, *Missus Chandler*," he drawled out, having loved to tease me with reference to how I'd insisted on calling him 'Mister Chandler' when we first met since we got married. It'd just made sense, with the little one on the way and both of us working through so much of our long-overdue baggage together.

He hadn't even made me sign a prenup, despite how I insisted that he should. He said, ' If I decided to leave him, I deserved to take half his money for messing it up again.'

He was just like that, I'd learned. I'd learned so many things about him and, truthfully, I was *still* learning about him. But I wanted to be the one to peel all those layers back and be the person who knew him, just like he was the only other person who could really know all of me.

"How long are you going to keep calling me that," I asked out in warm exasperation as I climbed the stairs up out of the garage, his hand still supporting me on the way up.

It was a beautiful house. A beautiful husband. A beautiful daughter. A beautiful *life*.

And I deserved all of it.

He followed right after me, and as the door shut after him, he laughed.

"Mmm, at *least* until next year."

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE **“Married My Brother’s Best Friend”**

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BXHMW8P4>

Sleeping with my billionaire boss and getting pregnant wasn't part of the plan. Start a new job. Live a new life. Find my happiness. Nothing more nothing less. But now, Conrad Knox is back in my life. Only this time, as my grumpy, handsome boss. And him being a billionaire is just the cherry on top. I was able to hide my feelings for him when we were younger and I'm just not sure if I can still do the same this time around. We got stuck for a night in Houston and that's when everything changed. That night felt special. I felt I was someone special. But if my brother finds out about us, he is not gonna be happy. But what should I do? These two pink lines on a pregnancy kit are taunting me. My instinct is telling me to run away. Don't get him involved. But would a do-over be such a bad idea?

Sneak Peek - Chapter One Start Reading "Married My Brother's Best Friend"

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BXHMW8P4>

Chapter 1: ALAINA Before moving, my old friends had warned me that life in Texas would be so much different than California. But having been here for almost a week now, I could definitively state that it really wasn't that much different. Austin was hot, humid, and urban as all get-out. If I squint hard enough, I might trick myself into thinking I was back in Torrance. Sure, there was a common Texas twang when talking to some people, but the place felt practically cosmopolitan. Once I got here, I really did get what they meant when they called this place Silicon Hills. The sheer number of major tech offices and headquarters spilled out an urban web of restaurants, boutiques, and cultural diversions enough to appease anyone with big city tastes. Definitely a far cry from the gallon hat, rootin' tootin' rancher life I'd grown up thinking living in Texas would be like.

**Sneak Peek - Chapter One Start Reading "The Billionaire's Therapist"
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Ten AM. I woke up right when I was supposed to. My internal clock was finally adjusting to the three-hour time difference between California and Wisconsin. Granted, depression was probably one of the main reasons why I was sleeping and waking at odd hours. Still, it felt better to excuse it on something that would not circle my mind back to why I was depressed rather than my body being difficult for its own sake. I felt my weight try to sink further into the bed, and the sticky droop of my eyelids begged me to go back to sleep. But I'd been trying to institute at least two new positive habits every week, and one of them was not allowing myself to sleep in. I'd spent most of the first two weeks in Los Angeles just crying when I wasn't sleeping, and the month after sleeping instead of being stuck awake trying to not cry. By this point, I was honestly surprised I hadn't gotten bedsores or created a trench in my brother's guest room bed.

Sneak Peek - Chapter One Start Reading “Second Chance With My Bossy Doctor”

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C1WKXY85>

“Miss Nicole,” a little voice chirped up. “I can’t get the petals right.” straightened, smiling over the top of a few children’s bald, covered, or close-shaven heads to the speaker. When I’d first started volunteering here at Rochester Children’s Hospital, I’d gently insisted that the kids didn’t need to address me like I was a teacher, and that just Nicole would do. But when I realized that some kids likely missed the opportunity to feel a bit of that school day normalcy again, I warmly obliged whatever they wanted to call me. “I’ll be right over, Jaime. Let me just finish helping Sam.” I looked back down to the little papercraft daisy in the boy’s hand and nodded approvingly. “You’re doing great.” A warm pat on his frail shoulder was made as I stood and walked over to Jaime, the smiling eight-year-old who had hailed me moments before. “Let me take a look,” I warmly uttered, leaning in to inspect the little mass of pink paper petals heaped in front of her. My pinstraight black hair slid over my shoulder in its ponytail, and I spared a quick moment to flick it back. “Which one are you trying to make?”