

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

# BE VERY QUIET

A COBRA SECURITIES NOVEL

*Don't say a word*

# VELVET VAUGHN

AUTHOR OF MATCH POINT

# **Be Very Quiet**

**Velvet Vaughn**

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my Aunt Paula, one of my first supporters, who passed away as I was writing this. And, as always, to my mom, Lana.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# Prologue

*Ten Years Ago.*

Something was very wrong. Liliana Lima could feel it in her bones as she neared the off-campus house she shared with her roommate, Erin Simon. She'd texted Erin an hour ago, letting her know she'd be late. Erin always left the porch light on for her, but the front was eerily dark.

Liliana had met Erin during their freshman year, and they'd been close friends ever since. Erin had inherited the charming bungalow, located near a picturesque lake, from her aunt. She had generously offered for Liliana to bunk with her and only asked her to contribute to utilities. Saving on housing costs was worth the five-minute walk to the bus stop and the ten-minute ride to campus.

Liliana had been away for over a week with the university dance squad, attending a bowl game for the football team. She'd had a great time in New Orleans but was ready to sleep in her own bed. Liliana fished out the key and started to insert it, but the door was already unlocked.

That was strange.

Erin was a stickler for always keeping the door bolted. Two women living alone in the woods could be scary sometimes, so they took security seriously.

The hair on Liliana's neck prickled with awareness. Everything felt ... off, like something sinister was waiting to ambush her. It took five minutes to talk herself into going inside. She needed to make sure Erin was okay.

Liliana finally twisted the handle and eased the door open. The living room was dark, with the only light coming from the hallway leading to the two bedrooms. The haunting notes of an intricate piano aria drifted toward her. Erin hated classical music.



More strangeness.

Liliana placed her bags on the ground and pulled out her phone. She dialed 911 but waited to hit the call button as she crept closer. Maybe Erin had met a man, and they were burning up the sheets. Liliana hoped that was what was happening.

The light and music were coming from Erin's room, and her door was ajar. Liliana kept her thumb on the call button and used her fingertips to push the door wider.

She froze. Her brain couldn't process the scene in front of her. She heard screaming and realized it was coming from her.

Erin was naked on her bed, and a man was applying makeup to her closed eyelids from a kit. Erin wasn't moving. At all.

The man's head snapped toward her. "What the hell?"

Liliana turned to run, but the man was on her before she could reach the front door. His body weight slammed into her and crushed her to the carpet. She fought and struggled, but he was bigger and stronger. He manacled her hands together behind her back and roughly jerked her upright. It felt as if her shoulders had popped from the sockets.

"My, you're a pretty one, aren't you?" He fingered a lock of her long black hair and then yanked it, causing her head to snap back violently and forcing a tortured cry from her lips. "Now shut the hell up and walk," he growled in her ear.

Tears hazed Liliana's vision, and she couldn't see where she was going. "W-who are you?"

"Would it be cliché to say your worst nightmare? Because, sweet thing, I am that. But you can call me The Mortician. Everyone does."

Terror seized her muscles, and Liliana stumbled. She'd heard the news reports of the man stalking and killing women in Minnesota. He raped and strangled them. That was before he jabbed a needle in their jugular and drained all the blood from their bodies.

Liliana's heartbeat pounded like hummingbird wings, making her lightheaded. She had to get out of there. He would kill her too.

"I've been watching Erin for days, and you never made an appearance. Bad timing on your part that you showed up now."

"Y-you killed her." They were the only words she could manage.

"No." He dragged the word out. "I sent her to her heavenly reward. *'There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.'*"

What was he talking about? His words made no sense, but they sounded like scripture.

She didn't have time to interpret his speech. He tried to tug her back toward Erin's bedroom, but Liliana dug in her heels. She couldn't go in again and see her best friend like that. Her stomach roiled, and she feared she would be sick.

"Get moving."

*Ding-dong.*

The Mortician flung Liliana around and slapped a hand over her mouth, stifling a gasp. Someone was here! She'd meant to call the police but had frozen in shock when she'd spotted her roommate. She had no idea what happened to her phone.

The music stopped suddenly, and the instant silence was jarring.

"Be very quiet."

Hot breath washed over her ear, and she shuddered in disgust. She almost did as the man instructed, but the will to live kicked in. Like hell would she stay silent. If she did, she would die. Simple as that. She bit the man's hand and screamed for all she was worth when he yelped in pain.

*"Bitch!"*

The man backhanded her before wrenching her into the bedroom. Shock from the hit brought more tears to her eyes, but she still glimpsed Erin and moaned. The Mortician grabbed a gun from his bag and dragged her to the door. She was too dazed to resist.

"Police. Come out slowly with your hands up."

Relief swamped Liliana that the authorities were here. She must've inadvertently hit the call button before the man had tackled her.

When a cop in a blue uniform appeared around the corner, The Mortician squeezed the trigger, sending a barrage of bullets raining down the hall. The onslaught forced the cop to jump out of the way.

"You bitch! You ruined everything," The Mortician hissed in her ear. "Now's not the time, but I will return for you. I will take my time and enjoy your sexy body until you beg me to kill you. Of that, you can count on, sweet thing."

Liliana let out a shocked gasp when he brutally shoved her, and she stumbled forward. She barely had time to throw out her arms and brace herself before she hit the ground face-first. A gun sounded, and her side erupted in burning pain.

She hardly registered the sound of breaking glass before someone rushed past her. She couldn't lift her head to watch because her entire torso was on fire.

"Hey, I've got you. You're safe now. You're going to be okay."

The voice calmed her, as did the gentle touch. Liliana closed her eyes and concentrated on not passing out. When she felt her T-shirt being lifted, she screamed and shot upright.

“It’s okay,” the voice soothed. “I need to check the wound. Just lie back and breathe.”

Easier said than done when it felt as if he’d jabbed her with a hot poker. “Is it bad?”

“Nah, it’s a flesh wound. The bullet cut a groove in your skin, so you’ll probably need stitches. Does this hurt?”

A gentle hand caressed her cheek. She’d forgotten about the hit after being shot, but now it throbbed with her heartbeat. “A little.”

“It’s starting to swell. We need to get ice on it.”

Liliana closed her eyes again. Two days ago, she’d been dancing on the football field, celebrating a hard-fought victory and partying with the fans. Now she was lying on the floor, bleeding from a gunshot wound. A tortured sound came from her throat, and she began to sob.

“Relax, you’re going to be okay.”

“Erin,” she managed.

“Do you want me to call her?”

“In there.” Liliana pointed to the open door.

“I’ll be right back.”

The man got up, and she had the irrational urge to grab him. She didn’t want him to leave her. She felt safe with him around. The Mortician wouldn’t get past him.

“Don’t go,” she gasped, but it was too late. How could she feel bereft when she didn’t even know him?

He returned, and she let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. He gently placed something against her cheek, and she hissed.

“Frozen peas,” he explained as he grasped her hand. His touch reassured her.

“Is she ...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, though she already knew the answer.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “Was she your sister?”

“Roommate.” God, how could Erin be dead? She was the sweetest person Liliana had ever met. She’d give the shirt off her back to anyone who needed it.

“What’s your name?”

“Liliana Lima.”

“That’s a beautiful name, Liliana.”

“Thanks. What’s yours?”

“Luca Russo.”

A sudden commotion caused Luca to stand up. All at once, the hallway flooded with people. Paramedics dropped to her side and began working on her injuries. They removed her shirt, leaving her in her bra, but Liliana felt disconnected from her body, so she didn’t care. Pain didn’t register because she was completely numb. The only time she felt anything was when Luca touched her.

Liliana was barely aware when a needle was jabbed into her arm or when she was lifted onto a gurney. It wasn’t until she was being wheeled away that she came to her senses.

“Stop!”

The paramedics did as she asked. “Are you in pain?”

Instead of answering, she called out, “Luca.” He was instantly by her side. She reached for his hand. “Come with me.” She had an irrational fear of being away from him.

He didn’t say anything right away, and she was afraid his answer would be no. She wasn’t too proud to beg.

“I have to take care of a couple of things here, and then I promise I’ll meet you there.”

“I need you.”

He squeezed her hand and smiled. She watched his face until they rolled her around a corner and out to the waiting ambulance. They must’ve put something in the IV because she fell asleep on the ride to the hospital and didn’t wake until they transferred her to a table in the emergency room. She’d

hoped the last hour had been a bad dream, only to realize it was a veritable nightmare.

The nurses asked her questions, but she didn't know if she answered correctly. They stitched her up, slapped an ice pack on her cheek, and transferred her to a room to rest. She would've asked to go home but didn't have one now. She would never step foot in that house again. It could burn to the ground for all she cared. Erin had died there.

Liliana wanted to cry, but she felt dead inside. Sweet Erin, who'd wanted to be a social worker to help others, who'd volunteered at food banks and children's hospitals, couldn't be gone. It wasn't fair. There were bad people in the world who deserved to die. Not Erin.

Liliana's eyes jerked to the door when it opened, afraid she'd see the man who had tried to kill her. He promised he would come back for her, and she believed him. Instead, it was a tall man with black hair and eyes the color of smooth whiskey. Luca. He was so handsome she couldn't look away. He'd changed out of his police uniform into a cream cable-knit sweater and blue jeans. When he stopped a foot away from the bed, she reached for his hand, and he clasped it.

“Hey. How do you feel?”

Safe, now that he was here. “Okay. Did you catch him?” She hated the thought of having to look at that hideous monster across a courtroom as she testified against him, but she wanted him to rot for what he'd done. She'd prefer hell but would settle for a maximum-security prison.

A grim look crossed Luca's face, and Liliana's stomach fell. “No, we didn't.”

Those three words sent her pulse skyrocketing. What if he came for her here? He could pretend to be a doctor or a nurse and waltz right into her room. The hospital personnel would be none the wiser. What if she was asleep when he did it? He might slit her throat before she could scream.

“Liliana, calm down and breathe.” She hadn't realized Luca had moved. He was suddenly holding her shoulders.

Evidently, she hadn't inhaled lately. White spots danced before her eyes.

"I'm going to get a nurse."

She clutched his hand and gasped in a breath, shaking her head. She didn't want him to leave. "He-he's coming for me."

"Who? The doctor?"

"No, the killer."

"Rader?"

"I don't know his name. He called himself The Mortician." There was no way she'd close her eyes again. He could get to her while she slept.

"No, he won't. We'll find him first and stop him."

Apparently, she'd spoken out loud. It didn't matter what Luca said. She wouldn't be able to rest until he was caught.

Luca carefully replaced the ice pack on her cheek. "Were you able to call your family, or do you need me to contact them?"

"Yes. I talked to my mother."

Liliana's father had passed away when she was six. She barely remembered him. He'd worked as a stockbroker on Wall Street, and her memories were scarce and vague. She recalled him never being around, and then he hadn't come home at all one day. One of his colleagues had lost an excessive amount of money for his client. Despondent over losing his life's savings, the man stormed the office and killed the colleague, her father, and two others, including himself.

Liliana had been too young to understand what had happened. Her mother had packed their belongings and moved them to her home state of Minnesota. She'd remarried a few years later when Liliana was thirteen and had given birth to a set of twins, Liliana's seven-year-old half-siblings.

Liliana had tried to talk her busy mom out of making the two-hour trek to visit her in the hospital. She also didn't want

her near the evil that had taken Erin's life. Despite her objections, her mom had insisted.

Luca had tried slipping out the door when her mom arrived, but Liliana had begged him not to leave. He'd become her rock. Her foundation. Her feelings were ridiculous because she'd barely known him. It was absurd to assume that he could stay with her forever, but he had tried his hardest over the course of the following week. He had taken vacation days to be with her, even accompanying her to Erin's funeral.

Oh, that had been brutal. It had felt as if the entire university had shown up for the event, along with Erin's grieving family. She'd fallen apart when the university band played the Alma Mater in her honor. Liliana remembered little from that time except for the gut-wrenching sobs from Erin's parents and her overwhelming feelings of hopelessness. The only shining light had been Luca. Liliana had fallen completely, irrevocably in love with him.

It had probably happened the first time she'd seen him when she'd been terrified, shot, and in shock. He'd calmed her down, made her feel safe, and gotten her the care she needed. Spending time with him had only intensified the feelings. When she knew she couldn't stay in Minnesota any longer, the thought of never seeing him again had been agonizing.

Luca hadn't been surprised when she'd told him about her plans to leave. In fact, she thought he might've suspected it would happen. He'd held her in his muscular arms, comforted her, and kissed her. It'd been the most intense, sensual kiss she'd ever experienced. She'd whimpered when he pulled back.

Getting in her car and driving away had been the hardest thing she'd ever done in her life.



# Chapter One

## *Present Day*

Liliana Lima pulled her silver Jeep Grand Cherokee into the parking lot and angled into the spot reserved for her. She glanced outside the windshield as she grabbed her bag off the passenger seat. Swirling dark clouds promised rain ... and right on cue, it came down in round, fat droplets as she opened the door. She hadn't brought an umbrella, so it looked as if she would get wet.

“Hey, Liliana.”

She turned to see Rex Raines jogging her way. Rex was the proprietor of the real estate office located next to Liliana's studio and the owner of her building. He'd offered her the space for her business, and ever since she'd first met him a year ago, he'd pressured her to upgrade her condo. He'd also asked her out several times, which she'd gently refused. Usually, she had an excuse ready, like work or a class, but she was tired of fending off his advances. Maybe she should tell him she was already seeing someone. No, that wouldn't fly. She should've done that the first time he'd asked.

Each time she had turned him down, she was afraid things would be awkward, but he'd taken her rejections in stride. He was always friendly to her. Their offices had gotten together a few times for dinner and other outings, including a concert at the beach. She didn't mind hanging out with Rex when other people were around to act as a buffer.

“Hey, Rex.”

“Here, I don't want you to get wet.”

He popped open an umbrella and lofted it over her head. He was very thoughtful and possessed impeccable manners. Standing around five-ten and clean-shaven, with neatly trimmed black hair, emerald-colored eyes, and straight white

teeth, he looked good on the several billboards and park benches scattered around town featuring his ads.

It was a shame Liliana didn't feel any sparks with him. He was handsome, successful, and caring. After losing staff who'd left to open their own business, he'd recently hired two employees who were trying to better their lives. Theo Harvey had grown up with a single mother who worked as a church secretary, so money had been tight. Becoming a real estate agent was his way of making something of himself. Georgia Perkins was in the midst of a contemptuous divorce, and her confidence had suffered mightily. Rex had taken a chance on both with no experience, and he was teaching them the ins and outs of the business and providing them with the tools necessary to succeed. Great guy.

*Sheesh.* What was wrong with her? She couldn't help how she felt, and she felt nothing when she looked at him. Her heart didn't start to pound, and her pupils didn't dilate. Her hands remained as dry as the Sahara Desert. Nada. He'd make someone an excellent husband, just not her.

"Thanks," she said when they reached the door. "I appreciate the umbrella."

"Say, there's a reception tonight for—"

"Hey, Liliana. I set that meeting up for six tonight."

She'd never been so glad to see Shonda Johns, her assistant director slash right hand slash best friend in the world. She'd saved Liliana from having to turn Rex down. Again.

Liliana waved as she punched in the code and stuck the key in the lock, one upgrade she'd installed when she had signed the lease. "Thanks again for your kindness, Rex. Have a great day."

"You too, Liliana. Shonda. See you both later."

She opened the door and held it for Shonda to enter. Once Rex was gone, she turned to her friend and smiled. "How did you know to make up the bit about a meeting?"

“I heard him talking to Theo yesterday about an event and wondering if you would be available. I knew you’d need an out.”

She tossed an arm over Shonda’s shoulder and hugged her. “You’re the best. Thanks.”

Liliana flicked on the lights and took in the gleaming wood floors, sea-green walls, and abundance of plants inside her fitness studio. Hers. It still amazed her when she thought about how she owned her own business.

When Liliana had decided to leave Minnesota, she’d picked Miami because it seemed the farthest away while still in the continental United States. When she first arrived, she’d been hired as a dance instructor for Madame LaVon. She’d still been in shock and recovering from a bullet graze, but dancing had always been her salvation. Madame LaVon had hired her, and she’d begun teaching classes five days a week to young students eager to learn. She’d worked hard doing other odd jobs around the facility to help Madame LaVon keep things running smoothly. Madame LaVon had taken her under her wing, teaching her how to run the studio and handing over several essential tasks to Liliana. Soon, people had started approaching her instead of Madame LaVon with issues. She’d thrived with the work and knew she’d found her calling.

The following semester, Liliana had enrolled at the local university and switched her major to business. She’d immersed herself in classes devoted to developing the skills necessary to operate a successful company.

Many times over the years, Madame LaVon had told Liliana she wanted her to take over once she stepped aside. Madame LaVon had been in her late sixties when Liliana had started working for her. Eight years later, the time had come, and Madame LaVon had announced her intention to retire.

Liliana had immediately begun devising a plan to purchase the studio. Her condo had been bought from a small trust fund left to her by her father. Her savings account was modest, so she’d needed to secure a loan to pay for the business and the upgrades she hoped to implement.

Madame LaVon offered lessons in several disciplines, including contemporary, tap, jazz, and hip-hop. Competition for ballroom styles such as tango, salsa, and cha-cha was intense in the Miami area, so they didn't offer those. Daytime classes catered to young children, and there were many gaps in facility usage. Liliana had planned on filling the schedule with fitness and martial arts courses.

One afternoon, Liliana had returned from a final meeting with the lenders at the bank, giddy at having secured the loan, when Madame LaVon had called her into her office. It surprised Liliana to see Jazmine, Madame LaVon's only daughter, inside. Jazmine had never taken an interest in her mother's business. In fact, she'd rarely stepped foot inside the doors, but now that her mother was retiring, she'd suddenly decided she wanted to take over and run the studio.

Liliana had been devastated, as had Madame LaVon. She had wanted Liliana to continue her legacy—had groomed her for it. But Jazmine was her flesh and blood. Madame LaVon would abide by her daughter's wishes. Liliana would never step between the two.

Jazmine had always resented Liliana for her relationship with her mother, so Liliana knew she couldn't stay and work for the woman. She'd returned to the bank, renegotiated the terms of her loan, and set about finding a place to start her own company. Shonda Johns, her best friend and fellow dance instructor, had tendered her resignation to Jazmine at the same time and had thrown in her lot with Liliana.

Having seen his numerous ads on television, Liliana had approached realtor Rex Raines about finding a space. He'd told her about the vacant warehouse he owned adjacent to his office that would be perfect for her needs. He'd even put her in touch with a contractor who had transformed the building into her dream studio.

At first walkthrough, Liliana had thought the interior was way too big. She'd planned on a boutique fitness center offering a few specialized classes. However, when she'd gone over plans with the architect, she'd loved the concept he'd visualized. The design he'd drawn up included six individual

workout rooms, men's and women's locker rooms, three offices, a storage room with laundry, a reception area, and even a smoothie bar.

Though it had pained her, Liliana had decided not to offer dance lessons that would directly compete with Jazmine. She only kept two contemporary/jazz classes: one that she taught twice a week and one Shonda taught. Instead, she'd hired yoga, Pilates, martial arts, and fitness instructors to cater to adults. Two of the most popular classes were spinning and bungee fitness, which was exactly how it sounded: exercise moves while attached to a bungee cord anchored in the ceiling.

Other sessions included ones for pregnant women, new moms, people with physical limitations, boot camps, as well as other specialties like core, low impact, and high-intensity interval training or HIIT. Her most important classes were for self-defense, held three nights a week—up from one when she'd first offered it. They were so popular that she had needed to add more to the schedule.

There was never a lull, and the rooms were continually in use. Liliana's business had become a success and increasingly more profitable. She employed over two dozen instructors, an assistant, two masseuses, four people who rotated working at the refreshment bar, and a membership and marketing coordinator. Three office managers also served as receptionists: one during the day, another at night, and one on the weekend, since business hours were from eight in the morning until nine in the evening, seven days a week. Initially, she had closed at noon on Saturday and all day Sunday, but the demand for classes had forced her to remain open all week. Her instructors had pushed as hard as the clients, so she had acquiesced, though she took the weekends off most of the time.

If business continued, she'd have to look for a bigger place. She was considering adding fitness equipment, CrossFit, and a spa. She'd turned one space into a massage room for athletes after they worked out, and it was so popular there was never an opening on the schedule.

Suddenly, two powerful arms wrapped around Liliana from behind, immobilizing her. Her training kicked in, and she reacted without thought. She grabbed the forearms so the attacker wouldn't get her in a headlock. Next, she immediately turned her chin to her left shoulder, threw out her right hip, and raised her right elbow to step back and counterattack. She'd practiced the moves hundreds of times, and they'd never failed her. They certainly didn't now.

"Damn," Rutger Villanueva muttered as he stepped back. "You are so good, Lil. I can never get the jump on you."

"You should be proud instead of upset," Liliana told him as she adjusted her tank top embroidered with the logo she'd had professionally designed. "You trained me."

"Best student ever," Rutger praised, sending a rush of warmth through her system. She'd practiced long and hard to master the moves. It gave her a feeling of accomplishment and immense pride that she could protect herself. It was a far cry from the frightened young woman who had been afraid of her own shadow ten years ago.

Liliana spent the day working in her office, which featured a glass wall overlooking the atrium, as she liked to call it. It was the common area in front of the workout rooms featuring several trees and plants, a fountain, and seating for people waiting for classes to begin. Tucked in the corner was the smoothie bar, with additional seating and a display case of merchandise, ranging from T-shirts and shorts to yoga mats and water bottles. Her sales had been through the roof. She could also see the entry and reception desk, where members scanned their cards. Men's locker rooms were to the left, women's to the right.

Her office was roomy and included a private bathroom, a conference table seating eight, and a couch in case she wanted to crash instead of driving home. That part of the suite was out of direct view of the glass window, so it provided privacy if she had a meeting. Another cool feature was a button she could push to make the glass opaque to block all visuals.

Shonda's office was next door and also sported a glass wall with the same button. The membership and marketing manager's space was located down the hall, across from the storage and laundry room. There was a back exit leading to an alley running behind the buildings.

People constantly strolled by her window, but she rarely paid attention to them, like today when she was engrossed in work. A knock sounded on her door, and then Shonda stuck her head inside. Her curly brown hair sported a blonde streak that looked hip and fun, much like the woman herself.

"Hey, I'm going to grab a sandwich from the deli around the corner. Can I get you anything?"

Liliana's office included a kitchenette with a mini fridge, sink, and microwave. She usually brought her lunch or made do with a healthy smoothie. Today, however, she was hungry. "I'll take a turkey club on whole wheat."

"Sounds good. I'll be back soon."

Later that day, Liliana decided to take a bungee fitness class to burn off the calories from the bacon, bread, and mayonnaise. The instructor, Sonia, had worked the participants hard, and Liliana felt it. Her muscles were pleasantly sore.

As she headed to her office to shower and change, two beefy arms banded around her from behind again. Why was Rutger doing this twice in one day? Liliana would have to have a talk with him. She'd asked him to test her occasionally, but this was overkill. Before she could implement her counterattack, three words stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Be very quiet."

## Chapter Two

*Luca Russo never saw the attack coming. One minute he was headed to his vehicle after work, the next, something substantial had slammed into his skull with the force of a battering ram. Instant lights out. When he woke, his hands were secured behind his back, and something was strapped around his neck. Once his eyes fully opened, he found himself in an abandoned warehouse. The vast space was drafty and empty save for broken pallets, overturned barrels, and garbage. It reeked of mold and mildew and something rotten. Windows up high on the walls were stained or cracked or missing altogether. Dust motes danced in the air.*

*“You’re finally conscious. For a while there, I was beginning to think you wouldn’t wake at all, and what fun would that be?”*

*He turned his head as much as the restraints would allow. His lips curled in disgust to see Erik Swanson staring back at him. “You sonofabitch,” he spat. “I always knew you were dirty.”*

*“I finally got you right where I want you, Russo.” He smiled evilly before twisting a handle on a crank. The chain around Luca’s neck tightened, and he was lifted in the air until his toes barely touched a platform beneath his feet. He hissed at the pressure on his windpipe.*

*“You should’ve come at me like a man,” he wheezed. “It would’ve been a fair fight instead of ambushing me from behind like a coward.”*

*Swanson reversed the crank until Luca’s feet touched again. He sucked in a much-needed breath.*

*“That wasn’t me. I’m not afraid of you, Russo. I would’ve come at you head-on, and I’d have taken your sorry ass down.”*

*“I’m the one who hit you.”*



*Luca blinked, trying to focus. The lack of oxygen caused his vision to falter. When a face swam into view, he was struck momentarily speechless. “Sherry? You’re involved in this?”*

*Swanson tugged her to him for a disgusting, sloppy kiss. Huh, he’d never have put them together. He lost all the respect he had for the female detective. He’d never had any for Swanson.*

*Swanson released her, grinning smugly. “Jealous, Russo? Sherry picked me, not you. We’ve been going at it like rabbits for years.”*

*Classy. “Not even a little bit.”*

*“What do you mean?” Swanson looked perplexed. “Look at her rack. Her ass is bodacious. She’s every man’s fantasy.”*

*Not only was she overdone and persnickety, but he didn’t go for heartless, cruel child abusers. “She’s not my type.”*

*Sherry gasped as if he’d dealt her a physical blow.*

*“He’s lying,” Swanson assured her. “Everyone wants you, sugar bear.”*

*That seemed to pacify her, and she turned her attention to Luca. “Why are you so interested in the cabin fire?”*

*“How do you know about that?”*

*“I heard you and Isobel talking in the break room.”*

*“You mean you eavesdropped—ah!” Luca sputtered when the chain tightened again. He hadn’t been prepared and fought to keep his toes in contact with the platform. It was barely a relief since the pressure on his neck bordered on excruciating, but he refused to let them know how excessively it hurt. Much more, and they’d know anyway since he’d be dead.*

*“Try again, asshole,” Swanson snapped. “You know something. The question is, how much?” He lowered the chain again, and Luca’s feet touched down. Breath sawed in and out of his lungs. “Lie to me, and I’ll jerk you up again. I can do this all night. I don’t think you can. Spill. What do you know?”*

*At this point, Luca had nothing to lose. They wouldn't let him live, no matter what. He wasn't sure he could survive many more yanks of the chain. He wanted answers before he died, so he told them everything.*

*Swanson tried to mask his shock, but Luca was a trained detective. Sherry had no poker face at all. She'd blanched white. "Yeah? Where's your evidence?" Swanson demanded with false bravado.*

*With the evidence destroyed, none of this could be proven. They didn't need to know that tidbit. "That's for me to know and you to find out."*

*Swanson slammed a fist into Luca's stomach. The force sent him swinging, knocking the wind from his lungs and his toes off the block. The chain tightened around his neck again, cutting off what little oxygen he had left. His feet struggled for purchase as he swung back and forth. He landed one foot on the platform to stop the momentum and then the other, sucking in air as the pressure slightly lightened. He was having trouble focusing. His field of vision had narrowed to pinpricks. He was already dealing with a head injury from whatever Sherry had smashed into his skull. Repeatedly depriving his brain of oxygen couldn't be good.*

*He'd always known Swanson was a sadistic bastard, but he couldn't figure out Sherry's part. He'd considered her a good cop and a friend. She was most definitely high maintenance, from the weekly manicures to the expensively styled hair to the four-inch heels she insisted on wearing. Despite all that, he'd never looked at her as anything other than a colleague. They'd bounced ideas off each other in the past, and he respected her opinion. To know that she had a part in selling children online was hard to reconcile with the person he thought her to be. Realization dawned. The girls were dolled up for the cameras.*

*"You did their hair and makeup," he gritted out accusingly.*

*Sherry's silence was all the proof he needed.*

*His stomach ached worse from Sherry's duplicity than from Swanson's blow. "Why?"*

*She shrugged and averted her gaze. Despite his limited sight, he caught the flash of remorse in her eyes. Somewhere inside was a decent person. Could he reach that part of her? "How could you be involved with selling innocent children? You were so good at speaking to the grade-schoolers about safety and bullying. They adored you." It was true. The young kids hung on her every word.*

*Any regret he thought he saw was gone when she turned to him with a sneer. "The world's a cruel, dark place, Luca. You should know that by now. None of us are getting out alive. We might as well enjoy the ride while we can, and to me, that means money. Lots and lots of it. We put our lives on the line daily, and we barely make enough to survive." She pointed a finger at him like he had something to do with their salaries. "I wanted my fair share."*

*Sherry had sworn an oath to ensure the community's safety and quality of life, and she'd done the exact opposite. She made him sick.*

*"The only way you could know about the bunker is if the veterinarian told you," Swanson realized. "That means you know where Vanessa Lacroix is right now. Tell me, and I'll let you down so you can go home."*

*Swanson must think he was born yesterday. The only way he was leaving was in a body bag. He knew it, and they knew it. He would not betray Vanessa as his last act on earth. "I have no idea."*

*"Wrong answer." Swanson twisted the handle with a rough jerk, heaving Luca into the air. He didn't feel the pressure around his neck anymore. That couldn't be good. Darkness pressed in on him until he had no option but to surrender.*

*Luca gasped awake, the sheets beneath him bunched and covered in sweat. It had been weeks since a nightmare had jolted him from slumber. Something had triggered it. The last time had been when he'd encountered a woman with the same*

name as his former coworker, Sherry Prichard. If he had to guess, he'd say this time was caused by the news story he'd watched about a man on the New York subway who had been cruelly choked to death. He vividly remembered the feeling of the chain around his neck, cutting off his air supply.

The dream always ended in the same place—when he'd blacked out. Thanks to Quinn Billings, Quinn's Belgian Malinois Kilo, and his current coworker Gage Monahan, he'd survived the torture. They'd found him after placing a tracker on him when he wasn't aware. Had he known about the device at the time, he'd have been furious. He was a decorated detective. Being monitored by a private security company should have been infuriating. Instead, it had saved his life. It was hard to be mad after the fact.

Luca had been in the hospital recovering from his injuries when Luke Colton and Logan Bradley, COBRA Securities' founders, had stopped by his room. He'd liked them both instantly, and the choice to apply for a job had been ridiculously easy. It had been the best decision of his life.

For as long as Luca could remember, he'd wanted to be a major league baseball player. From the first time he picked up a mitt, he'd fallen in love with the game. He had been on track to make his dreams come true, excelling in college as the first pitcher in the rotation. Then an injury had sidelined him, and during the brutal months of rehabilitation, his police officer father had been killed while arresting a domestic abuser. Luca's focus had changed. His need to put bad guys away, like the one who had ended his dad's life, had become his new objective. So much so, it had almost developed into an obsession.

Luca's mom died from breast cancer when he was in grade school. With no siblings, he had been without a family after his dad had passed until he'd joined COBRA Securities. Now, he had a large group of people he could count on and who would always have his back.

He hadn't known how much his life would change when he met Quinn Billings and Vanessa Lacroix. He'd enjoyed being a detective and had put away many bad people, but he

loved his current job with COBRA Securities and every one of his coworkers. They were his family, and he'd give up his life for any of them. They'd accepted him into the fold from the first moment he'd stepped foot inside the compound, and the overwhelming sense of rightness confirmed he'd made the right decision.

Knowing from experience he wouldn't get more sleep after the disturbing images had plagued his dreams, Luca dressed and headed to the gym to get in a workout. Having been an athlete since he could walk, he always thought he'd been fit. He'd been wrong. *Now* he was in the best shape of his life.

After enduring the turmoil of the torture and upheaving his life by moving several states away from where he'd grown up, everything had finally fallen into place. He was happier than he'd ever been.

Many of his coworkers had met the loves of their lives and were settling into domestic bliss. He'd already attended numerous weddings, including ones for Quinn and Vanessa, Gage Monahan and Brooklyn Fontana, Ryan Marx and Dr. Harper Hillman, Owen Durant and Melanie Delgado, Kaiya Quillen and Chase Corrigan, and Sloan Lorince and John Cruz. Soon, there would be another when Colt Fontaine and Willa Ashford tied the knot.

Though he was in his early thirties, he was still perfectly happy playing the field and dating incredible women. In fact, the gorgeous owner of a boutique downtown he'd visited to pick up a wedding gift had given him her number. She'd boldly slipped it into the front pocket of his jeans. Maybe he'd give her a call tonight.

Yep, life was good.

## Chapter Three

All the breath in Liliana's lungs seized, and she completely forgot her training. *Whoosh*. It flew out of her head like a wiper flicking a droplet of water off the windshield. Her mind was a complete blank as fear paralyzed her, rooting her feet to the ground. Muscles started to shake uncontrollably.

As quickly as the arms grabbed her, they were gone, replaced by hands gripping her biceps.

"Hey, Liliana, are you okay? Geez, I was only playing with you."

It took a minute for Douglas Speke's words to penetrate. It wasn't The Mortician, Ted Rader, who'd attacked her, but one of the men she employed to teach martial arts. One of the newer hires.

"Earth to Liliana. Are you in there?"

His tone angered her and snapped her back to the present. "Yes."

"Look, I didn't know you were so easily scared."

"I'm not." The response was automatic. She hated to appear weak. She'd worked hard to overcome her anxiety and succeeded—for the most part. It was those three dreaded words that had triggered her reaction. Douglas had no idea what they meant to her. They represented the darkest time in her life. She'd lost her best friend, her naivety, everything in that one night. Possibly the chance at true love as well. "I was distracted."

Douglas eyed her dubiously. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Liliana lied. She creased her lips in what she hoped passed for a smile. It was hard to tell when her body still felt numb. She wasn't sure her legs would work when she walked away. Before she left, there was something she needed to know. "Why did you say those words to me?"

Douglas scratched his head. “What words? Easily scared?”

“No.” *Jerk*. “You told me to be very quiet.”

“I did?” Douglas shrugged. “It was a spur of the moment. I didn’t even realize I said it. You’re always so cool and collected. I saw Rutger grab you, and I asked why he did it. He said he tries to catch you off guard but never manages to do so. I thought I’d give it a go, throwing a little intimidation into the mix. I didn’t know you’d overreact so spectacularly.”

Rutger had been an instructor—her instructor—for a long time, and Liliana had known him for years. It perturbed her that the newbie had the nerve to attempt to test her. He hadn’t earned that right. Plus, she was his boss! Then, to tell her she had overreacted was the last straw. “While you work for me, you don’t go around grabbing unsuspecting women, trying to intimidate them. That’s not how we do things around here.” She held up a hand when he started to argue. “Rutger was my trainer, and he keeps my skills sharp. Period. Do you understand?”

He glared at her for a few seconds and then hitched a shoulder. “Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

Douglas’s attitude annoyed her. Liliana would have to talk with Rutger, who had been responsible for hiring him. She didn’t want Douglas trying to catch other women off guard as he had with her. She would not stand for anyone, man or woman, to be harassed in her studio. Not for their looks, race, religion, sexual orientation, nothing.

Douglas loped away with a cocky strut she found annoying. She’d not noticed it before, but his swagger struck her as obnoxious. How had she not realized how irritating he was?

Liliana retreated to her office to shower. Douglas’s attack had her off-kilter. Hopefully, the hot spray of water would ease the tension in her muscles. Still unsettled, she decided to leave early and go for a run along the beach. Maybe that would calm the turmoil rolling around inside her head.

#

The run along the beach had helped soothe Liliana's restlessness. The calming crash and retreat sound from the waves always relaxed her. She had spent the evening reading a good book and drinking a glass of wine, and when she woke, she felt refreshed and ready to tackle the day.

Tonight was her dance class, so she'd be working late. She and Shonda were planning a recital in a few weeks, and she'd already ordered outfits and worked with another studio—not Jazmine's—to conduct a joint exhibition. Maria Gomez, the owner of the other business, had several troops who would perform routines. Maria didn't have to collaborate with Liliana's students, but she had graciously accepted when Liliana approached her with the offer. Liliana and Shonda's pupils would dance in front of an audience much larger than if they had held one of their own. Maria even included them in a group number.

Liliana was about to call Maria to finalize plans when a knock sounded on her door.

“Come in.”

“Good morning.” Shonda breezed inside, looking like a million bucks as always. Shonda was the most effortlessly beautiful woman Liliana had ever met, both inside and out.

“Good morning. Is that a new outfit?”

Shonda spun around with a flourish. “It is. Do you like it?”

The blue romper with red and white flowers showcased Shonda's stunning figure and mile-long legs. “Love it.”

“Hey, did you hear about the grisly murder over on Lenox Avenue?” Shonda didn't wait for a response. “A friend knows someone who lived close to the crime scene, and she said a woman was killed. The police haven't released the details, but I heard all the blood was drained from her body. Isn't that like totally grotesque? Dracula-esque. Is that even a word?”

Horror washed over Liliana in tsunami-sized waves. It meant nothing, she told herself. Ted Rader didn't invent



exsanguination. That method was probably used all the time. He was dead. It'd been ten years. If he were alive, he would've been killing all along. Right?

It had taken months for Liliana to recover from his attack. Not from the bullet graze and black eye, but mentally. She had been skittish and so easily frightened. It wasn't until she became proficient in self-defense that she had started to feel safe again.

When she'd decided to learn to defend herself, she had chosen Krav Maga and was now a black belt. Krav Maga compiled several self-defense practices and offered a consistent, repetitive approach. Training emphasized tactical thinking and the most efficient ways to subdue an attacker, focusing on striking the body's vulnerable areas. It was practical for people of any age, size, or shape.

Once she'd become mentally stronger and the name Ted Rader didn't send her into a full-blown panic attack, she'd pored over the details of his crimes. She needed to know her enemy.

Rader had killed eight women over the span of a year. When news of his almost capture came out, details of his past were revealed.

Ted Rader was the only child of Ted Senior, a mortician and elder at his evangelical church, and Margorie, the heir to the Deakin Funeral Home and Crematorium. It had been in Margorie's family for decades, and she'd grown up assisting with all facets of the business. Teddy, as he was called, had been responsible for embalming or cremating the bodies from a young age. Margorie ruled with an iron fist, not allowing her only child to play with other kids or participate in extracurricular activities. His life consisted of church and the funeral home.

It almost made you feel sorry for Ted ... almost. Many people had grown up with strict, overbearing parents or faced unimaginable odds, yet they hadn't become deranged serial killers.

She still remembered the quote he'd whispered in her ear. She had researched it online and discovered it was from *1 Corinthians 15:40-43*. A man who quoted the Bible while doing the devil's work was one sick bastard. A cold-blooded killer.

"Liliana?"

"Huh?" She shook her head and blinked at Shonda, who was waving a hand in front of her face.

"I've been talking to you for like ten minutes. Where did you go? Did you hear anything I said?"

"Sorry. I was distracted. What did you say?"

"That the order for new T-shirts will be delivered this afternoon."

"Okay. Thanks."

Shonda was studying her closely. It was all she could do to school her features. "I should have the schedule for the recital later today."

Shonda nodded slowly. "Great. Sure you're okay? You know you can tell me anything."

"I know. I'm good."

Shonda looked reluctant to leave but closed the door behind her with a nod. Liliana let out a breath. Her best friend could be like a dog with a bone when she suspected Liliana wasn't telling her everything. Once, after a glass of wine or four, Liliana had confessed her love for Luca Russo. Shonda had wanted to call him, and at the time, Liliana had almost agreed. Then she remembered he was a cop, and she would be flirting with a drunk and disorderly charge. That stopped her from punching in his number.

Liliana turned to her computer and jiggled the mouse to bring the screen to life. She needed to find the story Shonda was talking about. She said it wasn't public knowledge yet, but crimes of that magnitude had a way of landing in the media sooner rather than later.

It had to be a twisted coincidence, didn't it? It couldn't be Ted Rader. She found an article on the website of a local television station. Her fingers shook as she scrolled to the bottom. The police had tried to keep information from the public, but it'd been leaked. More details would be released as the investigation proceeded.

Liliana slammed back against her chair. The facts were the same, and the method of death was identical. Rape. Strangulation. Exsanguination.

Ted Rader was back.

She picked up her cell and dialed a number she'd memorized ten years ago without realizing what she was doing. When the deep, husky voice answered, she ignored the thrill it sent through her system and blurted out, "He's back."

## Chapter Four

After a grueling workout, Luca Russo walked back to his apartment inside the COBRA Securities complex with Christian Zamora, Jalen Ellis, Kayne Serruto, and Presley Parrish, four of the newest hires. Like him, Christian, Jalen, Kayne, and Presley were unattached and living in the luxury accommodations provided to agents. They'd become fast friends and enjoyed hanging out together.

Many of the agents were married, and babies were being born right and left, but Luca wasn't at that point in his life yet. He was content being single and mingling.

“What the hell is that?”

Luca shifted his gaze to where Christian was pointing. “Uh, no clue.”

Some kind of gadget was zipping its way in their direction. It looked like an iPad on a stick with wheels. It stopped in front of them, and the screen popped on.

“Gah!”

All five jumped back when Tyler Redmond's smiling face appeared. “Hey, guys! 'Sup?”

“Tyler, what the hell is this thing?” Luca waved a hand at the apparatus.

“I know! Dope, right? I can be anywhere and everywhere without leaving my office. I've almost achieved my goal of being omnipotent.”

“Don't you mean impotent?” Kayne joked.

“Har har. I do mighty fine in that department, thank you very much. Just ask Lyra.”

“Okay, okay,” Luca cut in, not wanting to get into salacious details about the tech genius and his beautiful wife. “What is this?”

“He's my body double. I call him Melman.”

Jalen laughed. “After the giraffe in *Madagascar*?”

“Yep.”

Presley tossed her long, blonde ponytail over her shoulder and asked suspiciously, “Didn’t I see this same thing with Hetty Lange on *NCIS: Los Angeles*?”

Tyler sniffed. “I might’ve gotten the idea from the show, but mine is straight fire.”

“You made this?” Kayne asked dubiously.

“It was my idea, but Einstein built it from the ground up.”

Einstein was Damon McIntyre’s nickname. He’d been a highly sought-after mechanical engineer for the Air Force when COBRA Securities had snapped him up faster than a New York minute.

“It’s so slay,” Jalen announced. “You can be anywhere you can’t physically attend.”

“Exactly,” Tyler agreed.

“What’s the difference between that and Face Timing on a phone or a video conference call?” Christian wondered.

“My coolness factor is off the charts with this,” Tyler insisted. “I mean, watch.” He spun the machine in a circle before rolling backward and forward again, showing off the machine’s capabilities ... or dance moves. Luca wasn’t sure which.

A smaller vision of the same contraption zoomed up and executed a three-sixty before coming to a stop. The screen clicked on, and Kai Costa’s adorable grinning face appeared. Kai was Dante’s son, the man in charge of training the agents.

“Hey, guys, isn’t this the greatest? Watch.” He performed several impressive moves with the device.

“You sucked Little C into your robot world?” Luca chided.

“He’s a natural,” Tyler declared. “Who else would be my doppelgänger but Dante’s mini-me? I mean, come on guys,

you can admit Dante and I are practically twins since we have the same body type.”

“Yeah, right,” Jalen coughed into his fist, and they all chuckled. While Tyler was fit and had honed his muscles, Dante Costa was in a class by himself ... along the lines of Ares, the Greek god of war. The former Navy Seal was the textbook example of a physical specimen.

“Hey, everyone, do you know what a robot’s favorite food is?”

“If we’re talking about you, Kai, it’d be meat lover’s pizza,” Christian answered.

“Yes! But no.” Kai shook his head, and the machine wiggled.

“Mac and cheese,” Presley guessed. “I heard you tell someone you would lop off their hand if they tried to steal a taste of your dish ... oh, and, by the way, that was me.”

Kai grinned sheepishly. “Yeah, sorry about that, Presley. Kaitlyn’s mac and cheese is the bomb, and I lose my mind the second she places it in front of me. I zone out, and all I see is the tastiest, creamiest pasta on the planet.”

Kaitlyn was the sister of their boss Luke and was married to their other boss Logan’s brother, Dan, who was also a coworker. She was a world-class chef.

“Corndogs,” Kayne tried. “I heard you say that it was the perfect food.”

“They are! I mean, you can carry them around on a stick, dip them in ketchup or mustard, or nothing at all, and they are still delish. But no.” Kai’s robot twisted from side to side in what Luca assumed was another shake of his head.

“All right, we give,” Christian capitulated. “What is a robot’s favorite food?”

“Microchips!” Kai hooted, and his robot spun in several circles.

While they were all laughing, Luca’s phone buzzed. He didn’t recognize the seven-eight-six area code and almost let

the call go to voicemail. Something made him punch the button to answer. “Russo.”

“He’s back.”

Luca froze. Every muscle in his body seized. Christian and Jalen noticed, giving him questioning looks.

Though the caller didn’t identify herself, he would’ve known Liliana Lima’s voice anywhere. He’d been waiting for her call for years—ten, to be exact. It was why he’d worked with the COBRA Securities tech department to add a second SIM card to his phone so he could keep the number he’d given her all those years ago.

“Liliana?”

She didn’t respond for so long that he feared she had hung up.

“I’m sorry, Luca. I overreacted and shouldn’t have called you.”

“Liliana, wait!”

Too late. She’d disconnected. He instantly redialed but got a busy signal. She must’ve used a landline.

“Is something wrong?” Kayne asked.

“I’m not sure.” He searched the seven-eight-six area code and discovered it was Miami Beach. Luca had known Liliana had fled to Florida after she’d left Minnesota, but he’d refrained from using his contacts to track her down all these years. If she had wanted to talk to him, she would have called ... like now. He had made sure to search for similar crimes to Ted Rader around the country, but nothing had ever popped up. If it had, he would’ve flown to her in a heartbeat. “It’s about a case I worked on years ago.”

“Anything we can do to help?” Presley posed.

“I don’t know what’s happening yet, but I’ll let you know. You guys go on. I need to talk to Tyler.”

“Follow me to my lair,” Tyler said. Melman spun around and raced for the offices.

“Me too,” Kai said, zipping after the other robot and overtaking him.

Luca felt silly chasing after two iPads on sticks, but he jogged to catch up with Melman and Kai. Kai peeled off and rolled toward BeBe Davis’s offices with a wave. Luca and Melman descended to the underground domain where Tyler’s office was located. He would’ve been able to find out the information he was looking for on his own, but it would only take Tyler a matter of minutes.

“Melman, recharge,” Tyler ordered the robot. It backed up, turned, and docked itself in a port against the wall. Amazing. It was like a tall, thin Roomba.

“What’s up, Luca?”

“I need you to run a phone number.” He recited the digits.

“It’s an office line at the Fitness Academy of Miami Beach.” His fingers flew over the keys. “Owned by Liliana Lima.”

Liliana owned her own business. Luca wasn’t surprised. She was amazing.

“Can you look up recent crimes in the last forty-eight hours in the Miami area? I’m specifically looking for a murder where the blood was drained from the body.”

“A Dracula killer, huh? Gruesome.”

“Something like that,” Luca muttered. Ted Rader had been a sadistic son-of-a-bitch. He’d raped and tortured his victims before killing them. There had been no trace of him for a decade. Surely, he hadn’t come back—

“Got one.”

Luca jerked his gaze to the monitor as Tyler accessed the story. Tyler’s printer kicked on, and he swiped the sheets and handed them to Luca. He scanned the article about the killing.

“Where is Lenox Avenue compared to Miami Beach?”

Tyler typed keys with rapid-fire precision. “Dead smack in the middle.” Tyler eyed him speculatively. “This means



something to you?”

“It does. I worked a similar case a decade ago in Minnesota.”

“I’ll dig up the police reports and send them to your phone.”

“Thanks, Tyler. I appreciate it.”

Luca took the steps two at a time to the top floor where the bosses’ offices were located. Once he had Luke and Logan together, he explained the situation, going into detail about what had happened ten years ago, including Liliana’s involvement. He left out the part where he’d fallen madly in love with her. “I need to go down there and check it out.”

“I remember that case,” Luke said. “It stood out because of the perp’s methodology in draining the blood from his victims. He was never found?”

“No.”

As Luca expected, they instantly understood how important it was to him and offered unconditional support.

“Assess the situation, and if you think there’s a threat, we’ll send other agents to assist,” Logan told him.

“Take whatever you need from the supplies,” Luke added. “Keep us posted.”

Luca left the offices and headed to gather equipment. The murderer could turn out to be a copycat who had resurrected Rader’s killing methods. Or maybe it was happenstance that some sick bastard had raped and strangled women before draining their blood. The actual likelihood that it was Ted Rader was slim. There had been no sign of him in a decade. If he were alive, he’d have been killing. Still, Luca wasn’t taking chances, especially since it had happened close to where Liliana lived now. Seemed like an odd coincidence.

Luca paused with his arm outstretched. Liliana. Just hearing her name caused a rush of emotions to flood through him. He’d met her during the worst time of her life. He’d been a brash, twenty-two-year-old rookie on the police force; she’d

been a twenty-year-old junior in college. Luca and his partner at the time, Richard Wells, had responded to the call and were first on the scene. The perp, Ted Rader, had sprayed bullets to keep them at bay, then shot Liliana as a diversion to escape. He and Richard had returned fire, and one bullet had tagged Rader in the face. Luca had stayed with Liliana while Richard had gone after him, but he'd lost him in the woods. Scent dogs followed a substantial blood trail, but it ended at a lake, where they assumed he'd stashed a boat. Rader was never found, nor had he turned up at hospitals within a thousand-mile radius. Authorities deduced the wounds had been fatal.

A bullet had grazed Liliana in the side, leaving a deep groove, and she'd suffered a bruised cheek and black eye. Luca had visited her in the hospital and sat with her for hours until her family arrived. He thought he'd slip out unnoticed, but Liliana wouldn't let him leave. She'd been traumatized and afraid to go out in public, fearing Rader would find her. Luca had taken time off he hadn't yet accrued to be with her the next week while she healed, and he had escorted her to her roommate's funeral. He'd been crushed, but not surprised, when she'd told him she'd dropped out of school and was moving away.

Desperation had overtaken him that night, and he'd kissed her with all the passion he'd kept leashed inside. The kiss had been intense, carnal. Luca knew that if he didn't stop, he wouldn't be able to, so he'd summoned all the restraint he possessed and stepped back. He'd given her his contact information but hadn't heard from her in the ten years since.

Luca had loved her the minute he'd spotted her in Rader's clutches. Spending the next week with her had cemented the feelings. When she had left, he felt as if half of him had gone with her.

The passing of time had lessened the pain. At first, he'd thought of her hourly, then daily. That had morphed into weekly, and eventually, months would pass. It'd been years since he'd thought of her until she unexpectedly popped into his head as he watched Quinn Billings and Vanessa Lacroix together. It'd happened a couple of times since, the most

recent being when Colt Fontaine and Willa Ashford had fallen in love.

Luca hadn't been a monk in the ten years since he last saw Liliana—far from it. He'd even considered marriage a few years ago, but something had kept him from asking Hailey to be his wife. It might have been because it was Liliana's face he pictured in his mind when he asked a woman those four sacred words: will you marry me? Maybe it was that he didn't love Hailey enough to want to spend the rest of his life with her. Whatever the case, Hailey had grown tired of waiting for him to ask, issued an ultimatum, and when he'd remained silent, walked out the door and never returned. He didn't blame her at all.

“Can I help you find something, Luca?”

Luca turned to see Tank Hale walking over, and he realized he'd been standing there with his arm extended for a ridiculous amount of time. “Sorry, my mind was elsewhere.” He swiped the Kevlar vest he'd chosen for Liliana and held it up. “I think I've got everything I need.”

Luca chatted with Tank while he cataloged the items Luca picked out. As he headed to his apartment, a text chimed on his phone. BeBe had booked his flight already. He'd be in Miami by this afternoon.

## Chapter Five

Liliana tried to go about the day as if nothing had happened, certainly not a killing that mirrored the one that had taken Erin's life. She couldn't believe she'd called Luca. Hearing his voice had sent her mind reeling back ten years to the worst—and best—time of her life. If only she'd been strong enough to stay and see if the intense attraction she'd felt for him could have morphed into something more.

Liliana wasn't sure why she'd hung up on him. Maybe it was because her first impulse had been to ask him to come to Florida and protect her. She'd never felt safer in her life than when he was around. Rader couldn't get to her because Luca wouldn't let him. She'd worked hard over the years to become a fearless, independent woman. She'd managed for the most part. Weakness was no longer a part of her vocabulary ... or it hadn't been until Douglas Speke had pulled his idiotic stunt. Now she questioned her training. Rutger would be so mad at her. Hell, she was angry at herself.

Liliana put her worries aside to teach her dance class. The eight girls and four boys had learned the routine they would perform at the recital and were polishing it now. They were excited to join the students at Maria's studio for a group number. Liliana had given them the information to share with their parents since they would have to go to Maria's place of business to practice.

The music stopped, and she gave them a five-minute break before running through it again. She corrected form and timing issues and ensured they executed one clean performance before dismissing them.

Liliana took a drink from her water bottle and wiped a towel over her face. Teaching the students always resulted in a grueling workout. After she put the props away, she was headed for her office when Nina Poole, one of her closest friends, entered the building. Nina was teaching cardio burn tonight, and as always, her class would be packed. Her

clientele leaned heavily toward men since Nina was a bubbly blue-eyed blonde with a killer body. She was friendly, outgoing, and stunning. She tended to fall in love at the drop of a hat and then grow bored and move on to the next conquest. Currently, she'd set her sights on Rex Raines. She'd been begging Liliana to set them up, but Liliana was afraid things would be awkward when the relationship fizzled out. Plus, she hadn't mentioned to Nina how Rex had asked her out several times.

“Oh my gosh, please tell me he's here to take my class.”

Liliana sighed. Rex usually exercised in the morning or sometimes around lunchtime. His afternoons and evenings were filled with house showings and meetings. She'd given him and the others in his office a hefty discount since he had found her the space ... and owned the building. Theo Harvey usually worked out with Rex, while Georgia Perkins preferred the evening yoga classes. She had also been taking self-defense.

Liliana turned, bracing herself for Rex's presence, but didn't see him. A tall man with dark hair removed his sunglasses as he looked around the space. It was obvious he worked out, judging by his incredibly muscular physique. Wow, what a specimen. His gaze passed by her and then jerked back.

Liliana gasped and stumbled backward. *No, it couldn't be.*

“Liliana, are you okay?” Nina crouched down and picked up the papers that had tumbled from Liliana's lax fingers. “He's coming this way!” Nina gushed, but Liliana barely heard her. Her heartbeat thumped madly in her ears, and her feet had grown roots and anchored her in place.

My goodness, ten years had been good to Luca Russo. He'd been handsome before, with the brash cockiness of youth, but he'd matured into a man—a gorgeous one. His short, spiky black hair stood up a little in the front. A polo shirt clung to impressive muscles. He'd hooked his sunglasses into the buttons at his neck.

When she gazed into his amber eyes, she felt herself reverting to the young woman who had worshiped him and practically melted into a puddle at his feet. He'd always had that effect on her.

“Hi, I’m Nina. Are you here to take a class? You’ll love mine. I’ll get your heart racing if you know what I mean.”

Luca’s gaze never left Liliana’s. “Hi, Nina. No, I’m here for Liliana.”

Liliana heard Nina’s surprised inhale, but she was powerless to say anything. She was entirely under Luca’s spell.

#

Luca studied notes from the police investigation of the recent homicide on the flight to Miami. The MO, or *modus operandi*, appeared to be identical to Ted Rader’s style of murder. Rape, strangulation, exsanguination, heavily applied makeup postmortem. The only missing piece was the sewing of the eyes and lips shut. Rader had been meticulous with that step after he’d murdered his victims. That tidbit of information had never been made public with Rader’s killing spree ten years ago, and the police might be keeping it under wraps now, but Luca was looking at official notes and photos from the scene. He had no idea how Tyler had managed to get his hands on them, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t a cop anymore.

Luca scrolled to the photos, having long ago grown detached at viewing gruesome images like these. He’d seen death up close and personal too many times to count. It wasn’t that he was an uncaring bastard. The opposite, in fact. Constructing a shell around his feelings had been the only way he could cope, so he could do his job and deliver justice to those victims.

The woman was almost painfully thin, with her ribs and pelvic bones protruding through her skin. Close-ups of her arm showed noticeable track marks from long-time drug use. That was strange. Rader’s previous victims had either been successful, beautiful, from privileged families, or a combination of the three. The FBI had worked up a profile on

him, and they deduced he had chosen those types of women because they wouldn't give him the time of day otherwise. He might have even had unpleasant encounters with one or several during his formative years.

Luca came to the shots of the woman's face. He couldn't tell from the pictures if there were stitches in the lids or lips. Rader had always performed that step with surgical precision. They would be hard to see anyway since her face had been painted in garish hues of electric blue on the eyes, flamingo pink on the cheeks, and ruby red on the lips. That was another deviation. He'd perfected applying women's cosmetics. Had Rader changed his MO over the past ten years? Was it possible that this was a copycat?

Tyler had included information on the detective in charge of the case, Diego Torres. Luca planned on setting up a meeting with him after he spoke with Liliana.

Due to a delay on the tarmac, it was late when Luca exited the aircraft. Because he'd brought two guns along, he'd checked his suitcase. More time was wasted waiting at baggage claim for it to appear on the rotating carousel. BeBe had an SUV waiting for him, and he loaded his bag inside.

He didn't know if Liliana would still be at work or if she'd headed home to her condo. He had the addresses for both, but he typed in the location of her studio first into the onboard GPS.

Along with studying the case on the plane ride, Luca had dug into Liliana's background over the last ten years. He was ridiculously pleased to note she hadn't married. He remembered her major being psychology, with plans to become a therapist, but she'd changed career objectives and majored in business. She owned her condo, located north of Miami Beach in Surfside, and a three-year-old Jeep Grand Cherokee. She rented the building for her fitness academy but took out a substantial loan for the subsequent renovations.

Luca arrived at Liliana's place, located in a group of shops in Miami Beach. Many of the spaces in the shared lot were full. He found a spot and glanced around as he stepped

out. Other nearby businesses included a bank, a real estate office, and an upscale boutique. Several people were heading to the studio. He caught up with them and entered. After removing his sunglasses, he scoped the interior, looking for a beautiful woman with long raven hair. His gaze moved past two women before snapping back.

*Liliana.*

Her hair was shorter now, the front ends longer than the back and brushing her shoulders, but he would've recognized her anywhere. If you stripped everything else away, it was as if her DNA called to him on a molecular level, as ridiculous as that sounded.

The woman beside her was saying something, but Liliana's startled gaze was locked on his. He moved toward her, wanting to pull her into his arms and kiss her before squiring her away to his apartment inside the secure compound back home. Liliana's safety was of the utmost importance to him.

Would she taste as wonderful as he remembered?

"Hi, I'm Nina. Are you here to take a class? You'll love mine. I'll get your heart racing, if you know what I mean."

Luca's attention never left Liliana. "Hi, Nina. No, I'm here for Liliana."

The other woman inhaled sharply, but Luca didn't spare her a look. He couldn't tear his gaze away from Liliana. Those light green eyes sucked him in and held him there. How had he survived ten years without her? "Hello, Liliana."

She opened her mouth, closed it, and cleared her throat before murmuring, "Luca."

As if realizing her surroundings, she shook her head and glanced around. "I'll see you tomorrow, Nina." She addressed Luca. "Let's talk in my office."

Luca dipped his head at the other woman, who he noticed was incredibly beautiful but not in Liliana's league, and followed. Someone called her name and handed her a clipboard. She wrote something and passed it back before



continuing to a room decorated in soft tones. One wall was made of glass and overlooked the studio—a grand view, but not very private.

Liliana walked behind a metal and wood desk that looked like it lifted so she could stand if she wanted to. She sat in a black leather chair. Luca took one of the padded seats in front. There was also a conference room table, a small kitchenette, and a sofa.

She opened her mouth to say something and then frowned as she looked over his shoulder. Luca turned to see what had distracted her. The woman she'd been talking to when he arrived—he thought her name might be Nina—and several others had huddled together. They were looking at them and smiling. Liliana punched a button, and the glass became opaque. Nice.

“How are you, Luca?”

“I was better before I received your call,” he answered honestly.

Liliana winced and glanced away. “I overreacted and shouldn't have bothered you. I'm sure this is all a coincidence.”

“I'm not.”

Liliana's gaze lurched back to him. “What?”

“There are several similarities to Ted Rader.”

Luca was out of his seat in an instant, rounding the desk to pull Liliana into his arms. Her body shook uncontrollably, and he hated she was reliving the pain from all those years ago. He'd take every bit of it from her if he could.

“I won't let anything happen to you, Liliana,” he murmured, meaning it. His hand itched to stroke her hair, cup her face. The urge to kiss her, to ease her pain, was overwhelming in its intensity.

Luca felt the instant she gathered herself. It was as if her spine had suddenly encased in titanium. She pulled back, and

he reluctantly let go. It went against every instinct he possessed, but he returned to his seat.

Liliana regained her composure. “That shouldn’t have happened. I’m sorry.” She straightened a stack of papers on her desk and aligned two pens. “As I said, there is no reason for you to have come here.”

The apology irritated him, but her aloofness pissed him off. “Liliana, look at me.”

As if by great effort, she met his gaze. The icy stare was a punch in the gut. “It’s me. I was there.”

She glanced away. “I’ve put that time behind me and moved on.”

Yeah, right. That’s why she had called him the instant she’d learned about the murder and then fell apart when he confirmed Rader could be the killer. “Liliana, this is serious. Ted Rader might be back.”

“I’ll be fine, Luca. I’m trained in self-defense, have several black belts, and carry a gun in my purse.”

He’d taught her how to shoot and bought her first pistol for her. He wondered if it was the same one.

“I’m afraid you made the trip from Minnesota for nothing.”

“So that’s it? You’re just going to ignore the threat?” He hated prodding her, but he wanted her to take this seriously. And yeah, maybe it hurt that she was treating him like an acquaintance instead of a ... what? Friend? Nothing physical had happened between them besides that farewell kiss, but she’d meant much more than that to him.

“I’ll be vigilant.” She looked at him, and it was the authentic Liliana, not the mask she’d worn moments ago. “It was nice to see you, Luca. You look good. Those frigid Minnesota winters and catching bad guys agree with you, although I’m guessing you’re a detective now?”

“I was a detective, but I’m not on the force anymore. And I don’t live in Minnesota.”

Liliana's eyebrows arched. "You don't?"

"No." Luca stood, reluctant to share his life with her when she was doing everything possible to push him away. "Liliana, listen, there's a genuine threat. It might be Rader; it might not. Until we know for sure, just ... be careful." His cell buzzed, and he checked the screen, smiling at the information. He looked at her again and schooled his features. "I'll be in town for a few days. You have my number if anything happens or you want to talk." He headed for the door.

"Luca."

He turned.

"It really is good to see you."

"You too, Liliana. Be safe."

## Chapter Six

Luca had no intention of leaving Liliana alone. He sat in his SUV and waited for her to exit. He'd follow her home. Little did she know, BeBe had rented him the condo across the hall from her. It was blind luck that it had been up for sale. This way he'd be able to keep an eye on her. She probably wouldn't appreciate it if she found out, but he didn't care. Ted Rader might be back, and there was no way Luca would let that psycho anywhere near her.

He had to admit he'd never anticipated her reaction to his arrival. He'd known she'd be surprised, and hoped she'd be pleased. But the ice queen act wasn't what he'd expected. At all. He absently rubbed his chest.

Luca suddenly sat up in his seat. Liliana was walking out with a man, chatting it up. He snapped a picture, hoping to identify the stranger. Was this man her boyfriend? The burger he'd grabbed leaving the airport soured in his stomach.

Liliana pushed a button on a key fob to a silver SUV. She tossed her bag into the back seat. The man opened the driver's side door and held it for her. It was wishful thinking, but Liliana looked annoyed with him. The man said something, and she shook her head. A conversation ensued, tempting Luca to sneak out and eavesdrop. He needed to know what was going on.

Finally, the man nodded and stepped back while Liliana climbed inside and closed the door. With a wave, she drove away. The man watched as she exited the parking lot.

Luca was torn between waiting to see where the man went or following Liliana. Since she was his objective, he pulled out and tailed her.

The congested streets made keeping her vehicle in view difficult, but Luca managed. Twenty-five minutes later, she pulled into an underground garage beneath her condo complex. Luca eased down the ramp, watching as she angled into a reserved space. He found a spot designated for visitors

and had to duck down when she exited her vehicle and glanced around. Good. That meant she was always aware of her surroundings. She took the elevator instead of the stairs. Another smart move. Someone could be waiting to ambush her on the next flight up.

Luca gave her time to check her mailbox and proceed to her unit before he grabbed his bag and headed to the lobby. A man wearing a brown security uniform sat behind a desk. He looked as if he'd come to work straight from third-period history class at the local high school. His eyes narrowed when Luca approached.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m renting a condo and was told to pick up the keys here.”

“Name?”

Luca gave Warren—according to his nametag—the information, and he typed it into a computer. While Warren gathered the necessary forms, Luca examined the lobby. He didn’t see any surveillance equipment, which irritated him. It was a law in all states that security cameras in any apartment complex had to be clearly visible. There could be no hidden cameras, but it appeared as if his structure had none at all.

“How’s the security in the building?”

Warren looked up from his computer with a frosty glare. “I’m trained.”

“I wasn’t suggesting otherwise. I meant cameras, fire detectors, that kind of thing.”

“There are cameras outside the building. Fire extinguishers and smoke detectors on every floor are serviced regularly. Owners are responsible for maintaining, repairing, or replacing alarms inside their unit.”

“No equipment inside the lobby?”

“No.”

“Have you had any trouble? Theft, break-ins, assaults?”

“I’m trained,” Warren repeated with a growl.

Geez. Luca wasn’t getting off on the right foot with the man. “I’m not questioning your competence, Warren. I was merely inquiring about the safety of the tenants.”

Warren studied him with barely leashed hostility. “There have been no incidents since I’ve been here.”

Warren might like to think he was a badass, but he was no match for Luca. He wasn’t the least bit intimidated, nor was he backing down. “How long is that?”

It took so long for Warren to answer, Luca was beginning to think he wouldn’t. Through gritted teeth, he admitted, “Three weeks.”

Three freaking weeks and the man had the audacity to give Luca attitude? Luca planned on calling the security company for more details and Warren’s qualifications.

He accepted the key Warren handed him, signed some papers, and headed to the stairs. When he reached the eighth floor, he opened the door and casually checked the hallway before heading to the unit directly across from Liliana’s condo. He slipped inside and nodded his approval at the accommodations.

The place was updated, with wood floors, stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, and a killer view of the beach. He opened the sliding glass door and stepped outside, letting the sound of the waves wash over him. The fact that his rental faced the ocean meant Liliana’s didn’t. It also signified the mortgage on this apartment would be hundreds of dollars more, if not thousands. Totally worth it, in his opinion.

Luca checked his watch. It was getting late, but having been a detective, he knew Diego Torres was probably still on the job, trying to locate the murderer. The first forty-eight hours of an investigation were crucial. It could mean the difference between a solved case or a cold one.

Luca sent him a text with basic information on how he’d worked a similar scene a few years ago and that he’d like to discuss the current murder with him. Then he grabbed his

suitcase and headed to the bathroom to shower off the plane stench.

As he stood under the steaming spray of water, he reflected on the treatment he'd received from Liliana. He knew suddenly showing up at her business would shock her, but he thought she'd be excited too, maybe jump into his arms. Luca wanted to hold her close, murmur comforting words in her ear. He wanted to kiss her again, pick up where they'd left off ten years ago. Instead, she'd treated him as if he was a nasty, annoying gnat she wanted to swat. It had hurt both his pride and his heart.

Luca had thought of her over the years. Time might've lessened his feelings, but her dismissal was a crushing blow. The Liliana he remembered had long raven hair, frightened green eyes, and a sweetness that was pure and innocent. This Liliana had short black hair, eyes filled with determination, and a spine encased in steel. But she was still so incredibly beautiful she took his breath away.

Luca had just slid on a pair of shorts when a firm knock sounded on his door. The only person who knew where he was, besides the people in his office, was Warren. Had he pissed off the security guard so much that he wanted to give Luca a hard time? Maybe he forgot to sign a form.

He swiped a shirt, slid it over his head, and stuck his arms through the holes before grabbing his weapon and checking the peephole. It was a dark-haired man, his head on a swivel. Luca instantly pegged him as a cop and knew it would be Detective Diego Torres before he opened the door.

As if sensing Luca was checking him out, the man held up a badge. Luca stuck his gun in the back waistband of his shorts and opened the door, careful to stay out of sight in case Liliana happened to look through her peephole.

“Luca Russo?”

“Detective Torres,” he responded. “Come in.”

The man moved by him, his hand on the GLOCK 22 holstered at his side, letting Luca know he'd pull the weapon if

necessary. Untrusting soul. Luca appreciated the sentiment. He glanced at Liliana's door before closing his. "How did you find me?"

The detective's left brow arched. "I'm a cop. Got any ID?"

Luca jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "It's over there. Mind if I get it?"

"Please do."

Luca retrieved the leather folio from a pocket in his pants and handed it to Torres. The detective studied it, glanced at Luca, and then back at the picture before nodding and returning it to him. "I spoke with your boss." Now it was Luca's turn to lift a brow. "I had to make sure you weren't some wingnut trying to nose into my case."

"Fair enough." Luca would've done the same thing in his shoes. It meant that Torres was suspicious, competent, and detail-orientated. Those traits would come in handy in solving the case.

"Have you had dinner?"

"No." Luca didn't count the burger since it'd been the first thing he'd eaten all day.

"I know a place nearby that serves the best seafood, and I'm starving."

"Let me change."

Luca switched the T-shirt for a button-down so he could conceal his weapon. Then he slid on his tactical pants and all-terrain boots. Detective Torres was staring at the view when he returned.

"Nice place."

"It is."

"You carrying?"

"Always."

Torres nodded as if he was expecting the answer.



Luca grabbed a baseball cap in case Liliana opened her door and followed the detective to the lobby. Warren didn't hide his curiosity, watching them with a smirk. Torres would've had to show his badge to be let inside. Warren probably thought this was a perp walk, and Luca was about to be taken to the police station to be questioned.

Torres had parked in a restricted area using an official police permit. Luca climbed inside the department-issued sedan. Torres removed the placard from the dash and drove to a restaurant that wouldn't garner a second look from most people. The building was rundown, but the parking lot was packed—the sign of a favorite for locals. Torres found a spot, and they entered the rowdy establishment. Rock music belted at ear-splitting levels from a jukebox, and the din of conversation was loud as they navigated to a recently abandoned booth in a corner.

A server handed them menus and took their drink orders. When she returned with their glasses, Luca followed the detective's recommendation and chose the seafood platter.

After placing their orders, Torres studied Luca. “You came to Miami Beach because of this murder?”

“I'm visiting a friend and heard about it,” Luca hedged. He wasn't about to bring Liliana up to the cop. It wasn't that he didn't trust him, but he wasn't taking chances. It was already too coincidental that the murder had occurred close to where she lived now. Information had a way of leaking out, and if the media got wind of someone who had encountered the killer before living nearby, they'd run with it. Plus, if it was Rader, he didn't want the man to know she was close, though more than likely, he already did. Why else would he have chosen this as his killing ground?

If it was Rader, Luca had no doubt the FBI would become involved again. They'd stuck their nose into the investigation in Minnesota. They tended to be territorial, closed-mouthed, and hard to work with. He'd dealt with several agents over the years and had learned how to coexist. Some he'd even call friends, like Cayleigh Copeland. She was tough, fair, and hard-working. She was also now a coworker at COBRA Securities.

Luke and Logan had seen the potential in her, having crossed paths with the former FBI agent and him during the Quinn Billings operation.

“Tell me about your similar situation,” Torres prompted.

Luca recalled the details of the crimes, starting with Rader’s first seven kills and ending with Erin Simon’s death.

“You caught him in the act?”

“Yes. A woman came home and found him killing her roommate. She managed to call the police before he grabbed her.” He told Torres how he and his partner had returned fire, including one bullet that tagged Rader in the face.

“He never showed up anywhere,” Torres said. “No hospitals or morgues?”

“No, and we searched for months.”

“I looked up the case after getting your text, and while there are similarities, there are differences too.”

“Rader drained their blood, sewed their eyes and lips shut, and then applied heavy makeup,” Luca told him. “We kept the information about the eyes and lips out of the news.”

“What about the victims? Was there a pattern?”

“They were all pretty coeds from wealthy families or successful businesswomen. He didn’t seem to have a type. He crossed race and ethnicity lines.”

The server arrived with their orders and placed them on the table. After asking if they needed anything else, she left.

Torres picked up a crab leg and snapped it. “Our vic wasn’t a college student. She was a prostitute.”

Luca’s brows lifted. He’d come to the same conclusion from looking at the crime scene photos, but that was a significant deviation. “The FBI profiler surmised Rader studied the victims for at least a few days before he attacked. A prostitute seems like a quick grab.”

“It does. And while our victim was exsanguinated and had makeup applied, the eyes and lips weren’t sewn shut.”

“Maybe we’re dealing with a copycat,” Luca suggested as he picked up an oyster.

“It looks like it might be one,” Torres concurred. “What about any foreign objects on the body?”

Luca shook his head. “There were never any. He was fastidious, almost fussy. Everything had to be just so when he finished with the victim.”

“We found one on our vic. There was a flower in her hand. A lily.”

The oyster slid down Luca’s throat and wedged sideways into his esophagus. He hacked and fought for breath, fearing Torres would need to perform the Heimlich Maneuver before it dislodged and he could inhale again.

Torres had risen from his seat. “You okay?”

Thankfully, the oyster slid the rest of the way down. Luca held up a hand and took a drink of water. “Sorry. Swallowed wrong.” His heartbeat pounded in his ears, and the seafood he’d eaten sat like a goeey, gelatinous lump in his belly. That flower wasn’t a coincidence. How had he missed that detail in the report?

Torres was quiet—too quiet. Luca looked up to see the detective studying him with narrowed eyes. “What?”

“You tell me.”

Luca hadn’t been particularly successful in hiding his reaction to the flower, so even a mediocre detective would’ve picked up on his distress. Luca had a feeling Diego Torres was anything but average.

Since it looked like Rader was the perp, changes to his MO notwithstanding, Luca would need the cooperation of the detective to keep Liliana safe and finally bring Rader to justice.

“The woman I told you about who walked in on Rader killing her roommate ... her name is Liliana.”

Torres sat back against the padded booth. “The flower wasn’t some random addition.”

“There’s more.”

Torres gave a resigned sigh and rubbed his forehead. Luca wondered if a headache was brewing. “What is it?”

“She now lives here in Miami Beach.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“You are here for her?”

“Yes.” Luca left out the part about her not wanting to see or have anything to do with him. Semantics. “My company will provide protection.”

“I checked them out after your message. Their reputation is stellar. I’m impressed.”

“Best in the world.”

Torres nodded. “You think we’re dealing with a modified Ted Rader?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. The differences bother me. The FBI worked up a profile for him, and he was very methodical. He’d grown up with an overbearing mother who ruled with an iron fist. She forced him to work on the corpses, and if they weren’t perfect, he was disciplined. Punishments ranged from being locked in the refrigerator or a casket, to putting makeup on himself and wearing it in public.”

“Yikes.” Torres grimaced. “Definitely not mother-of-the-year material.”

“No,” Luca agreed. “Routine mattered to him, and he was meticulous about it.” Luca shook his head. “Unless he was under a time crunch, I can’t see him skipping the step of sewing the eyes and mouth shut.” It was easy to figure out why he’d added the flower. Luca’s stomach rolled again.

“If it’s not Rader, it’s someone who studied his kills,” Torres noted. “As you said, the part about sewing facial features was left out of the media. The copycat might not know about it.”

“The victims are also an issue. I can’t see Rader switching to prostitutes.”

“Maybe they were easier pickings,” Torres suggested. “He doesn’t know the area, so he grabs someone who won’t be as quickly missed.”

Luca nodded. Plausible. “Look, I want you to do something for me, Torres. The information I gave you about Liliana was confidential and off the record. You need to keep any mention of her out of the investigation.” Torres opened his mouth, looking like he wanted to object, but Luca cut him off. “You would paint a gigantic target on her back.”

“Don’t you think one is already there? The killing happened close to her.”

“Could be a fluke,” Luca argued, though he didn’t believe it. “If the media gets wind of the connection, the press would bombard her. There is no reason for her to be exposed.” He’d had cases tank because of media leaks.

Torres looked as if he wanted to argue. Luca knew he was asking a lot of the detective. He’d been one once, and if someone had done the same to him, he would’ve struggled with the decision. If a woman’s life were at stake, it would’ve made the choice easier. Luca voiced as much.

Torres sighed. “Fine. I’ll keep it to myself—” Luca started to thank him, but Torres held up a hand. “For now. If something changes or it becomes necessary that the link is exposed, I’ll have to speak up.”

“Fair enough. All I ask is for a heads-up before you do.” Then he’d squire Liliana away from Miami, even if he had to do it with her kicking and screaming the entire way.

Torres’s phone buzzed. He looked at the screen. “I need to take this.” He slid out of the booth and retreated outside.

Luca checked his messages. Since it was officially a case—whether or not Liliana cooperated—he needed to talk to his bosses about having one or two coworkers come down to assist. Liliana might not like it, but she would be protected at all times until Rader was caught.

Luca glanced up as Torres reentered the diner, and his gut clenched. He tossed down enough cash to cover the mostly uneaten meals plus a tip and met Torres by the door, knowing there had been another murder.

Torres held up a hand as they hurried to his sedan. Luca was beginning to hate the gesture. "I can't talk about it."

"Let me come with you." Torres opened his mouth, but Luca cut him off. "I was one of you, damn it. I've been to Rader's crime scenes before and might see something you don't. An extra set of eyes never hurts. I won't overstep my bounds or jeopardize the case."

Torres clenched his jaw as he started the cruiser and activated the alarm. "I don't have to remind you not to talk about anything you see."

Luca didn't even dignify that statement with a response.

#

Luca followed Torres into a house swarming with emergency personnel. A woman handed them disposable shoe covers and a pair of latex gloves. Torres signed them in, and then they entered the room.

Luca reverted to his police training and scanned the space with a detective's eye. The plethora of spiderwebs and dust-covered surfaces indicated the place was currently unoccupied, as did the stench of mold. Much of the furniture had been covered with canvas tarps.

Halogen lights illuminated the room where the victim had been found. Technicians were combing the space, looking for clues.

Torres addressed a woman examining the corpse, who was wearing gloves and a face shield. "Do you have a timeframe for the murder, Dr. Clyburn?"

"Rough estimate is between eight to thirty-six hours. Lividity is fixed, and the body is cold and stiff."

Meaning it was still in rigor. Luca knew several factors were used to determine the time of death: algor mortis, or the

temperature of death; rigor mortis, the stiffness of death; and liver mortis, or the color of death. A body's temperature would decrease by one point five degrees an hour until it attained the same conditions as the surrounding environment, but other factors could affect a reading.

"Do you know the time of death for the first victim?" Luca asked Torres.

"She'd been there only a few hours when she was found."

Luca studied the woman. She had the look of someone who'd lived a hard life. Like the other victim, track marks on her arms signaled prior drug use, and she was almost painfully thin, though not as much so as the previous woman. Her dark hair was stringy and looked brittle. The garish face paint didn't help.

Luca nudged Torres. "Was the makeup the same on the other victim?" He wasn't about to admit that he'd already seen the previous crime scene photos, thanks to Tyler. His relationship with Torres was tenuous at the moment. He didn't want to cut the string.

"Yeah." He scrolled to a picture on his phone and held it for Luca to see.

"Another deviation from before. Rader had applied it professionally. This looks almost clownish."

"Maybe that's how he sees these women," Torres suggested. "One officer recognized her from being arrested a couple of times, so she's another prostitute."

That bothered Luca. Why did Rader switch to using call girls? Before, he chose beautiful, successful women. Maybe he was unfamiliar with the area, and it was easier to pick someone off a street corner, as Torres had said.

Luca realized something. "There's no lily."

One of the technicians looked up from where he was snapping pictures. "Yes, there is. They were in her hand, but I removed them after documenting them and taking photos so Dr. Clyburn could work on the victim."

“They, as in more than one?”

“Yes. There were two red flowers.”

Two kills, two flowers. Most likely not random.

Luca carefully navigated the evidence markers to see around the bed. Sure enough, two lilies were on the ground, blood red in color.

Suddenly, it was crucial that he get to Liliana as soon as possible. He pulled Torres aside. “I need to get back to my rented condo. I know you can’t leave, so I’ll call a car service.”

“No need. I’ll have a uniform drive you back.”

Luca shook his hand. “Keep me posted on the investigation.”

“Will do.”



## Chapter Seven

Liliana regretted pushing Luca away. She'd done it before, and it had damn near killed her. She didn't want to be that weepy, scared girl he'd once known. Through hard work, determination, and sheer grit, she'd toughened her mind and body. All it had taken was one look at Luca, and she'd wanted to beg him to hold her. If she gave up control, she'd crumble into a million tiny pieces. She wasn't sure she'd be able to pick them up and put herself back together again.

How was it he was infinitely more handsome than she remembered? As she watched him walk out of her office, it felt as if her heart had ripped from her chest and gone with him. Then she recalled his smile when he'd checked his phone. Was it from a girlfriend? Wife? He wasn't wearing a ring, but some men didn't. He'd said he would be in town for a while. Was it because of that woman?

Liliana had been useless after that, so she headed home. Of course, it would've been at the same time Rex was leaving. He escorted her to her car and asked her to accompany him to dinner. He said Theo would be joining him, so it wasn't a date. She thought she'd persuaded him to quit asking, but apparently not. It was impossible even to consider going out with another man when Luca was all she could think about. She didn't feel bad about declining since Theo would be there.

Liliana pulled into the traffic flow and headed to her condo in Surfside, north of Miami Beach. She'd bought it when she moved to Florida, and the two-bed, two-bath unit was now worth considerably more. She'd purchased it because of the price, proximity to the beach, and the twenty-four-hour doorman. Security had been her priority back then.

The condo was located approximately twelve miles from the studio but took a good thirty minutes with the heavy congestion. She could do without the monthly homeowner's association fees that rose yearly, but she appreciated the amenities, including the indoor pool and weight room. She

didn't have an ocean view, but it was so close she could hear the waves with her windows open and be on the beach in minutes.

Liliana parked in her assigned space, and before she headed to the elevator that would convey her to the lobby, she scanned the area, looking for any threats. She'd done the same thing for so long that it was second nature. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, so she pushed the button and waited for the elevator, stepping inside when it arrived. As the doors opened, she fished her keys from her purse and waved at Warren. He'd only been on the job for a few weeks, and she was still getting used to him. Reginald had been the evening guard when she'd first moved to the building, and she'd loved him. He'd taken the job after retiring as a police officer, and she'd felt safe with him keeping watch. Warren's qualifications weren't nearly as impressive. He'd basically been the only one willing to do the job. A warm body, though some looks he'd given her had been downright chilling.

"I have something for you, Ms. Lima," Warren called out as she opened her mailbox and removed the letters stuffed inside. She closed her eyes, hoping it wasn't something personal. She wasn't entirely comfortable around him, especially with the way he leered at her. He'd always been civil, but he gave off a creepy vibe. Sometimes, she got the feeling he despised her, though she'd only ever been nice to him. She missed Reginald and his sweet smile. Biting back a sigh, she walked to his desk.

Warren held out a beautiful bouquet of flowers, and she inwardly cringed. "Warren ..."

His brows dipped at the warning in her voice, and he looked from the vase to her. "Oh God, no. They're not from me."

Did he have to sound so profoundly disgusted?

"They were delivered this afternoon, about the time I took over for Jorge."

Jorge worked the daytime shift, but she didn't know him well since she was usually gone. Liliana let out a sigh of relief.

It would've been so awkward around Warren if he'd bought them for her.

That thought was quickly replaced with the thrill of who had sent them. Was it Luca? It had to be.

Murmuring her thanks, she accepted the gift. It was heavier than it looked, and she cradled the vase against her body. Though not her favorite flower, the crimson lilies were beautiful. She'd have preferred gladiolus, but she wasn't one to complain. People usually assumed these were her favorite because of her name.

Carrying her bounty with her, she pushed the button for the elevator and stepped inside when it arrived. She was dying to read the card but waited until she was in her condo. Liliana arranged the vase on the island separating the kitchen from the living room, dropped her keys beside it, and removed her purse from her shoulder to place it on the quartz countertop.

She reached for the small white envelope with her name scrolled on the front. Her fingers shook as she withdrew the card. It simply read: *We meet again. Lilies for my Liliana.* No signature or clue about who had sent them.

They must be from Luca. No one ever sent her flowers, and a beautiful bouquet arrived on the same day she saw him for the first time in ten years. Plus, there was the, "*we meet again*" line. Couldn't be a coincidence.

Still, the sentiment bothered her. It didn't sound like something Luca would say. Liliana opened a cabinet to find a wine glass and then chose a bottle of pinot noir. It had been one hell of a day, from learning about a murder mirroring Erin's to seeing Luca for the first time in years, and now the flowers.

Voices outside her door made her check the peephole. The unit across from her was for sale. Bertie Wells, the woman who had owned it for over twenty-five years, had moved to an assisted living facility. Liliana was seriously considering purchasing it, but the oceanfront view made the asking price steep. On top of her loan for the studio renovations, she would be stretching it. Bertie had wanted her to have it and had even

told her she would take much less than the market value. Liliana had a meeting scheduled with her financial advisor to see if it was possible. She wanted Bertie to have a fair price since the money would be used for her long-term care.

Someone was definitely checking out the unit. The door closed before she got a good look, but the voice sounded male.

She returned to the kitchen and poured a glass of wine. The flavor exploded in her mouth and slid down her throat. It probably wasn't the wisest choice to be imbibing on an empty stomach, but she didn't care. She hadn't been able to eat after learning about the murder. Drinking, however, was a different story.

She took the glass to the bathroom and turned on the water in her tub. She enhanced her relaxation experience by using scented bath salts, lighting candles, and playing calming music on her phone.

Liliana wasn't sure how long she stayed in the water, letting the pulsing jets soothe her muscles. She finally forced herself out and dried off. After applying lotion to her body, she grabbed the pink floral-print sundress she preferred for lounging around her condo. Made with a mixture of polyester and elastane, it provided the right amount of stretch to be comfortable, and she didn't have to wear a bra.

Liliana rarely indulged in a second glass of wine, but after the stressful day, she poured another. A heavy knock rattled her door, and she jumped, sloshing red liquid over the side of the glass.

"Shoot." She grabbed a dishcloth and mopped the liquid from her arm. Who could it be this late? Warren hadn't called up to notify her of a visitor. Maybe it *was* Warren. That wasn't something she wanted to contemplate, especially since he made her so uncomfortable.

She placed the glass on the counter and walked to the door. Just as she stuck her eye to the peephole, another knock sounded, and she jumped a foot.

"Liliana?"

That voice froze her in place before she came to her senses, lunged for the lock, and whipped the door open. “Luca? What are you doing here?” She didn’t think she’d see him again, and the urge to throw herself in his arms was overwhelming.

The look on his face had her taking an involuntary step back. “What is it?”

“Liliana—”

“Tell me.”

He sighed. “There’s been another murder.”

The room spun, and if not for Luca’s quick reflexes, she would’ve ended up on the floor. He slid his arms around her and carried her to the sofa. She wanted to protest. She was a strong, independent woman. But, gosh darn it, she didn’t feel like one right now. She absorbed his strength. The steady beat of his heart beneath her ear was comforting.

When she felt composed, Liliana moved from his embrace before she did something stupid, like asking him to hold her for the rest of her life. She dropped into a chair adjacent to the couch.

“You’re sure it’s Rader?”

“No.”

Hope had her sitting upright.

“There are similarities,” he cautioned, “but there are differences too. We might be dealing with a copycat.”

“It’s too coincidental that they are happening where I live. It must be him.”

“We don’t know that for certain. Until the perp is caught, I’ll be sticking to you like glue.”

Liliana shook her head. “I don’t need protection, Luca. You probably don’t believe it, judging by how I reacted earlier, but I can take care of myself. I haven’t eaten much and was lightheaded, that’s all.”

“Liliana, I know you can. I don’t doubt that a bit. Hell, you own your own business.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s what I do. I also know you are intelligent. You realize that whoever is killing these women is ruthless and cunning. This isn’t about you not being able to protect yourself. It’s about keeping you alive.”

Liliana paled. She knew how cold-blooded Rader was since she’d made it her mission to learn everything she could about him after he had attacked Erin. Luca was right. It wasn’t about independence, but safety. Still, she wasn’t sure she could handle having him around without wanting to jump his bones constantly. “Fine. I’ll take your advice, but you don’t need to stay here. I have two associates who can watch out for me.”

The hurt on his face was like a knife in her heart. She hadn’t meant to offend him. She was trying to protect her sanity.

His expression hardened. “This isn’t up for discussion. My company will provide protection.”

“Your company? You said you weren’t a detective anymore. What do you do now?”

“I work for a private security firm. One of my coworkers will arrive tomorrow. He or she can be your bodyguard.” Luca stood and headed for the door. “Lock this when I leave.”

“Luca, wait.”

He stopped but didn’t turn around. He’d done nothing wrong, and she’d treated him poorly. In fact, he’d flown here for her, though she didn’t know from where except that it wasn’t Minnesota. He deserved the truth. “Please, come sit down.”

He paused for so long, she wasn’t sure he would honor her request. She let out a breath when he spun around and returned to the sofa.

“I’ve reacted badly to seeing you again and want to apologize.”

He gave a brusque nod. “Apology accepted.”

She noticed with a hint of amusement that he didn’t dispute her unpleasant behavior.

“The weeks after Erin’s murder almost destroyed me ... well,” she waved a hand, “you know that.” He nodded sympathetically. “I worked extremely hard to crawl out of that hole. There were times that I wasn’t sure I could do it, but I did. I strengthened my body and my mind. I learned how to defend myself. It was a long, tough road, but I persevered. Contrary to how I reacted earlier, I’m not that scared young woman you used to know.”

“I realize that, Liliana.”

“No, I don’t think you do, Luca.” She took a deep breath. “You see, when I saw you this afternoon and again tonight, all I wanted to do was walk into your arms and beg you to take care of me.”

She could tell by the stunned expression that she’d shocked him. Well, get in line. She’d surprised herself. Damn wine, loosening her lips. She hadn’t meant to reveal so much. Too late now.

“I would’ve done it,” he rumbled huskily.

“I know. And I would’ve become lost in the process. That’s also why I had to leave Minnesota all those years ago. It would’ve been so easy to continue to lean on you, have you watch out for me, and take care of everything. I would have ended up hating the woman I was becoming. I needed to find myself and couldn’t do that with you.”

Luca slowly shook his head. “I never would have held you back, Liliana.”

“I know you wouldn’t have, Luca. It wasn’t about you. You did nothing wrong and were exactly what I needed at the time.”

Luca sat back against the cushions. She’d obviously thrown him for a loop. Herself too. Once she’d opened her mouth, she’d been hit with verbal diarrhea, and words tumbled

out unabated. She'd admitted practically everything except her undying love for him.

Liliana stood to find her wine glass. She needed the fortification. Luca also got to his feet, and she froze, staring into those light brown eyes that had haunted her dreams for years. He gave her plenty of time to move, but she was rooted to the spot. His large hands cupped her cheeks, and his head descended. She could tell him no, and he would stop. She was sure of it. Instead, her heart pounded, and anticipation surged through her veins. Did he taste the same as he had back then?

Luca's lips touched hers, and she whimpered at the contact. It was everything she thought it would be and so much more. A decade ago, it had been evident that he knew how to kiss, and he'd only grown more proficient in the successive years. His mouth devoured hers, and she was swept along for the ride. He moaned, or she did. She couldn't tell as she slid her hands around his neck and ran her fingers through his thick hair.

It suddenly occurred to her she wasn't wearing a bra as she pressed her chest to his. The feeling was exquisite, even with the barrier of clothes between them. She could only imagine how it would feel skin on skin.

She was a heartbeat away from pulling him onto the sofa and begging him to make love to her when he broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers.

"I've wanted to do that again for ten years."

Liliana closed her eyes. Oh God, she'd wanted the same thing.

Her lids flew open, and she stumbled when Luca was suddenly gone. What the heck happened?

"Where did you get those?"

She turned to see him pointing to the vase of beautiful, fragrant flowers. "Aren't they from you?"

"No. I would've sent gladiolus."



Liliana's heart skipped a beat. He remembered her favorite flower, after she'd mentioned it once years ago. She couldn't bask in her feelings because he was taking a picture of the arrangement and reading the card she'd left on the counter beside the vase. Then he tapped buttons on his phone.

"Yes, can you tell me who bought a bouquet of red lilies to be delivered to Liliana Lima today?" His brows furrowed as he listened to whatever the person was saying. "Can you at least tell me if the order was paid with a credit card? Okay. Thank you."

"Who sent them?"

"They wouldn't give out the information, but she did say it was paid with cash, so there's no paper trail."

She couldn't resist teasing him. "Maybe it was from one of my boyfriends."

His gaze narrowed. "Do you have boyfriends, Liliana?" He practically growled the question.

She rolled her eyes. "Do you think I would've kissed you if I did?"

"I kissed you."

Yes, he did. And she wanted him to do it again and again. "I wouldn't have let you."

All along, she thought Luca had sent them. "Maybe it was Rex?"

Silence. She looked up at Luca to see that his eyes were mere slits. "Who. Is. Rex?"

"Rex Raines. You know, 'When you're ready to move but don't know what to do, give Rex a call, and he'll handle it for you.'"

Luca just stared, and it dawned on her that he'd probably never seen the ads airing on late-night cable stations in Miami. "Real estate agent. His office is next to the studio. My landlord."

"Why would Rex send you lilies?"

She lifted her hands. “I don’t know that he did, but he’s asked me out several times.” Liliana could practically hear Luca’s teeth grind together. “What’s with the overreaction? They are just flowers.” His expression gave nothing away, but judging by how he’d responded upon seeing them, something was up. Realization dawned, and horror gripped her. “Oh my God, it has something to do with the murders, doesn’t it?” Luca’s non-response was her answer, but that wasn’t good enough. “Tell me, Luca.”

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Flowers like these were found at both crime scenes.”

They were lilies, and her name was Liliana.

Ted Rader was back.

#

“Liliana, breathe.”

She blinked her eyes open to see Luca hovering over her. She felt the soft cushions of the couch beneath her. “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

She hated being the wimpy coward Luca knew her as before. Liliana bolted upright, causing Luca to jump back so they didn’t smack heads.

“Stay there and rest,” Luca instructed.

She ignored him and stood, disregarding the wobble in her legs too. “I’m fine. How are we going to find Rader to stop him?”

Luca crossed his arms. “*We* aren’t doing anything but staying safe. The authorities will take care of Rader.”

She shook her head slowly. “You don’t believe that, do you? They couldn’t stop him before.”

#

Liliana’s words stung because Luca had been part of the group that should’ve put Rader behind bars. They couldn’t even find him after he’d fled Liliana’s home all those years

ago. What should've been an easy capture of a critically injured man had turned up with zilch.

What had Rader been doing over the last decade? Had he still been killing? Torres was probably on it already, but Luca would ask Tyler to search for similar cases around the country. Luca had never been able to find any but if someone could, it would be Tyler. Maybe Rader hadn't stayed in one place long enough for detectives to notice a pattern.

Luca had misled Liliana earlier when he'd said they wouldn't do anything to find Rader. He and his coworkers would turn over every rock and follow every lead to find the murderer and put him behind bars for good. Though he had faith that Torres and his department, probably the FBI too, would find him, Luca's coworkers were the best of the best. He'd put his money on them every single time.

Luca studied Liliana. She was still pale, and worry lines etched the smooth skin of her forehead. She'd almost given him a heart attack when she'd fainted earlier. He'd lunged forward and caught her before she'd hit the floor.

His gaze drifted over her plump lips, ones he'd been dying to taste again for ten years. Kissing her was nothing like he'd remembered. It was a thousand times better. Mind-blowing. Addicting. He wanted to do it again, so much so it was a physical ache.

Maybe he should feel guilty about kissing her, but he didn't. Not even a little bit. And as much as he wanted to again, he wouldn't. Otherwise, he'd be taking advantage of an emotionally wounded woman. She was tougher now. That much was obvious. But after what she had endured with her roommate, knowing the perp was back and killing again would rattle even the most seasoned warrior.

Now all he had to do was convince her to let him protect her. Oh, he would, one way or another. But it would be much easier with her cooperation.

She surprised him by asking, "How is this going to work?"

He let out a relieved sigh. Her capitulation eased his worries. “I’ll move in here and stay on the sofa. One or two of my coworkers will arrive tomorrow to assist.”

“You’ll drive with me to work and pick me up?”

“Yes, but I will also go in with you until Rader is caught.”

“No one knows about my past. I’d rather they didn’t find out about my connection to The Mortician. I’ll tell them we knew each other years ago and have connected again.”

“It’s better to stick close to the truth,” he agreed. “You can say that I’ll only be in town for a few weeks, so we are spending as much time together as possible.”

A thought struck, and he wondered if Audria Giroux was available. She was a recent hire, having assisted with a case involving Melanie Delgado and Owen Durant. Audria was former FBI and had been working as a personal trainer before being hired at COBRA Securities, so she could teach classes if necessary. Having her expertise on the case would be beneficial. He fired off a text requesting her.

Liliana glanced at her watch. “It’s getting late, and I need to go in early tomorrow. Where is your luggage?”

“Across the hall.”

“You’re buying Bertie Wells’s condo?”

“Renting,” he corrected. “My coworkers can stay there. Be right back.”

Luca crossed to the other suite and packed his belongings. It didn’t take long since he hadn’t unpacked. He’d left the bag containing supplies and the vest he’d picked up for Liliana in the SUV, so after he dropped off his things in her apartment, he headed down to get it.

Luca entered the lobby and found Warren watching a pornographic movie. Figured. Luca’s steps were quiet, so he was only a foot away from the desk before Warren noticed.

“How’s it going, Warren?”

“Ah!” Warren fumbled for the remote to turn the movie off. “Why were you sneaking up on me?”

“Wasn’t.” Luca shrugged. “You must’ve been distracted.”

“I’m keeping guard,” Warren insisted. “Make noise next time, so I know you’re there.”

Warren really was a rookie. Bad guys rarely announced themselves.

“Besides, aren’t you supposed to be in jail? That cop came for you.”

Luca smirked. “He’s a colleague.”

Warren gaped at him, but Luca didn’t elaborate. He took the stairs to the parking garage and grabbed the box. He’d still need additional equipment, so whoever came to assist would bring it.

On cue, his cell beeped. He glanced at the screen to see that Audria Giroux and Christian Zamora would make the trip. Good. He needed all the help he could get.

Warren was on the phone when he returned to the lobby, so he nodded at the man, who guiltily ducked his head, and took the elevator to Liliana’s condo.

She held the door for him and then locked it.

“I have an extra bedroom. I use it as an office, but there’s a daybed. You could sleep there instead of on the couch.”

“I’d rather stay out here as a first line of defense. There’s a television, so I’ll be fine.”

Liliana walked to a closet and produced a pillow and blanket. “The bathroom is over there.” She pointed to a door. “If you need anything, let me know. Goodnight, Luca.”

“Goodnight, Liliana.”

#

It took all the effort Liliana could muster to walk away from Luca and close herself into her bedroom. It was a bad, bad idea, but she wanted him to join her. Hold her. Kiss her

again. She couldn't even blame the wine. It was her heart doing the wishing.

The feelings she'd had for him before came rushing back like raging water breaching a compromised dam. She didn't know this Luca that time and experience had forged, but at his core, he hadn't changed. He was still fiercely protective, extremely competent, and insanely handsome. It was astonishing how safe she felt with him. She would be able to sleep knowing he was near. Then again, maybe not, since she wanted him desperately.

Liliana brushed her teeth and changed into the tank top and boy shorts she favored to sleep in. The speaker beside her bed was set to her nighttime playlist, and she activated it before crawling into bed. The melatonin from the grape skin used to make wine worked its magic, and she was out like a light.

"I told you I'd come back for you."

Liliana's eyes flew open, and her muscles tensed. "Rader. What are you doing here?"

"Did you think you could hide from me by moving all the way to the edge of the country? Silly girl. You belong to me, Liliana. Always have, always will."

She shook her head. "No, I don't. I'm with Luca now."

"You mean the cop who shot me?"

"Yes."

"You're not with him anymore. I took care of him."

Fear rushed through her. "What do you mean? What did you do to him?"

"The same thing I did to sweet Erin and those other women. The same thing I'm going to do to you, my precious."

"No, I don't believe you."

"Come here. I'll show you."

Rader grabbed her, and she couldn't remember any of her training. Her muscles refused to work. He dragged her to a

door, as he had ten years ago, his brutal grip bruising her arms. He whipped it open, and she saw Luca lying on the floor, covered in blood. His eyes were closed.

*“Liliana.”*

Liliana gasped awake, expecting to see Ted Rader’s evil face. Instead, it was Luca’s beautiful one. He was alive and sitting beside her on the bed, his hands grasping her arms. He’d turned on a light, and the glow filled the dark nooks and crannies in the room.

“Are you okay? You were having a nightmare.”

“Rader,” she croaked, trying to control her ragged breathing. “He came back for me, and he-he killed you.”

“He’s not going to get to you, sweetheart. That I promise you.”

Liliana threw herself at Luca. His powerful arms around her helped erase the vile images from the dream. The fear dissipated, replaced by a sense of calm. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and she reveled in the feel of the steely muscles along his chest. Had he been that buff years ago?

Luca pulled back to study her face. “Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He eased away, but she clung to him. “Stay, please. I’m afraid to go to sleep now.”

Luca brushed a lock of hair from her face. “Okay. Let me grab my phone.”

She almost whimpered when he released her to stand. She hadn’t seen him for ten years and now didn’t want to be away from him for a single minute. What was wrong with her?

Still unsettled by the nightmare, she checked the drawer in her nightstand to be sure the gun Luca had purchased for her was still there. It was. She practiced at a range once a month and kept it maintained. She wasn’t sure she’d be able to use it on an actual human instead of a paper target, but she appreciated the feeling of security it provided.

Luca was always taking care of her. He'd come running after her call and rented the condo across the hall to watch out for her. Even after she'd treated him poorly, he hadn't left. He was and always had been her hero.

Her heart galloped when he returned, this time wearing a T-shirt and shorts. He placed his phone and weapon on the other bedside table and climbed beneath the sheets. Liliana closed the gap, pressing her body to his. She looked into his eyes and could barely breathe. She pressed her lips to his, needing the contact.

Luca slid a hand into her hair and kissed her. The first time had been mind-boggling, the second staggering. This one blew those out of the water. It was exquisite perfection.

Luca broke the kiss and rubbed a thumb down her cheek. "Go to sleep, Liliana."

"Luca ..." She didn't want him to stop.

"You need the rest. Close your eyes. I'll hold you."

Despite wanting him more than her next breath, she did something she hadn't done in a decade. She fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.



## Chapter Eight

Torture. Lying in bed, holding Liliana all night, had been unmitigated hell in the sweetest, most amazing way. Luca obviously didn't get enough sleep because he wasn't making any sense. Her exotic, feminine scent enveloped him, her silky hair tickled his cheek, and her soft yet strong body fit perfectly against him.

As much as he'd wanted to make love to her, and by the signals she was throwing out, she wouldn't have said no, she had been severely rattled after the nightmare. There was no way he'd take advantage of her in a weakened state. When they made love for the first time, it would not be because something had spooked her. It would be because she needed him as much as he did her.

Once she'd fallen asleep, he'd worked on compiling a list of equipment he'd need Christian and Audria to bring. The security in her apartment was average. The guard in the lobby was a plus, but Luca didn't have faith that Warren could stop a fly, much less a determined intruder, despite his claims that he was prepared. Luca had yet to meet the daytime guard, who he'd discovered was Jorge Martinez, a former Marine. If the US military had trained him, he would have mad skills.

Luca planned on installing a security system with sensors on the egress points. There were three, with the front entry and two separate sets of sliding glass doors leading to a balcony. Liliana's condo had no windows, so that was a plus.

He finally nodded off around two, so he wasn't thrilled when the alarm buzzed four hours later. Liliana woke up and looked surprised to see him. "Morning."

"I thought it was a dream."

"Nope."

"Thank you, Luca. I slept better than I have in years—maybe ever."

He was tempted to suggest they stay in bed and get to know each other carnally, but his coworkers were arriving today, and they had a killer to catch.

Luca retreated to the guest bathroom to shower and dress for the day. He hadn't had a chance to broach the subject of a Kevlar vest, so when Liliana came out of her bedroom, he held one up. "I need you to wear this whenever we leave the building."

"Is that a bulletproof vest?"

"It is."

"Why? Rader hasn't shot any of his victims."

"I'm not taking any chances."

She reached for it. "Okay. I'll have to take it off at work. I don't want anyone to know what's happening."

After a breakfast of oatmeal with fresh blueberries and whole wheat toast, Luca drove to the studio. A few cars were already in the lot when he parked in Liliana's assigned space.

"Looks like the real estate office is open early."

Liliana glanced out the windshield. "Yeah, someone is usually there when I arrive. I'm not sure Rex ever sleeps."

Rex again. Luca was going to have to check the guy out. It wasn't because he'd tried to date Liliana. Luca was simply being thorough.

Oh hell, he was lying to himself. It was totally because the guy was apparently into her.

Luca followed Liliana inside, his eyes scanning for any threats. He noted security cameras monitoring the parking lot. Good. She used a key to unlock the door and then started to punch a code into a panel on the wall. He looked at the name of the system. Decent, but not the best.

She stopped. "Oh, someone's already here."

Luca's instincts were instantly on alert. "Is that unusual?"

"No, not at all."

“Do you have cameras inside?”

“You mean for security?”

“Yes.”

“No. I have the alarm, and there are cameras outside.”

“How many people have the code?”

Liliana winced. “Several. Many of the employees.”

Luca glanced around the interior of the fitness center. He hadn't been able to appreciate it yesterday since he'd been so intent on talking to Liliana. The first thing he saw was a reception desk. Signs directed patrons to locker rooms on either side of the building. Behind the desk was an open area with a refreshment bar, several places to sit, a bubbling fountain, and green plants and trees everywhere. Doors with numbers lined two walls, and a hallway led somewhere. Two offices with glass fronts were on the left. He knew from his earlier visit that the larger one was Liliana's.

The door opened behind them, and he spun around with his hand on his gun.

“Relax. It's Shonda Johns, my assistant.”

Shonda pushed a hank of curly brown hair from her forehead and lugged a bag inside the door. “Oh, hey, Lili ...” Her voice trailed off when she spotted Luca. “Are you here for a membership? We aren't open yet.”

“Shonda, this is a good friend of mine, Luca Russo.”

Luca grabbed Liliana's hand and held tight. He didn't have to look at her to know a pretty blush stained her cheeks.

“He's going to be hanging around here for a few days.”

Shonda glanced from Liliana to Luca to their joined hands. A knowing smile crossed her lips, and she stuck out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Luca.”

Luca shook her hand. “You too.”

“So, a good friend, huh? When did you two meet?”

She directed the question to Luca, so he answered. “Ten years ago, in Minnesota.”

“Hum. A decade passes, and you suddenly show up?”

“Shonda!”

“What? You’re my bestie. Don’t I get to ask questions? Especially about a man ... oh, wait. Is this ...”

*Is this what?* Luca wanted to ask. Shonda just stopped and eyed Liliana. *Talk, darn it.* Had Liliana been chatting with her about him? She’d said no one knew about her past, so he assumed that meant they didn’t know about him. Could he have been wrong?

#

Liliana hoped the floor would open wide and swallow her up. Shonda was about to tattle on her and reveal to Luca that she’d spilled her guts to her friend about him. In her defense, it was one night after a couple of glasses of wine. Liliana hadn’t divulged the details of their relationship, meaning she hadn’t mentioned Ted Rader and the murders, but she had confessed her love for the handsome cop.

Shonda read the desperation on Liliana’s face because she recovered nicely. “Is this the day you teach class?” Shonda knew it was yesterday. She’d taught too. “I can cover for you if needed.”

Liliana let out a sigh of relief. “It was last night, but thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll be in my office if you need me.” The look she gave Liliana said she had better need her soon.

Kasey Teagan came from the women’s locker room and waved. “Hey, Liliana, there’s a package for you.” She moved behind the reception desk and handed the envelope to Liliana.

“Thanks, Kasey. Who left it?”

Kasey shrugged. “I don’t know. Jody didn’t leave a note.”

“Was it there when you arrived this morning?” Luca asked.

“Sorry, Kasey, this is an old friend, Luca Russo. Luca, this is my daytime office manager, Kasey Teagan.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kasey said. “To answer your question, I’m not positive. I wasn’t paying much attention. I was running late and needed to get the room ready for the early class.”

“Were you the first one here?”

“I was,” Kasey confirmed.

Liliana thanked her, and Luca followed her to her office. She looked at her space through his eyes. It was apparent she loved plants, as they took up much of the room. There were boxes with the newest T-shirts she hadn’t looked at yet and other merchandise stacked to one side.

Liliana placed her purse inside a credenza and removed the bulletproof vest and jacket she’d worn to cover it before opening the package. “What the heck?”

Luca grabbed her arm before she could pick up the jewelry that had dropped on the desk. “Do you know who it’s from?”

She shook her head and turned the envelope over. “There’s no return address.”

Luca removed a glove from a pocket in his tactical pants and lifted the necklace. “It’s the letter ‘L’.”

“It’s old,” she noted. “Look at the tarnish.”

Why would someone send her old jewelry?

#

A feeling of dread spread over Luca as he picked up one hoop earring and studied it.

Liliana leaned closer. “It’s cheaply made. Definitely not genuine gold. Why is there only one, and who would send me these?”

“We need to have them analyzed.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t know who left it for you.”

“I’ll call Jody, my evening office manager, and see if she knows who dropped it off.”

While Liliana made the call, Luca studied the necklace again. She was correct that the silver had tarnished. And the oversized hoop earring had been bent. It was most likely made of brass or aluminum with a gold coating. Who would send old jewelry as a gift? Luca didn’t like what he was thinking. If he were right, it meant the killer had access to Liliana.

He snapped several pictures and scooped them back inside the envelope since he didn’t have an evidence baggie with him.

Liliana ended the call and looked at him. “Jody apologized and said the package might’ve been there a few days. She said she found it beneath some files she needed to put away but hadn’t gotten around to it.”

“So, we don’t have a timeframe for how long it’s been there.” Luca sighed. “It could’ve been anyone who’s been inside for the last week.”

“That’s a pretty big suspect pool,” Liliana muttered.

It was. While she discussed an issue with Shonda, who’d knocked on the door and stuck her head inside the office, Luca called Tyler Redmond. The guy could find a needle in a haystack.

“Luca, what’s up, bro?”

“Can you look through the original Ted Rader victim files and see if anything was reported missing from the crime scenes? Specifically jewelry. Focus on women whose first or last name starts with an ‘L.’”

“On it. I’ll hit you up if I find anything.”

“Thanks.”

With suspicious brown eyes narrowed at him, Shonda left.

“I don’t think she likes me,” Luca mused.

“She’s just overprotective,” Lilitana murmured. “She will, however, grill me at her earliest convenience.”

Luca’s cell buzzed. He glanced at the screen in surprise and then answered, “That was quick.”

“I got a hit on Rader’s first victim, Linda Miller,” Tyler said. “She was a third-grade teacher, and her class had pitched in their money to buy her a necklace. She wore it all the time, but it wasn’t found at the scene.”

“Do you have a picture?”

“Sending it through now.”

Luca checked the screen, and his blood turned to ice.

“Do you need me to keep looking?”

“Uh, no. That’s it for now. Thanks, Tyler.”

“Luca, what is it? You’re pale as a ghost.”

Luca looked at Lilitana, wanting to protect her from all the evils in the world, especially Ted Rader. Yes, she was stronger now than when she was twenty, but this would be devastating. He didn’t want her to panic and feared that would happen when he disclosed the news.

While he was debating how much to reveal, she crossed her arms. “Tell me now.”

“I had a colleague search for missing items from Rader’s original victims, focusing on ones whose first or last name began with an ‘L.’”

Her arms dropped to her sides, and her eyes widened. “You think Rader sent this,” she gestured to the envelope, “to me?”

“His first known victim was a teacher named Linda. She always wore a necklace that her students purchased for her. It wasn’t found at the crime scene.”

He held up his phone so she could see the picture. “Yep, same necklace.” Lilitana dropped to her chair. “It really is Rader.”

As much as he wanted to shield her from the truth, that would do more harm than good. She needed to stay vigilant until Rader was caught. And he would be.

“It looks like it.”

#

The Mortician would have loved to have seen Liliana’s face when she’d received his gifts. Had she appreciated them, or had they sparked terror in her? He bet it was the latter. His body twitched with excitement at the thought.

Was she scared? On edge? Did she know he was just getting started?



## Chapter Nine

As fiercely independent as Liliana had become over the years, she was supremely relieved her actions hadn't caused Luca to flee and not return. She wasn't sure she could handle this by herself. Ted Rader was her Achilles heel, the one person sure to make her question her abilities and cause her convictions to waver. He was evil incarnate, and she'd promoted him to devil status long ago. He had the power to upend her carefully controlled life.

Luca was so calm and competent. He moved with an air of confidence that she'd found sexy a decade ago. He'd been young and cocky back then, but now he was steady and sure. If he said he'd protect her, she believed him. It was time to let go of her rigid control and hand part of it to him.

Her phone chimed with a text. She picked it up and read the screen. Shonda was dying to know why Luca had suddenly shown up after all these years. She wanted ... no, demanded, all the details on the "super-hot sex machine," as she'd called him. Liliana smiled at the description, but it was tinged with sadness. She'd kept the events of her dark past from everyone she'd met since her move south, including Shonda, who'd been her best friend from her first week in Miami. They'd shared almost everything, including Liliana's fascination with Luca Russo. She didn't blame Shonda for being persistent.

Shonda was the sister she'd always wanted. It didn't matter that they were different races. They were two peas from the same pod. Shonda was the person she trusted most in life. So, how would she explain why she hadn't shared her history? Shonda would no doubt be upset, and the last thing Liliana wanted to do was hurt her.

Spilling her guts to Shonda would have to wait. Right now, Liliana needed to process the fact that Ted Rader was alive and intended to keep his promise to return for her.

Before she could delve too deeply into her feelings, the work of running her studio engulfed her.

After a couple of hours, it was obvious her mind was elsewhere. Whenever she felt stressed, she worked out. She also kept up with her martial arts training to hone her skills. “I usually take one exercise class daily,” she told Luca. “Are you going to sit here and wait for me?”

“I’ll take it too if there’s room. I brought clothes with me.”

“There is. Today is rebounding.”

He looked excited. “You play basketball?”

She smiled. “No, it’s a HIIT workout on a mini trampoline.”

“Oh, well, it sounds fun.”

“You won’t be saying that when it’s over,” she warned. “It’s a killer session.”

When Liliana had designed the studio, she’d added a private bathroom to her office complete with a shower, washer, and dryer, so she didn’t have to use the locker room. She retreated inside to change into a tank top and spandex shorts. After she slid on her shoes, she stepped outside so Luca could change.

While she waited for him, she grabbed two bottles of water from the mini fridge and checked her email. When Luca walked out, Liliana stopped breathing. My gosh, he was incredible. The muscle definition in his arms made her drool. It was evident he kept in top shape.

When her eyes traveled to his, she found him watching her intently. There was heat in his gaze. Liliana’s entire body tingled. He’d held her last night. She wanted to be in his arms again.

The alarm she’d set on her watch beeped, letting her know it was time for the class. It also shook her out of her Luca-induced stupor. “Ready?”

“Yep.”

Liliana led the way to the room where Paige Sargent was setting up. She introduced the instructor to Luca.

Paige smiled seductively at him as she shook his hand. “Have you done rebounding before?”

“Only on a basketball court with four teammates around me.”

Paige tossed back her head and laughed as if Luca had said the funniest thing she’d ever heard. Then she grabbed his biceps. “Well, it’s obvious you are in shape.”

Irritation bubbled inside Liliana. “Need help pulling out the equipment?”

Paige jumped back. Apparently, Liliana’s tone had been a tad harsh. “Oh, sure.”

They set the room up as it started to fill. Luca had chosen a trampoline in the back row, so Liliana snagged the one beside him. Almost every spot out of twenty was taken when Paige punched a button to send music blasting through the speakers and started the session with a light warmup.

Once everyone’s muscles were loose, Paige began the high-intensity portion, kicking heart rates up for a minute before bringing them back down, only to start over again. They cycled between tuck jumps, running man plyos, jumping jacks, and abdominal twists. It was a thorough session, and Liliana was wiped when they reached the cooldown portion. She glanced at Luca to find him looking as if he could go another round. He’d never done the workout before, but he’d easily kept up with Paige. He wasn’t even breathing heavily. How was that possible?

Paige came hurrying back and stopped in front of Luca. “Wow. For a novice, you were with me the entire time.”

“It was a challenging workout, for sure. I enjoyed it.”

Before Paige could continue flirting with Liliana’s man ... er, Luca, she said, “Thanks for a great class.” She grabbed Luca’s arm and led him from the room.

“I’m thinking of adding that to my repertoire,” Luca mused.

Well, he should. He was good at it. Liliana had a feeling there wasn't much he didn't excel at in any way, shape, or form.

“Liliana.”

She turned to see Rex jogging her way and stifled a groan. His associate, Theo, was with him. Rex wore a sweat-stained T-shirt and shorts. She thought she'd seen them coming from Room Three, which would've been spinning. Theo looked ready to collapse. Wet hair was plastered to his head, and he gulped greedily from a bottle of water.

“Hey Rex, Theo.”

“I'm enjoying your newest hire, Denny Habba,” Rex informed her. “He knows his stuff, and he's relentless.”

“He is,” Theo agreed. “If he said ‘push harder’ one more time, I would've been tempted to chuck my water bottle at him. I thought I'd pass out a time or two.”

Liliana smiled. She'd had the same reaction to Denny. He was a beast.

Rex's gaze strayed to Luca. Liliana grabbed his arm and introduced him to the two real estate professionals.

“How long are you in town?” Rex's tone was suspicious.

Luca tossed an arm over her shoulders, tugging her close. His body heat warmed her. “Undetermined. Liliana and I are reconnecting.”

Rex turned to Liliana. “What does that mean?”

Rex was such a nice guy, and she felt horrible deceiving him, but she supplied, “We've known each other for years. We've recently reconnected.”

Rex glanced between the two. “I see. Well, nice to meet you, Luca. If you're looking for somewhere to live, give me a call. I can show you the best places in town.”

Liliana smiled. Always the salesman.

“Will do.”

Rex and Theo left, and they continued to her office. Liliana took a quick shower to rinse off the sweat and then let Luca do the same. She tried hard to keep her mind off him naked a few feet away.

A knock sounded on her door.

“Come in.”

Kasey stuck her head inside. “Liliana, two people are here asking for you, saying you’re expecting them.” Kasey raised her brows twice, letting Liliana know she liked what she saw. It had to be Luca’s coworkers. Liliana would explain their appearance by saying they were married friends of Luca’s and were looking to open their own studio. She would tell everyone they would be around for a few days while she assisted them in drafting a business plan. It would explain why they were in her office so much without raising questions. She didn’t want anyone to know about The Mortician. “Send them back. Thanks, Kasey.”

Kasey opened the door wide, and a woman entered, followed by a tall man. The beautiful woman had long black hair fastened into a high ponytail and light blue eyes. Goodness, the man was gorgeous, with sandy blond hair and the prettiest aquamarine eyes she’d ever seen. Not quite blue, not exactly green. Whereas he was quick to flash a grin, showcasing straight, white teeth, the woman was all business.

Luca came out of the bathroom and broke into a smile as he strode forward to greet the newcomers. “Hey, glad you two are here. Liliana, these are my coworkers, Christian Zamora and Audria Giroux. Audria is a former federal agent, and Christian was a marine and DEA agent.”

Liliana shook their hands. “Nice to meet you.” Her cell phone buzzed. “Excuse me. I need to take this.”

#

While Liliana conducted her business, Luca met with his coworkers. “Thanks for coming. I think we’ve pretty much connected Ted Rader to the crimes.”

“Fill us in on what you know,” Christian instructed.

Luca told them about the similar, yet different crime scenes.

“That’s strange,” Audria said. “Usually, killers stick to their routine. I wonder why he deviated?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out. He was shot twice, with one bullet to the head. I’m not sure if it was a graze or if it penetrated, but blood sprayed from the wound.”

“A head injury could’ve caused the change in his MO,” Christian speculated. “Maybe you hit a part of his brain responsible for impulse control or decision-making.”

“Maybe.” That would explain the differences, but Luca wasn’t sure. Something felt off. He told them about the package left for Liliana and how the necklace almost certainly belonged to Rader’s first victim. “I need to get the jewelry to Detective Diego Torres of the Miami Beach Police Department, along with the card from the flowers that were delivered to her yesterday. Audria, do you mind running them over? I’ll call him and let him know you’re on the way.” He hadn’t wanted to do it earlier and leave Liliana alone.

“No problem.”

Luca handed her the evidence. “We’ll wait to go over security issues until you return.”

While Audria ran the errand, Christian and Luca researched Rex Raines and Warren Hopkins, the security guard from Liliana’s building. Luca gave Christian the task of looking into Raines’s background since he didn’t think he’d be impartial. When Liliana had introduced him to the real estate agent earlier, Luca realized he was the man who had escorted her to her SUV last night.

Luca found the number of the security company that employed Warren and asked for his supervisor. He was transferred to a woman named Murial Barber, who informed him that Warren had been an exemplary employee so far in his short tenure. He arrived on time, never missed a day, and no complaints had been filed against him. She had been reluctant

to share Warren's previous history, so he did some digging on his own.

Warren was twenty-three years old. He'd attended a community college and graduated with a degree in criminal justice. His grades had been average. He'd obtained a Class D Florida security guard license and had completed forty hours of professional training by a certified facility. He also held a Statewide Firearms Permit.

Warren had one brush with the law when he was seventeen. He'd been ticketed for drag racing. No other marks in his file. He'd run track in high school, but it was his only extracurricular activity, and his grades were average there too. No red flags that stood out.

"What do you have on Raines?" Luca asked Christian.

"Seems to be a model citizen. Graduated in the top ten percent of his business school. Became a real estate agent at twenty-three. Employed by a mega realty firm in Boston for several years before moving to south Florida and working for a smaller boutique company. After a couple of years, he opened his shop. He's been extremely successful and owns a waterfront condo outright, as well as his Alfa Romeo. Diverse portfolio. Possesses over a dozen rental properties. Impressive bank account. Well-liked by the community. Single. Never married. No kids. No brushes with the law. Donates time and money to charity."

"Hum." On paper, he seemed like a catch. Why hadn't Liliana wanted to go out with him? Just because he seemed normal didn't mean he wasn't a psychotic killer. Sometimes they hid in plain sight.

## Chapter Ten

Audria Giroux relied on the SUV's GPS to guide her to the police station. This was her first official job as a COBRA Securities agent, and excitement surged through her veins. Luca had requested her, and that made her feel special. An adrenalin junkie, she'd missed the rush since she'd stepped away from the Bureau a few months ago. At the time, she didn't think she'd ever return to law enforcement. Her new position allowed her to be a part of the action without the rules and restrictions of the FBI. It was perfect for her.

Audria had spent time with several psychiatrists after her last assignment with the Bureau, where she'd been forced to kill a grieving mother. Logically, she knew she hadn't been left with a choice. The woman had murdered five people in her rage and injured three. The body count would've climbed if Audria hadn't stopped her. Still, it had been difficult to overcome, as had the deaths of the woman's two young children at the hands of their father.

The automated voice instructed her to turn at the stoplight. Several police cars were parked along the curb as she pulled into the public parking garage adjacent to the facility.

Audria grabbed the envelope before stepping outside into the heat. She'd worn a short-sleeved polo shirt with her vest underneath, as well as a pair of tactical pants. When she'd worked for the FBI, she wore pantsuits and shoes with heels, which she'd hated. The boots were much more comfortable.

Audria entered the vestibule and gave her name to the man in a blue uniform sitting at the window. He buzzed her through a glass door and then took her to Detective Torres's office. He knocked on the closed door and stuck his head inside when a voice called out.

"Ms. Giroux is here."

"Send her in."



Audria thanked him as she entered the office. She smiled at the man behind the metal desk and started to extend her hand when her gaze moved to another man sitting in one of the two visitor's chairs. Her steps faltered, and she ground to a halt.

“Audria.”

She cleared her throat. “SSA Reneau.”

Supervisory Special Agent Reese Reneau's eyes narrowed at the formal greeting.

“You two know each other?”

She turned to the man who must be Detective Diego Torres. With dark hair and eyes and tanned skin, his Cuban heritage was evident. He was handsome, but standing next to Reese Reneau, he wouldn't garner another look ... at least from Audria. Reese also had black hair, but his eyes were crystal blue. Some would call them frosty. She didn't. But then, she'd had a crush on her former boss for years.

“Detective Torres?”

“Yes.”

She shook his hand.

“Audria and I worked together at the Bureau,” Reese informed him.

“Ah. And now you work with COBRA Securities?”

“Yes. I didn't realize you'd called in the FBI.”

Torres's lips twisted. “I didn't.”

Audria bit back a smile. She was used to the reaction from local authorities when she'd been on the job. She'd always tried to smooth relations between the two groups, but it didn't always work. Cops were territorial. So were FBI agents. Sometimes it was like oil and water: they didn't mix.

“I didn't know you were with COBRA Securities now,” Reese murmured.

Audria felt terrible that she hadn't notified him of her new job. Reese had always been good to her. In fact, he'd wanted her to stay with the Bureau, even encouraging her to take some time off before making a decision about her career. He told her he'd hold a position for her. She had thought about it, but the job Logan Bradley and Luke Colton had offered had been a no-brainer.

"It's recent," she told Reese. "This is my first assignment."

She handed Torres the envelope with the necklace and earrings. Luca hadn't wanted Liliana's association with the murders to get out, but it would be almost impossible. It seemed as if the killer was purposefully drawing her into his web. At least he'd given Torres a heads-up.

Reese studied the clear plastic bag. She'd transferred the jewelry into one from the manilla envelope. "Where did you get these?"

She didn't want to answer and looked at Torres. "He just got here. I haven't had a chance to fill him in yet."

Oh damn. Her first assignment, and she was going to piss off the agent in charge. Luca would hate her for giving the FBI the details, but what choice did she have? "It was found at the reception desk of a local fitness studio."

"It's jewelry, cheap at that. What makes you think it's part of this case?"

She removed another baggie, this one with the envelope and card from the flowers. Reese took it from her hands. "Liliana Lima?" She could see the wheels turning in his head. Reese was sharp, one of the most brilliant minds at the FBI. It wouldn't take long for him to connect the dots. She was right. "She was the victim who survived Rader's last crime scene. Her roommate was killed." His eyes narrowed. "Are you saying Liliana Lima is here in Miami Beach?"

She glanced at Torres. He gave her a shrug. She interpreted it to mean that she couldn't hide Liliana's connection, so she didn't, explaining everything.

“I didn’t know about the flower delivery,” Detective Torres said. “It’s not a coincidence that we are finding the same lilies at the crime scenes.”

“Where is Ms. Lima now?” Reese asked. “We need to interview her.”

“No, you don’t.” Her tone brooked no argument. “She is to be left out of this.”

“Audria ...”

“No, Reese.” Oops. That slipped out. “SSA Reneau,” she corrected. “If the media gets wind of her involvement, she will be exposed. Her life will become a circus.”

“She’s a material witness,” he argued.

“No, she isn’t,” Audria insisted. “She doesn’t know anything. The package was left at her business. There is nothing she can tell you that you can’t read in the files from ten years ago.”

Reese looked as if he wanted to argue but bit his tongue. Good. She wasn’t losing this battle. She would not go back to Luca and tell him she’d failed.

“What made Russo think Rader sent it to her?” Detective Torres asked.

Well, she was just giving up all their secrets, wasn’t she? “Luca had a hunch when he saw the pendant with an initial and had our office check if any items were listed as missing from Rader’s first victims.”

“He got a hit,” Reese concluded.

Audria pulled her phone from a pocket and scrolled to the picture Luca had forwarded to her.

“It certainly looks the same,” Reese agreed. “We have a mobile forensics lab here. I’ll have them process these immediately for DNA.” He texted someone, and then a knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” Detective Torres called out.

A woman stuck her head inside. “You need me to run something to the mobile lab?”

Damn, that was fast. But that was the FBI. Still, as good as they were, they were no match for her COBRA Securities colleagues.

Reese handed her the evidence baggies. “Put a rush on them.”

“On it.”

Audria waited until the woman closed the door. “Do you have any new information on either murder to share?” She glanced between the two men, who looked at each other, both tight-lipped. Her irritation rose. “I thought we were working together. We shared information with you. You owe us the same courtesy. You know our company’s reputation.”

Detective Torres nodded. “I’ve already let Russo accompany me to one of the crime scenes, so I’ll share what I can, but you know how this works.”

Audria inclined her head. “I do, but as I said, we are not keeping anything from you. I’d appreciate the same respect.”

“Liliana Lima.”

Audria shot a glare at Reese, who merely lifted his dark brows. Maybe they were hiding her from them, but there was no need for her to be involved at this point.

Torres opened a file. “Both victims were prostitutes and had not been reported missing. They were raped, strangled, and the blood was drained from their bodies via a puncture to the jugular.”

“I don’t mean to sound crass, but how can you be sure they were raped? If they were prostitutes, they most likely had sex recently. And often.”

“You’re correct. We’re not positive they were violated, but they both had ligature marks on their ankles and wrists and some bruising on the inner thighs, as if they were held open against their will. No semen, but the same spermicide was found in both vics. Again, that only proves that the same brand

of condom was used during their last sexual encounters. At this point, we can't determine whether it was consensual."

"Rader raped his victims ten years ago," Reese pointed out.

"Yes, but the victimology is vastly different," Audria debated. "Before, he chose beautiful women who were successful or came from wealthy backgrounds. This time, they are hookers."

Reese rubbed his chin. "That is a substantial deviation. I'll have the Behavioral Analysis Unit work on an updated profile. What are the other differences between a decade ago and now?"

"Flowers," Detective Torres supplied. "He left lilies at the two recent crime scenes."

"Lilies?" Reese narrowed his eyes at Audria as if she had something to do with it. "We need to talk to her."

Audria ignored him. "There were differences in sewing the eyes and mouth shut, weren't there?"

Detective Torres nodded. "He didn't do that this time."

"There are a lot of inconsistencies in ritual," Reese agreed. "That's unusual if it's the same perp. I'll have the BAU expedite the updated profile."

"Text me a copy when it's finished."

He stared at her, and she thought he might refuse. Finally, he nodded.

"Thank you." She stood to leave. "Keep us posted, and we'll do the same." She turned for the door.

"Audria."

Darn it, she should've known she wouldn't be able to make a clean break. She glanced over her shoulder at Reese, cursing the flutter in her heart that happened every time she looked at him.

"We'll need to talk to her sooner rather than later."

Instead of answering, she walked out the door.

## Chapter Eleven

Liliana was tired. She'd spent the day trying to push thoughts of Ted Rader and his murderous ways from her head, but it was virtually impossible. Having Luca and his coworkers around helped, but there was still an underlying sense of unease that she couldn't shake. He'd sent her a package of souvenirs from his victims. How utterly demented.

Before they headed to her place, they detoured to drop off Luca's vehicle. His coworkers had arrived in one, and Luca said they wouldn't need two. When they arrived at her building, Luca introduced Christian and Audria to Warren and informed him they were staying in the rented condo. That way, he wouldn't be suspicious when they came and went from the complex, and they wouldn't need to stop and sign in daily. Warren looked skeptical, but then, he always did. He was an odd duck.

Liliana felt dwarfed by the two men as they rode up the elevator. Though Audria was about the same height, she seemed to tower over her too. Ted Rader wouldn't mess with these folks, she was sure.

When the door opened, she stepped out first with her key in hand.

"Liliana, wait."

Luca grabbed her arm to prevent her from moving forward. Then she saw the padded manilla envelope tacked to her door.

Luca removed a pair of latex gloves from a pocket and carefully peeled the tape to release the package. He unlocked her door and ushered her inside.

"Wait here."

Liliana watched as Christian and Audria searched her condo. She had a feeling it would be like this until Rader was caught, so she might as well get used to it.

"All clear."

She moved to the kitchen island, where Luca placed the envelope. With his gloved fingers, he opened it. A tube of red lipstick and a pear-shaped amethyst earring accented with round diamonds slid out. Liliana would bet her next paycheck the earring was the real deal this time.

She looked up at Luca. “Whoever left this has to be a tenant of the building, or they would’ve needed to sign in.”

“Audria, wait here with Liliana,” Luca instructed. “Christian, come with me. We’re going to have a chat with Warren.”

#

Luca wished he’d brought cameras with him to attach to the outside of his rented condo door. Then he would’ve caught the person who had left the envelope for Liliana. Audria and Christian had some with them, but it was too late now. He doubted the person would return.

The implications of leaving packages for her at work and home meant Rader knew exactly where Liliana was, and he was flaunting that he could get to her easily, at any time.

Luca and Christian took the steps down to the lobby. Warren was flipping through a magazine when they approached the desk. His television was turned to a baseball game. At least he wasn’t watching a porno this time.

Despite his seemingly clean background, the guard was on Luca’s suspect list. He was new to his job, and he had access to Liliana. Luca waited for him to look up before he spoke. When he did, it was to frown at Luca and Christian.

“What?”

“Didn’t his momma teach him manners? “Did someone stop by today asking for Ms. Lima?”

Warren shook his head. “No.”

“What time did you come on duty?”

“Five.”

“Can I look at the sign-in book?”



Warren narrowed his eyes. “No.”

“That wasn’t a request,” Christian growled.

Warren acted as if he wasn’t intimidated. “Why would I let you look at it? It’s privileged information.”

“No, it’s not,” Christian argued. “It’s public knowledge. You have no claim to confidentiality at all.”

Luca took out his credentials and slapped them on the counter. “We work for a private security firm. The best in the country. Cooperate, or I will get a warrant.” He couldn’t without help from Detective Torres, but he was hoping Warren didn’t realize that.

When Warren made no move to hand the book over, Luca took out his phone. “Fine. I’ll give Muriel Barber a call. I’m sure she’ll give the okay.”

Warren’s eyes widened. “Wait. You don’t need to call her.” He grabbed the book and tossed it in front of Luca. “Knock yourself out.”

“Thanks.” He tried to sound convincing but failed miserably. Oh well.

He carried the book to an area away from Warren. Christian took a seat beside him on the sofa, and Luca opened the ledger. The envelope wasn’t there when they left the condo, so he flipped to the page displaying names after seven a.m. There were approximately two dozen. Luca took out his phone to snap a picture, but his finger froze over the button. He recognized one of the names. Rex Raines.

“Sonofabitch,” Christian muttered, noticing the same thing. “Why did you have me research him? Do you suspect him?”

Luca hated to admit his jealousy. “He’s asked Liliana out several times. Do you think it’s possible he’d found out about her past trauma and decided to stalk her?”

Christian looked skeptical. “From what I found about him, it doesn’t seem like something he would do.”

Luca withheld judgment until he had more information. His heart wanted the bastard to be guilty. “Douglas Speke signed in and out at the same time.”

“Raines was probably showing him a condo,” Christian rationalized. “That would make sense since his job is to sell real estate.”

Christian’s defense of the man perturbed Luca. Raines wasn’t a freaking saint, for goodness’ sake. He snapped a photo, making sure the names were legible, before standing and handing the journal back to Warren. “Thanks for your cooperation.” He’d meant it sarcastically, but the rebuke whooshed right over Warren’s head.

“What’s going on?” Warren asked. “Do I need to be aware of something happening?”

“No, we’re doing background investigation. If that changes, I’ll let you know.”

They returned to the apartment. Liliana looked up as she was talking with Audria.

“How well do you know your buddy Raines?”

“Rex?” At his confirmation nod, Liliana said, “Pretty well. He’s my landlord, and our offices have gone to dinner and other events together. He attends several classes at the studio. Why?”

“He was here today.”

Liliana scoffed. “He is a real estate agent, Luca. There are several condos for sale.” She echoed Christian’s thoughts, pissing Luca off all over again. “He’s probably here all the time.”

He tamped down his irritation. “Does the name Douglas Speke ring any bells?”

“Douglas? Yes. He’s one of my martial arts instructors.”

“They signed in and out at the same time.”

“Douglas is new to the area and probably looking for a place to live, but I didn’t know he was interested in this

building.” A look of horror crossed her face, and her eyes widened. “Oh my God. He knew the phrase.”

“What?”

“He knew the phrase,” she repeated.

“What phrase?”

“Be very quiet.”

Luca’s jaw clenched. Those were the words Rader had whispered in Liliana’s ear when Luca and his partner had arrived on the scene ten years ago. Luca explained the meaning to Christian and Audria.

“In what context did he say it?” Audria asked.

“One of the instructors who taught me most of what I know about self-defense likes to test me occasionally. He’ll grab me from behind and expect me to escape the hold.” At the thunderous look on Luca’s face, she quickly added, “I had asked him to a few years ago. I wanted to test my skills and keep sharp. It’s one thing to practice when you expect it, but I needed to know I could recall the training in real-life situations.” That didn’t appease Luca. The thought of any man grabbing her made his blood boil.

“Anyway, Douglas saw him do it one day and thought it would be funny to try it. He came up behind me and whispered those words in my ear.”

Oh, damn. It must have terrified her. He softened his voice. “What did you do?”

She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture. “I froze. The low tone sounded the same, and my mind rewound ten years. For a moment, I was sure Rader had returned.”

And he had, killing women close to where she lived now.

Luca clamped his hands around her arms and rubbed, not even caring that his coworkers were a few feet away. “I’m sorry. That had to be traumatic.”

“It was for a minute, but I’m fine now.”

“I’ll have a little talk with him.” And beat the shit out of him for daring to touch Liliana.

“That’s unnecessary. I asked him not to do it again.”

“How long has he been working for you?” Christian asked.

“About a month. Rutger—the man who taught me self-defense and oversees the martial arts instructors—recommended him, and I approved the hire.”

“We need to talk to him.”

“He teaches tomorrow, so you can speak with him in the morning.”

“Good.”

“I’m starving, but I don’t feel like cooking. Pizza sound good to everyone?” At their approval, she added, “I do have ingredients for a salad.”

“I’ll help chop veggies,” Audria offered.

“I’ll need to call Detective Torres after we eat to let him know about the second envelope,” Luca warned them. That meant the FBI would be notified as well. Audria had been apologetic when she’d returned from dropping off the first package, but it wasn’t her fault the FBI was involved. Luca knew it was only a matter of time.

Frankly, he wasn’t sure how long he could hold them off from questioning Liliana. He understood their insistence and would’ve wanted the same thing in their shoes. But he wasn’t, and this was Liliana. He would protect her or die trying.

“First, I want to get the equipment placed outside.”

With Christian’s help, he secured microscopic cameras facing both Liliana’s door and the one across the hall. Liliana was against the idea of adding any inside her fitness center, and since someone would be with her the entire time, they weren’t necessarily needed. Still, Luca would place one facing the entry to monitor who came and went. Again, he didn’t think the person would try to leave another package for her, but it was better to be prepared.

“Since the perp has been to Liliana’s apartment and knows where she lives, maybe you two should stay in the rented condo,” Christian advised. “Audria and I will take turns staying at her place.”

Luca thought about it, and it made sense. “Good idea.” He didn’t think Rader was careless enough to return, but there was no way to know what went on inside the twisted mind of a madman.

#

Audria was busy chopping peppers when her phone started playing a song, and she almost sliced off her finger. It was the ringtone she’d set for Reese Reneau.

She placed the knife down and wiped her hands on a towel. “I need to take this.”

“I’ll take over,” Christian said, having returned with Luca from positioning cameras outside. He picked up the knife and started slicing vegetables like an iron chef. Huh. Who knew?

Audria walked to the balcony overlooking the busy street and more apartments across the way. It was a shame to live so close to the ocean and not be able to see it. “SSA Reneau.”

“Audria, open the door.”

She spun around. “What? Why?”

“Because I’m standing outside right now.”

“How do you know where I am?” she whispered furiously. “You had me followed?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Audria. I pulled Ms. Lima’s address.”

Of course. He was FBI. There wasn’t much he couldn’t do. Crap on a cracker. Luca would have a coronary. “Give me a minute.”

“No—”

She disconnected and motioned for Luca. She prayed he didn’t blow a gasket.

“What’s up?”

“Supervisory Special Agent Reese Reneau from the FBI is here.”

“Damn it. I knew they’d come eventually, but I hoped we’d have more time.”

“Listen, Luca, Reese is one of the good guys. I worked with him for four years. He’s fair, and he’s honest. I trust him implicitly. You can too.”

Luca nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Just like that?”

“If you vouch for him, that’s enough for me. Besides, we were going to have to call them about the second package.”

“You’re right.” With a relieved breath, Audria headed for the door and whipped it open. Reese was leaning against the opposite wall with his muscular arms crossed. One brow lifted, and she almost melted into a puddle at his feet. “Uh, come in.”

She stood back to allow him to pass. A subtle scent of cologne wafted to her, and she almost moaned. Man, she had to get a grip on her feelings. It had been easier to do when he’d been married. She didn’t lust after men who had wives. It was a line she refused to cross. It was after he divorced that the attraction surged to the forefront.

Now he was here, and all Audria could think of was how much she wanted to kiss him.

## Chapter Twelve

Luca eyed the man who entered the apartment. He wore a white oxford shirt and dark blue dress pants, but his suit coat and tie had been discarded, and his black hair was mussed. Nonetheless, Luca would've pegged him for a fibbie at first glance.

Audria made the introductions.

"I'm sorry for what you went through ten years ago and again now, Ms. Lima," Reese said sincerely.

"Thank you, and please, call me Liliana."

Reese nodded. "I wanted to let you know we got a hit on the earring. It belonged to the first victim here in Miami, Ruby Brown."

Luca cursed. "I was afraid of that."

"So, he sent me a souvenir of his first kill a decade ago and again now. Why? What is the point?"

"I'm having a profile drawn up to give us an idea of his current mindset, but if I had to guess, it's because he's fixated on you. You're the one who got away."

Liliana winced, and Luca wanted to wrap her in his arms and never let go.

Reese continued. "The perp knows where you are and wants you to realize he can get to you at any time. He's drawing you into his evil scheme. It's all a sick, twisted game to him."

"You mean Rader," she said.

"I'm withholding judgment on that for now. It might be him, but it could be a copycat. Until we know for sure, I'm not making assumptions."

"How would anyone else have access to an item from one of Rader's first kills?" Christian asked.

Reese turned to him. "Good question. Maybe he had an accomplice or a protégé we don't know about. We're working

on that now.”

Luca retrieved the padded envelope that he'd placed in an evidence baggie. “We were going to call you. We found this taped to the door when we arrived home a few minutes ago.”

Reese took the bag and studied the contents. “If I had to guess, I would say that the lipstick is from the most recent victim, Pam Barton, and the earring from Charlotte Cryer, the second victim in Minnesota.”

“My thoughts too,” Luca concurred.

“I'll take this and have it analyzed.” He turned to Liliana again. “Have you noticed anything strange lately or felt you were being watched? Has anyone left you any trinkets or gifts?”

“You know about the flowers?” At Reese's nod, she said, “No, nothing else like that has happened.”

“He killed eight people before,” Christian pointed out. “It makes you wonder if he plans on doing the same now.”

“Let's hope we catch him before that happens. We've been searching for similar crimes over the last few years.”

“If he used prostitutes, they might not have been declared missing,” Luca advised. “He could've dumped the bodies since he's changed other aspects of his former routine.”

“Good point,” Reese noted. “I'm putting together a task force. I would like you to be on it. There will be a couple of FBI agents, Detective Torres, and one or two of his staff. Audria, I would like you on it, too, since you have experience.”

Luca wanted to decline the invite. He needed to stick close to Liliana. Still, it would help his investigation to have inside intel on the local police department and FBI's findings.

Christian spoke up. “You don't have to worry about Liliana. I'll stay with her so you two can go.”

Luca trusted Christian with his life, therefore, Liliana's too. He nodded. “Okay.”



Reese pulled Luca aside. “You are providing protection for Liliana?”

“We are. Twenty-four-seven.”

“Good. I want to offer help, but we’re shorthanded as it is, and I know the police department is as well.”

“We’ve got it covered.”

“I feel better knowing she’s safe. Audria is one of the most talented agents I’ve ever worked with, and your company has the reputation as the best in the business.”

“We are, and you’re right about Audria. Your loss is our gain.”

Reese grunted in agreement. “Detective Torres asked me to tell you he instituted extra patrols around the condo complex and Liliana’s studio.”

Good. It probably wouldn’t stop Rader, but it might scare him a little.

Audria had been right about SSA Reese Reneau. He seemed extraordinarily fair and didn’t try to lord the FBI supremacy over him. He’d even taken steps to include COBRA Securities, inviting them to the table. As much as he hated to be away from Liliana, working with the police and FBI to bring Rader to justice was precisely what he wanted.

“We’re about to order pizza. You’re welcome to join us.”

Reese glanced at Audria and then nodded. “Pizza sounds good.”

#

Liliana hoped she had ordered enough food for everyone. Luca, Christian, and Reese looked as if they could each put away a whole pie themselves. She’d chosen a variety, including meat lovers, vegetarian, double pepperoni (knowing it was Luca’s favorite), and her personal choice, Hawaiian.

She’d offered everyone a glass of wine, but they had declined, saying they were on the job. That had been a sobering thought. *She* was the job.

Liliana had no qualms about pouring herself a glass. She needed it after everything that was happening with Rader. The alcohol settled her nerves.

Christian left to meet the driver in the lobby when the delivery arrived. Liliana suggested they move across the hall to the condo Luca's company had rented. Bertie Wells, the former owner, had left a table with chairs on the balcony overlooking the ocean. It was the perfect place to eat.

Despite the delicious flavor, Liliana could barely manage one piece. Too many thoughts rolled around in her head. The initial shock over discovering Ted Rader was alive and killing again was gone. In the back of her mind, she'd always known it was a possibility. Now that it was confirmed, she was determined to stop him. She would find vengeance for Erin, the other victims, their families, and herself.

"We have to find Ted Rader before more innocent women lose their lives," Liliana stated. "How do we draw him out?"

"That's a good question," Luca said between bites of pepperoni pizza. "If we knew, we could set a trap. But he's evaded arrest and stayed beneath the radar for ten years."

She certainly didn't want to be the bait, but if it would stop him once and for all, she would do it. "What can I do to lure him out?"

"Nothing!" four voices shouted at her at once.

She jerked back and held up a hand. Sheesh, they didn't have to gang up on her.

"You are not setting yourself up to lure him out," Luca growled. "Just forget that right now."

"We will find him," Reese stated firmly. "You listen to Luca, Audria, and Christian and do as they say."

Liliana had been independent for a long time. It was hard to cede control of her life to someone else. She wasn't stupid or foolish enough to think she could handle Rader herself. Still, it stung that they treated her like her voice didn't matter.

“The view is amazing,” Audria stated, obviously changing the subject. “What a beautiful place to live.”

Though the setting sun was behind them, it painted the sky in brilliant shades of orange, purple, and red. The waves surged and retreated in a hypnotic rhythm. People were strolling along the shore, some holding hands, others walking dogs. Young kids were splashing in the water while others built sandcastles. A group of teens were huddled in a circle.

*Pop, pop, pop.*

Before Liliana knew what was happening, she was lying on the palm tree print rug beneath Bertie Wells’s table with Luca on top of her. Christian, Audria, and Reese had all drawn their guns and were crouched down, searching the beach.

“Fireworks,” she gritted out.

Luca lifted some of his bulk off her, and she could breathe again.

“What did you say?”

“Firecrackers. I saw the teens lighting them up.”

“Isn’t that illegal?” Audria posed as Luca helped Liliana to her feet.

“I think so unless it’s the Fourth of July, New Year’s Eve, or New Year’s Day.”

They watched as an adult approached the group of teens. One nudged the other, and they took off running.

“That was my cue,” Reese said. “I need to get these items back to the mobile lab.” He reached into a pocket and handed everyone a card. “If you receive any more packages or if you need anything from me, give me a call. Audria, walk me out.”

He shook hands with everyone and then left with Audria.

“Did I hurt you?”

Liliana turned to see Luca frowning at her. She’d been rubbing her arm without realizing it. “I banged my elbow. No biggie.”

He lifted her arm and inspected the damage. “Damn,” he muttered as his thumb rubbed over the red area. “I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You were busy protecting me.”

“From pyrotechnics.”

She smiled, and he did too. Their eyes caught, held. The moment stretched out until Christian casually cleared his throat. Luca dropped her arm and stepped back.

“Since Rader knows where you live, we will stay in this condo. Christian and Audria will take turns sleeping at your place. Not that he could get to you, but it’s just precautionary.”

Liliana hated to leave her home, but she trusted him. “If you think that’s for the best. What?”

“I didn’t think it would be that easy. I expected you to put up a fight.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m trying to be more accommodating.”

He laughed, and the change in his face mesmerized her. Gone were the serious eyes and frown lines. He looked considerably younger ... like the man she’d known all those years ago.

“Liliana?”

“Hum?”

“I asked if you wanted to grab a few things.”

She shook her head. “Oh, yes, I do.” She hurried across the hall and found a bag in her closet. Liliana didn’t need to pack much since she could pop in and get what she needed at any time. Something made her toss her racy, lacy red bra and matching panties inside. Would she have the nerve to put them on? What would Luca’s reaction be to seeing her in them?

She returned to Bertie’s condo. Luca was on the phone, so she headed to the second bedroom. She assumed Luca would want the main one with the ocean view and sliding glass doors to the balcony. His company was paying for it, after all. Before she could unzip, Luca was standing at the door.

“This is mine. You’re next door.”

“Don’t you want the bigger room?”

He shook his head. “I want you to have it.”

Liliana picked up her suitcase and walked past him, inhaling the scent that was uniquely Luca. It intoxicated her and made her drunk with lust. She’d successfully subdued her libido for years, and after a few minutes around Luca, it was back in full force.

Liliana placed her bag on the dresser. Bertie was selling the unit fully furnished. When she moved into the assisted living facility, she hadn’t needed to take the items with her. She had lovely taste, and the king-sized bed with the woven headboard was perfect for a coastal-designed space. The company selling the unit had staged it perfectly, adding touches to remind prospective buyers they were close to the beach, from the mermaid artwork to the octopus towel holder to the starfish lights. They had included a plethora of fake plants, which looked nice, but Liliana was partial to the real thing. The unit would sell quickly, she was sure. It was a shame she likely wouldn’t be able to afford it.

Liliana opened the slider to hear the waves. When she turned, Luca was watching her. She hadn’t realized he was still there. She didn’t know what to say to him. Should she ask him to come to her? Hold her? She didn’t want him to think she was weak.

“Christian is staying at your place tonight. Audria is taking the couch here. I’ll, uh, be in the room next door if you need me.”

Oh, she needed. Badly. Borderline desperately. “Wait,” she called out when he turned to leave. Luca spun around with a questioning look. “Stay here. With me.” She closed her eyes and gathered her thoughts. “I slept better last night than I have in years. I need to rest, and I won’t until Rader is caught. You make me feel safe.”

In two steps, Luca was in front of her. He slid his hands around her face and then he lowered his head. Liliana moaned

as he touched his lips to hers. Fire. Pure, unmitigated heat. His lips were firm yet soft. And oh, were they masterful. The man knew how to kiss.

Liliana wrapped her arms around his neck and hung on as he plundered her mouth in exquisite fashion.

Suddenly, she was whisked into his strong embrace, and he carried her to the bed. The sound of the waves crashing into the sand filled the room.

Luca's lips never left hers as he lowered her to the mattress. Liliana craved the feel of his body pressed to hers, but he was suddenly gone. Her eyes fluttered open to see her staring at her with stark desire in his amber eyes.

"I have to get my coworkers settled," he rumbled in a gravelly voice.

Liliana didn't want him to leave, but she understood his need to make sure the others were okay. He'd always been a protector. It was his superpower.

Liliana waited until he left before scrambling out of bed and grabbing the racy lingerie. She hoped he would return as she settled the lace over her breasts and slid the thong in place. If he needed a green light, this should do it. The material barely covered the important bits. All that was missing was a neon sign that flashed, "*Do me.*"

Liliana leaped back into the bed and slid beneath the covers. She moaned. Nice. Either Bertie had left satin sheets, or the staging company had used them. It didn't matter. The material was luxurious. Liliana snuggled into the pillow, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

#

Luca spoke with Christian and Audria, ensuring everything was set for the night. They thought he'd be bunking in the extra bedroom, but after Liliana's request, the only place he wanted to be was in her arms.

No, it wasn't professional. Although, he didn't think it was against COBRA Securities' rules since he'd worked on a few cases where an agent fell in love with the person they

were charged with protecting. It had happened to most of his coworkers, including both of his bosses, if the rumors were true.

Luca never mixed business with pleasure. During his tenure as a cop and then a detective, he'd been propositioned with every sexual favor imaginable. It was comical, yet sad, the lengths people would go to in an effort to avoid a ticket or arrest. He'd never crossed that line, not even been tempted. Once you breached the barrier, it was impossible to go back. He'd known several cops who had taken that step, only to lose their job or, worse, be accused of a crime themselves.

Yet right now, Luca didn't care about the consequences. He wanted to hold Liliana, kiss her, make love to her. He'd been fantasizing about it for years. It seemed as if he'd wanted her forever. He'd always considered her the one that got away, even if their relationship hadn't been sexual back then.

It took everything he had not to race into the bedroom. He didn't want to frighten her with the force of his need. And it was massive—as was the erection he was sporting.

He opened the door and ground to a halt. Lord have mercy. She was lying in bed in the most erotic red lingerie he'd ever seen. The material barely covered her secrets. But his excitement was quickly dampened. She was sound asleep.

With a sigh, Luca placed his gun and phone on the table beside the bed, stripped down to his boxer briefs, and slid beneath the sheets. Liliana made a sound and snuggled her sexy body against him. He gritted his teeth. He thought last night had been torture. That was nothing compared to right now.

Liliana's deep, even breathing and the sound of the ocean waves outside lulled him to sleep.

#

Luca's eyes snapped open, and he was instantly awake when he felt the soft slide of a hand over his stomach. The only illumination in the room was the moonlight filtering through the windows, but he could clearly see Liliana as she

explored the muscles on his abdomen. What he couldn't see was if her eyes were open or not. Was she dreaming? Sleep-feeling? Was that a thing?

His question was answered when she tilted her head and blinked at him. A coy smile curved her lips. Very much awake.

"My business revolves around fit men, but I've never met anyone as perfect as you," she murmured as her hand skimmed higher to his pecs.

That was it. There was only so much a mere mortal man could take.

In one fell swoop, he scooped her up, ignoring her startled gasp, and came down on top of her. That gasp quickly turned into a whimper as their bodies aligned. Her eyes rounded at the proof of his desire for her. She widened her legs, allowing him to settle more firmly against her, and it was his turn to moan.

"You're the perfect one," he rasped as his hand cupped her lace-covered breast. She closed her eyes and arched against him as his thumb stroked her nipple.

Despite the fact that there was barely any material in the bra, he wanted it off. Now. He made quick work of the front clasp, and then she was bare before him. His mouth replaced his hands, and she dug her fingers into his scalp. As much as he loved what he was doing, it'd been too long since he'd tasted her lips, so he captured them in a heated, passionate kiss.

He broke contact long enough to confess, "I want you, Liliana. More than my next breath."

She pulled his head back down for another scorching kiss before murmuring against his lips, "I want the same thing, Luca."

That was all it took. He wanted to go slow, worship her body the way it was meant to be revered, but his control was slipping faster than an Olympic champion sprinter out of the blocks. He made quick work of his boxers and grabbed the condom he'd optimistically stashed beside his phone. Before



he could rip it open, Liliana snatched it from his fingers and did the job herself, humming appreciative words as she rolled it on. Luca gritted his teeth, mentally chastising himself for his lack of self-discipline. He wasn't a high school kid anymore. He was an experienced man and should be able to last more than a nanosecond.

When he couldn't take it any longer, he reached for the scrap of lace between her legs and yanked it down. Then all he could do was stare. She truly was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever met.

Liliana didn't give him time to linger. She hooked her heels over the back of his thighs and pulled him down. Not one to disappoint, he sank into her and groaned deeply. Her inner muscles clenched him as her nails bit into his back. He needed to move, but he was almost powerless to do so. The sensations were like nothing he'd felt before. He slid out and in, picking up the rhythm. Her body gripped him tightly like an iron fist, and the tenuous string holding back his restraint snapped.

One of them was getting louder. He wasn't sure who, but he had just enough sanity remaining to keep his coworkers from knowing what was happening. He covered Liliana's mouth and let go. The orgasm rushed through him like category-five hurricane winds, depleting him until nothing was left, and he collapsed bonelessly on top of her. Thank heavens he'd lasted long enough for her to climax twice ... or was it thrice?

"Wow," she gasped into his ear. "I thought I might seriously shatter into a billion tiny pieces after the third one."

Luca couldn't stop the smug smile. A trifecta. Not bad for their first encounter. Not one to stand on his laurels, it gave him something to shoot for the next time they made love.

## Chapter Thirteen

Daisy May Lewis adjusted her tube top and checked the photo she kept of Jackie Joe, or J.J., her baby, inside a locket necklace shaped like a flower. He was the reason she was out on the street, selling her body to anyone who would pay.

J.J.'s father had split before he was born, leaving Daisy May with no money and bills to pay. She had dropped out of high school, so she didn't have an education to fall back on. The only jobs she could get required her to be on her feet for hours on end, like working in a restaurant or a grocery store checkout. Standing that long became impossible as her pregnancy progressed.

When she couldn't make rent, she'd lost the furnished apartment where they'd been living and had to bunk at a women's shelter. What few possessions she had fit into a battered suitcase. Once J.J. was born and she looked at his sweet face, she knew she would do whatever it took to make sure he had a good life. She'd come from an abusive home with parents who fought constantly and hit her regularly. Growing up, she didn't have role models to show her how to be a good parent, but Daisy May thought she could do the job. J.J. would always know his mother loved him.

Six weeks after J.J. was born, the shelter had speakers come and talk to the women to encourage them to better themselves. Something one of them said had stuck with her: if you are good at something, do it. The only thing Daisy May had ever excelled at was sex. Frankie, J.J.'s father, had always told her she was talented. Though she'd initially been scared, she'd quickly gotten the hang of it. And gosh darn it, she was good at it. Some johns were even regulars and came back often.

The most challenging part had been asking one of the women at the shelter to watch J.J. at night. She couldn't tell her where she was going for fear she would turn her into child

services, and they would take her baby from her. She would not let that happen.

Daisy May had taken the clothes she'd purchased at a second-hand store with money she'd gotten from begging on the streets. It had been humiliating to ask strangers to hand over cash, but some generous people did. She'd shamelessly used J.J. as her excuse for needing the money, and it had worked. She was able to select a wardrobe that was more suited to her new profession.

Since Daisy May couldn't change at the shelter or someone would figure out what she was doing, she had walked to the bus station and used their public restroom. Then she'd gone to the area known for street walkers.

She had been so nervous at first. What if she got picked up by a psycho? Or a man who wanted to hurt her? Frankie had hit her plenty, so it wasn't like it would be the first time. As she approached the corner, she'd encountered an amazon of a woman with the most beautiful black skin Daisy May had ever seen. The woman's hair was long and braided, and her outfit had showcased her ample assets.

"You're new."

Daisy May had looked around to see who the woman was talking to, but no one else was there. "Yes."

"You got representation?"

Daisy May had no idea what she was talking about.

"A pimp, honey. You got one?"

"Oh, no. It's just me."

"You be careful. It's a scary world out there. What's your name?"

"Daisy May Lewis."

"Well, Daisy May, I'm Diamond. I've been around the block a time or two, so let me tell you how it is."

Diamond had proceeded to give Daisy May advice and guidance, instructing her on what to do in different scenarios

and how much to charge. Diamond had flooded her with invaluable information.

That first night, she'd made more money than she ever had, and the men who had picked her up seemed kinda normal. No one wanted the kinky stuff that Diamond had warned her about. By the end of the first week, she'd earned enough for a deposit on a small apartment for her and J.J., with extra to pay the older woman who lived next door to watch him. She had even been able to buy food!

With Diamond's help, Daisy May had set up an actual bank account. The balance was more money than she ever thought she'd own. She'd even started a college fund for her son. He was going to be a doctor or a lawyer or maybe a football player. He would be successful. She would make sure of it.

Since her first week, she'd had dozens of requests for unusual or disgusting things. Instead of turning them down, she simply charged extra and endured until it was over.

Maybe it wasn't the noblest of professions, but Daisy May didn't hate her job. She'd always enjoyed sex, and now she got to be with several men, some attractive, some not. She'd become friends with many of the other women, and Diamond had become her best friend and an auntie to J.J. Daisy May wouldn't have survived on the streets without her guidance and support.

"How's our boy today?" Diamond hugged Daisy May.

"Fussy. I think he's getting a tooth or something." She'd hated to leave him when he wasn't feeling well, but Mrs. Jefferson had raised eight babies of her own and knew what to do. The grandmother of twenty-two never looked down on Daisy May for how she made a living. She'd never outright asked, but Daisy May had a feeling the older women knew, anyway.

"I got one on the hook. Later, sweetie."

Daisy May turned to see Diamond sashay up to a jacked-up truck with chrome running boards. She spoke to the driver

and then turned to wave at Daisy May as she rounded the vehicle and climbed inside. Diamond was exotically beautiful and always one of the first selected. She never had to wait long for a pickup.

A brown sedan slowed to a stop. The glass was tinted so heavily Daisy May couldn't see inside. She flipped her long, black hair over her shoulder and thrust out her chest. When the window lowered a fraction, she purred, "See something you like, sugar?"

"Come here."

Daisy May had learned to perfect her walk. She loosened her hips and slinked over. "Whatcha looking for tonight, sugar?" She made sure to bend down far enough that he could see her cleavage.

"How much?"

She wagged her brows. "Depends. What are you looking for?"

"Companionship for an hour."

"No problem, sugar. That'll be four hundred."

"Get in."

Daisy May walked around the hood and opened the door to slide inside. The seats and floor were clean, but there was a funny scent permeating the interior. It made her nose wrinkle. It reminded her of when she'd gone to the funeral home when she was young, after her uncle had passed. "Where are we headed, sugar? I know of a couple of good places." With Diamond's help, she'd worked out agreements with the owners of two pay-by-the-hour motels and brought them a constant string of business. They charged the john full price and then gave her a kickback that went straight into J.J.'s college fund each month.

"Someplace nice."

Well, that didn't answer her question in the least. She shrugged and watched as they drove through one of the swankier areas of Miami Beach. Maybe he had money, and

she could tack on additional services. “What’s your name, sugar?” She’d found that the men liked to be called pet names, and sugar was her favorite.

He braked at a red light. “The Mo...uh, you can call me Mort.”

“Well, Mort, what if we, ah!”

Mort reached over and jammed some kind of cloth against her face, and she couldn’t breathe. Diamond had gifted her with a wicked-sharp switchblade, but her head was swimming, and she couldn’t reach into her bag. Then the lights went out.

#

Daisy May woke up groggy and disorientated. She couldn’t remember what had happened or where she was. Panic set in, and she needed to ensure her son was okay.

“J.J.?”

“There’s no one here by that name,” a man said.

Daisy May blinked her eyes open, but bright lights had her snapping them shut again. The harsh glare made her unable to see who had spoken the words. She lifted her head and cracked a lid to discover she was tied to a table, and she was naked. Her wrists and ankles were bound, and she was spread wide. That wasn’t unusual in her line of work, but the surface was cold and hard, like some kind of metal.

Images shifted in her brain, and she remembered a john picking her up. Mick, Mike, no, he’d said his name was Mort. From there, she had nothing. It was all a blank. She’d been tied up before and always charged extra. She needed to let Mort know it was an additional fee to the one she’d quoted him earlier.

“You don’t have to worry about payment,” Mort assured her when she voiced her concerns. Well, if he was willing to pay extra, she’d tolerate his quirks.

Daisy May flinched when classical music blasted through speakers close to her head. Then Mort climbed on top of her. When he grabbed her thighs in a painful grip that would leave

bruises, she bit her tongue and gritted out, “I insist on a condom.”

Though she was on birth control prescribed by a doctor at a free clinic, she didn’t want to take chances with a venereal disease. Her health was of the utmost importance so that she could care for J.J.

“I do too, you filthy bitch.”

Well, that wasn’t very nice. Maybe being a prostitute wasn’t as prestigious or respectable as being a teacher or an accountant, but it paid her bills, and she’d always kept herself clean. Hygiene was essential to Daisy May. She didn’t do drugs of any kind, including alcohol, unless the john insisted she have a drink with him.

Chalking Mort up to being a disgusting, sexist pig—she’d serviced plenty of those in her career—she slipped into her persona and purred, “Give it to me, baby.”

“Shut up!”

Mort reared up and backhanded her across the face. Daisy May’s head slammed to the side, and she cried out in pain. Tears flooded her eyes, and blood rushed to her cheek. She wanted to put a hand against it, but he’d bolted her wrists securely to the table. She could feel her heartbeat pounding, and fear threatened to engulf her. “W-why did you do that, s-sugar?”

“I said shut up, Liliana.”

“My name’s not Lil—”

Strong hands wrapped around her neck, and she gasped as he applied pressure. She’d had a couple of johns who got their rocks off on strangulation sex. They’d called it erotic asphyxiation, or something like that. She’d never particularly enjoyed it, but she indulged their fantasies ... again for an additional fee. This time, however, she didn’t want to play along.

“Mort, I don’t want to...ugh!”

He squeezed her neck as he thrust into her. Daisy May tried to relax, but her vision blurred, and she couldn't breathe. He was brutally pounding into her, hurting her. It was possible he was dislocating her pelvis or breaking the bones completely, but all she could focus on was the need to inhale. With her bound wrists, she couldn't pry at the hands crushing her windpipe. She could feel life draining from her as he grunted out his climax.

Daisy May's last thought on earth was of her precious son, J.J. She prayed he was taken care of and led a long, happy life. Hopefully, he would know his mother had loved him above all else and would've done anything for him. He was her pride and joy.



## Chapter Fourteen

Liliana woke up more refreshed than she'd ever felt in her life. She ached in the most delicious places. Wow! Sex with Luca was nothing like what she'd dreamed possible. It was a million times better. She had no idea it could be like that and didn't want to think of how many women he'd been with to become such a skilled expert. She wasn't sure she'd survive the encounter. Luca was a big man all over. The sensations had been so exquisite she thought it must've been a dream.

She was suddenly very aware that he was awake. It was hard to miss, actually. She reached for him, but before she could grab her prize, he rolled her over and settled himself on top.

“Good morning,” he rumbled.

She cupped his cheek, feeling the stubble beneath her hand. “Glorious morning,” she corrected.

He leaned down and kissed her and she lost herself in him again. It was impossible to think of anything else but the feel of him, the taste of him. But she wanted to be in charge this time. Using the element of surprise, she flipped him over, loving the startled look on his face that morphed into naked desire when she straddled him.

“Much better,” he murmured as he grasped her breasts. She didn't have a lot on top, but that didn't seem to matter to Luca. She felt beautiful. Empowered. When his hands moved to her hips and lifted her up, she grasped him to hold him in place as she sank down. They both groaned. How could she be sore, but feel so incredible?

She rose slowly and sank back down. If she died right now, she'd go out with happiness in her heart. Luca set a fast pace, and soon she rode him like a champion bull rider. She tried to mute her reaction, but it was impossible. He reared up and fastened his mouth to hers as she screamed her release. Oh, so good. So damn good. He didn't stop, rolling them both until she was on the bottom, and kept going. Another release

slammed into her, catching her off guard. Good Lord, how was she supposed to keep up with him? The third one was a slow build-up that robbed her of speech. The fourth one had her entire body shattering into tiny shards of immense pleasure. Thankfully, Luca joined her, and she was able to regain a portion of her sanity.

“Was that four?”

Liliana was having trouble managing basic thought processes. “Uh, what?”

He lifted his head, a cocky smile on his lips. “I counted four.”

He was keeping track of her climaxes. Should she be offended? She wasn't sure. “Why does it matter?”

He kissed her, and she melted against him. The peel of a cell phone shattered the buzz of happiness.

“That's mine.” Luca picked it up and spoke in low tones.

Liliana used the distraction to get out of bed and head to the bathroom. She glanced over her shoulder to see Luca's gaze zeroed in on her naked body. She gave an extra wiggle and finger wave before closing the door and falling against it.

What was she doing? This was Luca, not some random hookup. He was the man she'd judged all other men by, and the one she'd placed on a pedestal. She now knew it wasn't high enough. He was so much more than she imagined.

But nothing could come of a relationship. Her life was in south Florida. He lived in the Midwest. Even if she was willing to relocate for him, there was no guarantee he'd want her to. Maybe he was just enjoying sex with her but wasn't thinking long term. Why was she?

*Because he's the love of your life*, a voice whispered in her head. The man she'd loved when she'd been young and the one she wanted now that she was older. He represented everything that mattered to her. Honesty. Integrity. Compassion. Kindness. Sense of humor. He was the total package, and she was ridiculously happy that some other woman hadn't snatched him up.

Liliana turned on the taps and waited for it to heat up before she stepped inside the shower. The hot water felt good on sore muscles. She was about to reach for the shampoo to lather her hair when a light rap sounded on the door, and it opened. Luca stood there looking like every fantasy she'd ever had.

“Thought we'd conserve water,” he rumbled.

Liliana opened her arms, and he came to her. She plastered herself against his rock-hard body. “Excellent idea.”

#

Luca knew he was making a mistake by joining Liliana in the shower. Last night should've been a one-off. He needed to step back and return their relationship to a professional one. He couldn't afford for feelings to become involved. His concentration had to be on finding a killer.

But it was easier said than done. He'd been half in love with her for years. Last night had only intensified those feelings. She was amazing.

Once again, he'd been unable to go slowly, and the encounter had been hard and fast against the tiled wall. Now, as he lathered her sleek, beautiful body, he wondered how he'd walk away once Rader was caught. In a very short amount of time, he'd become addicted to her.

Once they dressed, Luca left first so that Audria wouldn't know what had occurred—three separate times. Although, he had a feeling he wasn't fooling them one bit. He'd been around coworkers when they thought they were keeping their liaisons secret, and he'd always known.

Audria was drinking a cup of coffee at the kitchen bar. He greeted her, and she didn't act as if she knew they'd been burning up the sheets and steaming up the glass shower walls. Good. A knock on the door sounded, and he headed over to let Christian in. He'd made a trip to a bakery down the street for fresh bagels, pastries, and assorted fruit. Luca thanked him and grabbed a blueberry muffin.

“Good morning, everyone.”

Liliana appeared, and a chunk of pastry caught in his throat. God, she was so beautiful. She'd dried her silky black hair, and it glistened like a raven's wing. He'd like to think he had something to do with the dewy glow on her face. Her bright green eyes landed on him, and he completely forgot that he currently couldn't breathe.

"You okay, Luca?"

He forced the flour, egg, and blueberry mixture down his throat, sucked in much needed oxygen, and nodded at Audria. "I'm good."

Damn, he wasn't fooling his coworkers at all.

## Chapter Fifteen

“We need to question Rex Raines and Douglas Speke about their visit,” Luca announced as they headed to Liliana’s studio. He was sitting in the back with her while Audria drove and Christian rode shotgun. “Audria, you talk to Raines. I’ll interrogate Speke.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Liliana inquired, remembering his reaction to hearing Douglas had frightened her. “I don’t think you can be impartial.”

Luca studied her and finally nodded. “You’re probably right. I want to tear his head off and punt it into the Atlantic. Okay, Christian, you speak to Speke.”

“Roger, Roger. You want me to get the vector, Victor? Clearance Clarence?”

Liliana laughed at his movie reference, and he turned to grin at her. Luca simply shook his head, but a smile teased his lips. Audria glanced over at him like he’d grown a horn out of his forehead.

“What? Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of a little movie called *Airplane!* Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Peter Graves. Classic scene.”

“Heard of it? Yes. Watched it? No.”

Christian shook his head and tsked sadly. “You’re missing out.”

Liliana’s smile morphed into a frown. “How will they question Rex and Douglas when I’ve told everyone that Audria and Christian are a married couple looking to start their own fitness studio? Won’t that seem strange?” She didn’t want her staff to know she’d outright lied to them.

“We’ll stay in character,” Audria promised.

“There are ways to get information without being obvious,” Christian added.

Traffic wasn’t as brutal as it could’ve been, so they made good time. “Douglas teaches a class at ten this morning,”

Liliana told them. “He usually arrives early, so you should be able to talk to him before his session.”

Audria pulled into the parking lot. Liliana directed her to her designated spot right as Rex Raines was stepping out of his Alfa Romeo. “There’s Rex. I’ll introduce you, Audria, or should I say, Audrey?” Audrey Grant was the alias they’d come up with while sticking close to Audria’s name. Christian would be shortened to Chris.

Liliana slid outside and shouted, “Rex.”

He turned and instead of his usual smile when he saw her, he looked troubled. “Hey, Liliana. I wanted to talk to you.”

“I-we wanted to talk to you too. This is Audrey Grant. She has some real estate questions to ask you.” At least it wasn’t a lie. Audria wanted to inquire about his visit to her condo.

Rex took her arm and guided her away from Audria. Lowering his voice, he asked, “Have you heard about the latest murders? They sound like the work of The Mortician.”

Liliana gasped, and a hand flew to her chest. “How do you know about him?”

“I was in school at Marquette at the time. I remember hearing about the string of brutal killings a state over in Minnesota. Liliana, that was you, wasn’t it? You are the one who escaped him.”

“Everything okay here?”

Liliana appreciated Luca’s support since Rex had blindsided her and she didn’t know how to react. Her heart was fluttering so fast, she feared she might be having a heart attack. “Rex was asking me about The Mortician.”

Luca stiffened next to her. “Why don’t we go to Liliana’s office and talk, Mr. Raines?”

Luca had phrased it as a question, but it was obviously a command.

Rex checked his watch. “I have about twenty minutes before a scheduled meeting with a client. Let’s go.”

Liliana led them inside on legs that were anything but steady. She had a feeling the hand on her back was Luca's way of letting her know he wouldn't let her fall.

Shonda called out a greeting and waved as they proceeded to her office. Liliana placed her bag inside the credenza and sat down. She didn't remove her bulletproof vest yet because she didn't want Rex to know she was wearing one. He dropped into one of the chairs in front of her desk while Luca leaned against it, facing him. Audria and Christian took up strategic spots around the room.

"Why were you at Liliana's place yesterday?"

Luca had said that Audria would question him, but he'd obviously changed his mind and taken the reins.

The question took Rex off guard for a moment. "I wasn't at her condo, but I was at the complex. I had a client who requested a viewing of an open unit."

"Douglas Speke."

Rex nodded in confirmation. "Yes."

"He asked you to show it to him? You didn't suggest it?"

Rex shook his head. "No. He approached me two days ago and asked if I'd be his realtor. He said that he'd seen a listing for a condo in the building and wanted to look at it."

"Were you with him the entire time?" Christian asked.

"Yeah, pretty much. We drove separately and met there but went up together to look at the listing."

"Did he know Liliana lived in the building?" Audria questioned.

"If he did, he didn't tell me. I certainly didn't point it out to him, even though there's no such thing as realtor-client privilege." Rex's brows pulled together. "I did find it curious that he asked me to show him that complex. It was out of the price range he quoted to me."

Luca asked, "Did you pass Liliana's condo while you were there?"

“No. The listing was for a unit on the third floor. We went in and looked around. He seemed interested but didn’t want to make an offer. He said he wanted to think about it.”

Rex’s phone buzzed, and he frowned at the screen.

“Problem?” Luca wondered.

“An issue with a listing,” he said before putting the phone away.

“What do you know about The Mortician?” Luca pressed.

“As I was telling Liliana, I went to school a state away from the killings ten years ago. It was big news at the time, and the guys in my fraternity were fascinated by it. I heard about the recent murders here in Miami, and when the news reporter said the blood had been drained from their bodies, it jogged my memory. I pulled up the old news stories and saw Liliana’s name. To say I was shocked is an understatement. Then I thought it might’ve been another woman with the same name, but one paper printed her picture.” Rex glanced at everyone in the room. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? The Mortician is back and killing again.”

“That’s not been confirmed,” Luca cautioned him. “And no, Audrey and Chris are friends looking to start their own fitness studio. I’m here to reconnect with Liliana.”

Liliana wasn’t sure Rex believed him. For one thing, Christian and Audria didn’t act like budding entrepreneurs. Plus, all three had an air of authority about them. It was apparent, at least to Liliana, that they were law enforcement of some sort.

A bell chimed on Rex’s phone. “Sorry, that’s my appointment. I need to go.” He stood and picked up his briefcase before turning to Liliana. “If there is anything I can do, please let me know.”

“I will.”

With a nod, he left.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that he dug into the case and found out about Liliana’s connection to The Mortician?”



Christian asked.

“He knew some details of the past victims and admitted to being fascinated by the case,” Audria added. “Maybe he decided to emulate Rader. That would explain the inconsistencies.”

“Rex?” Liliana shook her head. “He’s not a killer.”

“He’s on our suspect list,” Luca told her.

They could add him to it, but he wasn’t the guy. He’d only been kind and decent to her, and from the stories she’d heard about him, he treated everyone that way. If he liked to snatch prostitutes off the street and brutally torture them, there would be some sign of a deranged mind, wouldn’t there?

Liliana looked out and spotted Rutger with a gym bag over his shoulder. He didn’t have classes until the evening, so it was unusual for him to be here. “I’m going to ask Rutger if he’s seen Douglas Speke.”

Liliana left her office, not the least surprised when Luca followed her out, but he stayed back, giving her privacy to speak with her friend.

She was so lucky to have Rutger teach twice a week for her. He owned wildly successful dojos in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and West Palm Beach. He didn’t need to do it, but he did because she’d asked him. His sessions were the most popular on the schedule.

“Rutger.”

The martial arts instructor who had given her back her confidence turned at hearing his name. “Hey, Lil.”

“I didn’t think you taught until this evening.”

“I don’t, but I’m covering the early class.”

“Where’s Douglas—Rutger, what happened to you?”

He touched the bruise around his eye. “I needed to talk to you about that. I fired Speke last night.”

Liliana’s eyes widened in surprise. “You did? Why?”

“Because I heard about what he did to you from several people. When I asked him about it, he laughed it off and said you’d panicked. I know you, Liliana. You don’t overact. Ever. Plus, attacking the boss is a fire-able offense in my book, and I told him as much. He didn’t take it well. We fought ... well, he sucker-punched me, but I made him pay for it.”

“Oh, Rutger, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad I found out what kind of person he is. He said some nasty things that I didn’t appreciate. He won’t be able to find a job as an instructor in south Florida.”

“After he grabbed me, he apologized.” Kinda. Douglas had said it with a snarky tone, which had irritated her.

“Doesn’t matter.” Rutger crossed his arms. “He burned his bridge here. We’ve never talked about it, but I know what happened to you, Lil. I know about Ted Rader.”

Liliana tried to hide her reaction. She didn’t think anyone in Miami knew about her past and now there were two people in the span of a few minutes admitting they had known all along. “How—” She cleared her throat. “How did you find out?”

“I’ve known since the day I met you. You were so skittish and panicked whenever anyone got too close to you. I thought you were running from an abusive relationship. I wanted to make sure you were safe and that someone didn’t track you down. A buddy in the police department ran your name for me.”

It was an invasion of privacy, but she didn’t blame him. She had been scared of her own shadow back then. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Because it was your story to tell. If you wanted me to know, you would’ve told me.”

“He’s back.”

Rutger’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“Ted Rader. He’s killing again, here in Miami.”

Rutger ran a hand over his short brown hair. “Wow. I didn’t know that. I’ve been at my facility in West Palm for a few days. Lil, I know you can take care of yourself, but you need protection.”

“I have it.” She turned and motioned Luca forward. “Rutger, this is Luca Russo.”

Rutger shook Luca’s hand and narrowed his gaze. “That name rings a bell.”

“He was the cop who saved me from Rader.”

Rutger nodded in recognition. “I read about you. Are you still a police officer?”

“Private security.”

“What company?”

“COBRA Securities.”

“Out of Indiana?” At Luca’s confirmation, he nodded in approval. “Their reputation is stellar. I’ve worked with a couple of the agents there. I feel better knowing you’re watching out for Liliana, even though she can protect herself.”

Liliana smiled at his tacked-on praise.

“Do you know what time Douglas Speke will arrive today?” Luca asked.

“I was telling Liliana that I fired him last night.”

He explained his decision, which Luca readily agreed with since Liliana had told him about the incident.

“Do you have an address where we can contact him?”

“He was bunking in a motel until he could find a place to stay, but I don’t know which one.”

“I think I have it in the files.”

The men followed Liliana into her office. Christian and Audria were working on their computers, and both glanced up when they entered the room. Liliana introduced them to Rutger, keeping the made-up story about the reason for their visit. She didn’t mind that Rutger knew Luca worked for

COBRA Securities since he recognized him as being the cop who had saved her from Rader.

Liliana found Douglas's employment file and pulled it from the drawer. She rifled through it but couldn't find the paper with his current address. "I know he gave it to me." She remembered him writing it down because she'd pressed him for contact information. She clearly recalled putting the note in the file. Someone had removed it.

"Do you know where he was from originally?" Luca asked.

She looked up from the file. "I don't think I ever paid attention."

"Damn," Rutger muttered. "I'd forgotten. He's from Minnesota."

## Chapter Sixteen

Rutger tried calling Douglas Speke's number, but it instantly kicked to voicemail. Luca contacted the COBRA Securities office and had them search area motels for his name.

"He's registered at a residence hotel that offers short or long-term rentals." Luca recited the address from the text.

"It's not too far from here," Liliana said.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Rutger asked.

"Stay vigilant," Luca suggested. "If you see Speke, contact me immediately." He handed him a card.

"Will do." He pinned Luca with a gaze so intense, he would've shuddered if he'd been intimidated by the man. "Keep her safe."

Luca parroted his words back to him. "Will do."

Once Rutger left, Luca said, "Audria and I need to go to a task force meeting in an hour. Christian, you stay here with Liliana. Audria and I will check Speke's place out before we head to the police station."

"Be careful," Liliana said as they left.

Audria drove and five minutes later turned into the parking lot of a chain hotel. "He's in room 402."

They entered through a side door that was supposed to require a key, but someone had propped it open with a rock.

"Makes you feel safe, doesn't it?" Luca deadpanned.

They took the elevator to the fourth floor. Luca knocked on the door, but no one answered.

"Wait here," Audria said and then disappeared around a corner. She returned, waving a key card. "I swiped it from a housekeeping cart, so we have to hurry."

Luca was impressed. Technically, they were breaking the law, and anything they found wouldn't be admissible in a court of law. It was only a problem if he'd still had his old job. He donned a pair of gloves and slid the card into the slot. When the green light flashed, he turned the handle. They both grabbed their weapons.

“Speke? You here?”

No one answered, so they slipped inside. The room was a wreck, with the sheets, pillows, and comforter strewn off the bed. Empty pizza boxes were stacked beside an overflowing trash can filled with beer bottles. Towels littered the floor. Despite the carnage, it was evident that the room was utterly devoid of personal items.

Audria had come to the same conclusion. “He’s checked out.”

“Let’s talk to the front desk clerk.”

As they left, a member of the maintenance staff was searching through the housekeeping cart. “Where did I put that key?” the woman mumbled to herself.

Audria stealthily tossed it to the floor. “Excuse me.”

The woman looked up. “Can I help you? Do you need anything for your room? More towels?”

“No, I saw you searching for something. Is that what you’re looking for?” She pointed to the card beneath the wheel of the cart.

The woman let out a relieved sigh and bent down to pick it up. “Oh, thank the heavens. It is. I must’ve dropped it and not realized it. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Luca was waiting for her down the hallway with an amused smile. “Nice. And to think you used to uphold federal rules and regulations.”

“Hey, where do you think I learned my spy-like ways?”

They reached the registration desk. A young man with curly black hair was handing a receipt to a family of three. When they left, he smiled at them. “Welcome. Do you have a reservation?”

Luca detected a hint of a Jamaican accent. “No, Cosi,” he read from the nametag, “I need to ask you a couple of questions.” He flashed his COBRA Securities identification.

“How can I help you, Mr. Russo?”

“A man was renting a room with a short-term lease, but I can’t contact him. Can you tell me if Douglas Speke is still registered?”

Cosi looked hesitant. “I’m not supposed to give out client information.”

“Would it help to know I was an FBI agent?”

Cosi’s eyes widened at Audria’s statement. “Yes. I don’t want to interfere with official government business.”

Luca gave Audria the side-eye. They were skirting the edge of the law. He didn’t mind bending the truth when necessary, but it was hard to remove the cop he used to be from the situation. However, she’d phrased it correctly. She had been an agent. Gray area. All good.

Cosi typed into his computer. “He’s still a registered guest. His contract is month-to-month, and he’s paid through the end of this one.”

Luca shared a look with Audria. He might not have officially checked out, but he’d cleared his room. Luca didn’t like the implications of what that might mean. Speke wasn’t answering his phone, and now they had no clue to suggest his whereabouts.

“How often is his room cleaned?” Audria asked.

“Once a week, on Fridays.”

Housekeeping wouldn’t enter until tomorrow. Luca took out a card. “Do me a favor, Cosi. Call me when Speke either renews his room or checks out.”

Cosi nodded. "I will, Mr. Russo."

Once they were back inside the SUV, Audria echoed his earlier thoughts. "He's on the run."

"You think he could be the copycat killer?"

"It's a possibility, especially since he's from Minnesota, and now he's disappeared."

He was a suspect for sure, but Luca wasn't convinced. There were still too many similarities with Ted Rader's methods. Still, it was coincidental that Speke knew the phrase that was sure to terrorize Liliana. Luca had never included it in the official police file, so the only other person who would know about it was Rader. Had he passed the information to Speke, along with his kill souvenirs?

"I'll have Tyler do a deep dive into his background." He sent a text asking Tyler to mine for any and all details of Douglas Speke's past.

Audria drove to police headquarters and found parking in the crowded garage. Memories bombarded Luca as they were escorted to a conference room. His station had been much smaller, but the sounds and smells were the same. Coffee. Burned popcorn. Sweat. There had been good times, but there had also been awful ones.

He followed Audria inside the room to see people milling about, drinking coffee, and chatting. A whiteboard had been set up with the pertinent details of the first two cases and Rader's past crimes.

Luca walked over to study it.

"The differences bother me."

Luca turned to see SSA Reese Reneau standing next to him. "Yeah, me too."

"If it's not him, the perp has access to the stash of items he took from his first victims."

Luca nodded slowly. "That's what has me perplexed. If not for that, I would be certain it was a copycat."



Detective Torres strode into the room with his arms full. He dropped a binder on the conference room table and placed a box of pastries next to the coffee machine.

“Cops and donuts. A little cliché, isn’t it?” Luca joked.

“That doesn’t bother me even a little bit,” Torres remarked. “Try one.”

Luca did and almost moaned. It was delicious. The others crowded around and swiped the treats until the box was nothing more than icing smears.

Torres moved to where he’d stashed the binder. “Thank you all for coming. Let’s get this meeting started so we can get out there and find the killer.”

The occupants of the room took seats. Counting Audria and himself, there were eight people. Torres had them go around the table and introduce themselves, asking Luca to go last. Torres had included a detective from his precinct as well as a deputy from the sheriff’s office. Reese had brought two special agents from the FBI with him.

When everyone else was done, he stood. “My name is Luca Russo, and I work for COBRA Securities. Ten years ago, I was a cop in Minnesota. My partner and I were the ones who caught Rader in the act. We took fire but returned it. Rader was hit twice but got away after he shot his hostage.”

“Damn, how did we manage to score you on the task force?” Detective Harlen Foley asked.

As much as Luca wanted to keep Liliana’s name out of it, it would be impossible with the trinkets she’d received. He told them about Liliana’s involvement and the items sent to her from the previous and current victims.

“It is Ted Rader,” Special Agent Juli Husker concluded. “He’s back.”

“We can’t assume that,” Reese cautioned. “Yes, there are similarities, but there are vast differences too. I asked our Behavior Analysis Unit to update The Mortician’s profile.” He passed around copies of the report.

“Did they deduce it was Rader?” Deputy Phil Bluffton asked without reading the paper.

“Not exactly. As I said earlier, there are substantial variations, making it appear that Rader isn’t the killer.”

“How would you explain the jewelry from his earlier crimes?” Detective Wolf asked.

“I can’t. There are excellent arguments that Rader is the current perp and just as sensible reasons he isn’t.”

In other words, they had nothing to go on.

“We could be dealing with a protégé of Rader’s or a possible partner, though there was never any indication that anyone else was involved ten years ago,” Luca said. “When he was caught in the act, he was alone.”

Detective Torres stood and walked to the whiteboard. He picked up a marker and outlined the details of the two recent cases. Luca provided insight into the inconsistencies, and Torres noted them on the board.

A knock sounded on the door, and an officer in a blue police uniform stuck her head inside. “Excuse me, Detective Torres. I know you asked not to be interrupted, but a woman is demanding to speak to the officer in charge of the recent murders of prostitutes. She said she has vital information.”

“Send her back.” Torres flipped the whiteboard around and pushed it against the wall, hiding the evidence they’d gathered up to this point.

A woman sashayed into the room but stopped abruptly on her five-inch stilettos when she spotted everyone inside. She tipped forward and almost toppled over before catching herself. The long braids in her hair were threaded with beads and dyed blue. She wore a skintight top showcasing an ample chest that would’ve cushioned her fall. Her skirt was leopard print and borderline obscene. The aforementioned heels were fire engine red. She also had a fat black-haired, green-eyed baby on her hip.

“Am I in the wrong room?”

“No. I’m Detective Torres. I’m in charge of the investigation into the recent murders. What’s your name?”

“Dana Jones, but you can call me Diamond. Who are these people?” She waved a hand at the rest of the occupants.

“Members of a joint task force. You have information for us, Diamond?”

“I heard about the murders. Word gets around fast in my business. I didn’t think nothing of it since those kinds of things happen from time to time. But then my friend Daisy May went missing, and she’s as reliable as clockwork ... or something like that.” Diamond waved a hand with the longest ruby-red nails Luca had ever seen. How did she get anything done with those talons?

“Anyway, I talk to her every morning after our shifts. I was worried when I didn’t hear from her and stopped by her apartment. Her babysitter said she never called or picked up J.J. here.” She jiggled the baby. “He was the most important thing in the world to Daisy May. She’d never leave him. Never. She’s done fell victim to The Mortician. That’s his name, right? I read all about him online. That’s what they called him.”

“When was the last time you saw her?” Detective Torres questioned.

“Yesterday. We always chat before we hit the stre ... er, go to work. At our jobs. It’s our daily ritual.”

“What is your job?” Reese asked, though they all knew.

Diamond glanced around the room filled with cops all staring at her. She flashed a sly smile. “We’re in customer service.”

“Customer service,” Reese repeated dubiously.

Diamond nodded. “Our jobs are to make people happy.” She winked. “I’m very good at what I do.”

Luca bet she was. “Did you see Daisy May getting into a car?”

“No, hun.” She plumped one massive breast. “These babies guarantee I get picked up . . . er,” she cast a nervous glance around the room, “meet with the clientele first.”

“Why do you think she might be a victim of The Mortician?” Detective Torres asked.

“Uh, hello?” She lifted J.J. “I told you Daisy May would not leave him. He was her world, and everything she did was for him.”

“Maybe she found entertainment that kept her busy,” Audria suggested.

“No.” Diamond’s tone was harsh. “Nothing came before her baby. Nothing.”

“Diamond, we’re going to need the truth from you if you want us to help your friend,” Detective Torres warned. “Is Daisy May a prostitute?”

Diamond deflated like a popped balloon. “She’s working the streets so J.J. will have a better life. None of us goes into this line of work wanting to, but we need to make money to live. Something happened to her. I’d bet my stock portfolio on it. I do have one, you know. Soon, I’ll have enough to leave here and never look back.”

“Do you have a picture of Daisy May that we can distribute?” Luca asked her.

“Sure.” Diamond pulled a phone from her pocket and manipulated it with one hand while she bounced J.J. on her hip. “Here she is.” She turned the phone around.

Luca’s stomach pitched. Daisy May was a petite, green-eyed brunette, like the other two victims. Like Liliana.

## Chapter Seventeen

Diamond was reluctant to let J.J. go, but she finally allowed Audria to turn the baby over to a worker from child services, who would have the resources necessary to care for an infant. Diamond wanted to be the one to keep J.J., but Audria didn't think they would allow her to do so since she wasn't related by blood and because of her occupation. Child services would work to uncover a relative to take the baby in until Daisy May was located. Audria was afraid they would find Daisy May dead. She matched the profile and hadn't contacted anyone in over eighteen hours. There was a good chance she had become The Mortician's latest victim.

"If he killed Daisy May, he's escalating," Luca pointed out. "Before, Rader took time between kills. He studied the victims and learned their patterns. Now they are happening closer together. Why the urgency?"

"There must be a timeframe we're unaware of," Reese decided. "There is some reason he's rushing the kills."

"That would explain why he chose prostitutes," Audria noted. "They would be easier to grab. All he needed to do was pretend to be a john. Also, they might not be missed as quickly."

"He seems to be fixated on women with long, dark hair this time," Reese added. "That wasn't his pattern ten years ago."

An idea struck Audria. "We need to draw him out. I'll go undercover as a prostitute."

"No."

Audria raised her brows at Reese's vehement denial.

"It's too dangerous."

"I have the right coloring," she argued. "And I'm trained."

"What if he shoots you as soon as you get in his car? You aren't bulletproof."

“That’s not how he does it, and you know it. He rapes and strangles.”

Reese crossed his arms. “Miami is a large area. What are the odds you’ll be in the right place to catch The Mortician?”

“Well, I’m not a statistician, but I can tell you the odds if we sit back and wait for the next shoe to drop. There’s a ninety-nine-point-nine percent chance someone else will die.”

Reese didn’t have a response to that. She looked at Luca.

“I don’t like it either.”

“You will be watching me,” she argued, “and I’ll be wearing a wire and tracker.”

“What if you get picked up by someone else?” Reese posed. “That’s the most likely scenario.”

“We’ll arrest him for soliciting a prostitute,” Detective Torres interjected.

Audria waved a hand at him. “See, someone who is reasonable and thinking clearly.”

“We’ll also send a vice officer undercover with you, so you won’t go alone. She’s currently working the streets and can guide you on what to do.”

Audria felt better about that. She’d played clandestine roles before, but never as a hooker. However, the cop Torres wanted to send with Audria, Kelli Gilbert, was out of town and wouldn’t return until late, so they couldn’t set the plan in motion until tomorrow. They spoke to Kelli over the phone, and she promised to have clothes and makeup to transform Audria into a call girl.

The task force discussed details and agreed to reconvene at six p.m. tomorrow at the station. As much as Audria wanted to do it tonight, things had to be set in place, and she understood, but she wanted to catch the guy before someone else lost their life.

#

Luca had been away with Audria at the task force meeting for a few hours, and Liliana missed him desperately. It was sad, really. She'd gone years without seeing him and been able to function perfectly well. Now, within a few short days, she was becoming obsessed with him. Not good.

Liliana glanced up from the finance sheet she was working on to see a man in spandex shorts, wearing a helmet and a shirt with Speedy Delivery on the front, standing at the check-in desk. She knew without a doubt the package was for her and it was from The Mortician.

“Christian?”

“I see him. Wait here.”

He left the office and approached the delivery man, who backed up a step. With his size and build, Christian could be intimidating. They spoke, and the bike messenger made all kinds of gestures with his hands. Christian took the package—somehow, he'd donned a glove—and signed for it.

He returned and placed the envelope on the desk. “The person paid in cash and wore a disguise. They flagged this guy down a block away and gave him an extra hundred to deliver it now. He thought it was a man because the person wore a shaggy brown wig, mustache, sunglasses, and hat, but conceded that it might've been a woman.”

“That helps not at all.”

Christian sighed. “It doesn't.”

“I'll let you open it.”

Christian took out a knife. “Don't you want to wait for Luca to return?”

“The police need to know about it as soon as possible.”

“Agreed.”

Using the tip of the blade, he sliced through the tape.

#

Luca wasn't keen on using Audria as bait to draw out The Mortician, but they needed to stop him before he killed again.

They would've set it up for tonight, but the cop who would accompany her wasn't available until tomorrow. Luca hadn't known Audria for long, but she was more than qualified. She'd passed the tests to become an FBI agent and the more rigorous ones to work for COBRA Securities.

Man, those suckers were brutal. Dante Costa, the person in charge of certifying new hires, was a beast. He'd been a Navy SEAL and demanded the best of the recruits. They gave it, or they weren't hired. Period. That Audria was here now was a testament to her mental and physical fortitude. She would be protected, and he trusted she could handle herself.

As wary as Luca was, Reese Reneau was twice as leery. He'd been adamant that Audria not set herself up. Since she didn't work for him anymore, he had no say in the decision. That seemed to frustrate him. Luca spoke to him, assuring him that Audria would never be in grave danger. Maybe he was talking himself into it too.

It was also telling that Reese was so adamantly against it. He knew Audria had excelled at her job with the FBI—Reese was always the first to point it out. She'd had dangerous assignments before. Luca was sure of it. It seemed Reese's feelings ran deeper than those of a former boss.

Once they discussed the details of what would happen tomorrow, Luca was anxious to get back to Liliana. He trusted Christian but hated leaving her, even for a short time.

Kasey was on the phone when they arrived at the studio. She waved as they passed her desk and headed to Liliana's office.

Luca spotted the package as soon as they entered. He had a sinking feeling about what they would find inside. "Have you opened it?"

Christian nodded. "Yeah. Just now."

"Is there something with a daisy on it?"

Christian lifted a pencil dangling a gaudy necklace with white petals and a yellow center that Luca remembered from the photo Diamond had shared of Daisy May. The center



should open to reveal the picture of a baby boy. J.J. would grow up without the mother who had sacrificed her life to care for him.

“How did you know?” Lilitana asked.

He recalled Diamond’s visit and the fear that her friend had fallen victim to The Mortician.

“Oh, no,” Lilitana murmured. “What will happen to the boy?”

Luca shook his head. “I’m not sure. He’s in the care of child services now.” Hopefully, he would be adopted by someone who would give him a good life. Maybe the courts would do the right thing and give him to Diamond. She loved the baby and wanted to raise him. Most likely, they would place him with a foster family if relatives of Daisy May couldn’t be found.

Luca called Detective Torres and Reese Reneau to inform them about the latest package, which also included a gold cuff bracelet that most likely belonged to Darcy Beale, Rader’s original third victim.

When he disconnected, he asked, “How did this arrive?”

“A bike messenger dropped it off.”

“Luca, Audria, take a look at this.”

Christian had his laptop open on the conference table. He turned it so they could see the screen. “It’s security footage from outside Lilitana’s studio.”

Even though cameras were already in the parking lot, they’d added one of their own.

“I was checking to see if the person who paid off the messenger was caught on tape. He wasn’t, but see the guy there?” He pointed out a figure leaning against a light post, smoking a cigarette and talking on a phone. His focus was on Lilitana’s place. He ended the call and tossed the butt on the pavement before grounding it out. Then he picked up a bag and headed inside.

“When was this?”

“Two days ago, around seven p.m. Keep watching.” Christian fast-forwarded until the man came outside and climbed into his vehicle. Instead of leaving, he waited until the studio closed at ten.

“Do you think he’s casing it?” Audria wondered.

There were a few cars in the lot. Liliana’s evening manager, Jody Brock, came outside with two other people, a man and a woman.

“That’s Georgia Perkins and Theo Harvey, the real estate agents next door,” Luca noted.

The trio walked to their vehicles, waved, and drove away. The man paused for a beat and then pulled out after them.

Christian hit the forward button again and stopped. The same car was in the lot. He zoomed in to show the man watching the building with binoculars.

“This was last night?”

“It was,” Christian confirmed.

“He is casing it,” Audria claimed.

“This time, he doesn’t go inside,” Christian informed them. “He watches and waits until everyone leaves again.”

“Can you get a look at his license plate?” Luca asked.

Christian shook his head. “I tried, but he’s got some kind of shield on it to make it impossible to see.”

That was never good. “We need to catch him in the act tonight,” Luca decided. “Liliana needs to stay late to teach a dance class, so we’ll ambush him.”

#

Audria stayed with Liliana inside the studio while Christian and Luca left the building, each headed in a different direction. They circled and came up to the watcher’s vehicle. This close, Luca could read the license plate, so he snapped a picture before creeping up to the driver’s side. The window was down. Good. Luca placed the barrel of his gun against the man’s temple.

“Don’t move a muscle. Hands where I can see them.”

The man froze, his eyes darting sideways from Luca to Christian, who’d stuck his gun through the passenger side window.

“Okay, okay, no itchy trigger fingers, fellas,” the man scolded. He placed his hands on the steering wheel.

Luca opened the door. “Now get out.”

The man sighed and slid outside. He was wearing a navy-blue tracksuit with white tennis shoes—no noticeable bulge from a weapon.

“Who are you?”

“Who are you?” the man shot back.

“I’m the one holding a gun to your spinal cord,” Luca drawled.

“I’ve got your cerebrum,” Christian added, coming around the car with his gun poised.

“Look, lower your pistols, okay? Reach into the glove compartment, and you’ll find my ID.”

Christian leaned in and popped the latch. He removed a brown leather wallet and flipped it open. “Robert Eckerd. Private Investigator.”

“You’re a PI?” Luca repeated.

“I am.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m pleading client-investigator privilege.”

“There’s no such thing,” Luca scoffed. “Try again.”

Eckerd huffed. “I’d rather not divulge any details.” He started to lower his arms, but Luca dug the barrel of his gun into his back, and they shot back up.

“I’d rather not face-plant you to the ground, but you’re about two seconds away from eating blacktop.”

“Fine. A man hired me to follow his soon-to-be ex-wife. He wants to know if she cheated on him. Contentious divorce. Nasty, really.”

“Who?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“Henry Perkins,” Christian supplied, holding a sticky note with the man’s contact info.

Perkins was the last name of one of Rex Raines’s real estate agents. “Georgia Perkins?”

Eckerd sighed and nodded.

“Is she?”

He hitched a shoulder. “Not sure. I’ve only been doing this for a couple of days. If she is, I haven’t been able to identify the other party yet. From what I’ve witnessed, she’s rather boring.”

Luca removed his weapon. “You can put your arms down, but you’ll have to find another way to tail her instead of hanging out in the parking lot.”

“It’s a free country,” Eckerd argued.

“Yes, it is, but I won’t tell you again. I see you here, and I will have you arrested for loitering.”

Eckerd looked between Luca and Christian. “You two cops or something?”

“Or something,” Luca agreed.

Christian slapped the wallet against Eckerd’s chest, and his hand shot up to grip it. “Fine. I’ll leave, but I might decide to join the fitness center. I took a complimentary class the other night and enjoyed it.” He tapped his belly. “I might get back into shape.”

“Give it a couple of weeks. If you feel the same, go for it. Don’t come around before that.”

Eckerd looked like he wanted to argue but snapped his mouth closed at the unwavering looks from Luca and

Christian. “Fine.” He slid into his car. With a shake of his head, he backed out of the space and drove away.

Christian stood beside Luca as they watched him turn onto the street and disappear. “You believe him?”

“Yeah, I do,” Luca said.

“I snapped photos of his license and sent it to the office to run a check.”

“Good.”

#

Liliana had a hard time focusing on instructing the dance students. They knew the routine that would be performed at the recital, and the only thing left to do was polish it, but her mind was elsewhere.

She couldn't stop thinking of the little boy who would grow up without a mother. Maybe it wasn't the most noble thing that Daisy May had sold her body to pay bills, but she'd done what she had to do to survive. That took grit, determination, and courage. According to Luca, everything she earned went straight to her son's care.

“They're really great,” Audria praised, jarring Liliana from her thoughts. She watched as the students navigated the choreography perfectly. They were good.

“Thanks. They've worked hard.”

When the class was over, Liliana ensured the students had the information for the joint practice sessions with Maria's studio before sending them home.

Luca and Christian came back inside. Liliana's heart kicked up to see Luca stride forward with a supreme confidence that was both sexy and sure. Oh gosh, she loved him. She loved Luca.

Maybe she should've been shocked at the intensity of her feelings, but deep down, she'd always known, from the moment she'd met him years ago. He was the love of her life.

“Ready to go?”

For a moment, she couldn't speak. All she could do was stare into the face that was so dear to her. Then she nodded.

When Luca reached down and took her hand, Liliana clung to it like a lifeline.

## Chapter Eighteen

Luca was getting frustrated at the long line of dead ends. The Mortician was a human male with faults and flaws just like anyone, yet they couldn't catch a break. He'd outmaneuvered them at every turn. Luca had his chance to stop him ten years ago, but Liliana's life had mattered more than a notch on his police belt. Given the opportunity, he'd do the same thing a hundred times over. He would never regret staying with her after she'd been shot.

His partner at the time, Richard Wells, had been a couple of months short of retirement. He'd never aspired to be anything other than a beat cop. Still, when he'd gone after The Mortician, Luca thought he'd catch him. After all, they'd both wounded the killer. But Ted Rader bested them once again. He'd gotten away without a trace. Wells had retired a few months later, and Luca had gone on to become a detective with the force.

Now, all these years later, Luca was still chasing him. It was as if he was a phantom. He'd check the system every couple of years to see if there were any similar murders, but there hadn't been any. So, what had Rader been doing for the last decade? It was rare for a serial killer to stop for so long.

Luca would have enjoyed making love to Liliana last night, but the day's events had drained her. Two people admitting they knew about her past had thrown her for a loop. Luca had held her so she could sleep.

She came out to where he was drinking coffee with Audria and Christian, looking well-rested. Her smile was the air he needed to breathe.

“Hungry?”

The look she gave him telegraphed *for you*. He almost grabbed her and dragged her back to the bedroom. Instead, he handed her a cranberry-apple muffin.

Once everyone had eaten, they headed to the SUV.

“Luca.”

He turned at Audria’s voice and then followed her gaze. Lying on the windshield was a manilla envelope.

Luca glanced around the parking garage. It was full of cars but absent of people. He’d checked the security situation the first day and discovered that while there were cameras, they only covered the elevator. When Christian and Audria had arrived with supplies, they’d attached one on a wall to encompass the vehicles, both Liliana’s and theirs. The package was on theirs.

“Pulling up footage,” Christian announced.

Luca watched over his coworker’s shoulder to see a young kid on a skateboard wearing a gray hoodie scoping all the vehicles. He stopped, placed a foot on the edge of his board to tip it in the air, and swiped it. Then he removed a piece of paper from his pocket and checked to make sure the license plate was what he was looking for. He crumpled the paper and tossed it over his shoulder before pulling the envelope from inside his sweatshirt. He barely dropped it on the glass, probably afraid an alarm would go off. If they’d been driving an official COBRA Securities vehicle, it would have, and Luca would’ve received an alert on his phone. Once the kid finished, he released the board to the ground, hopped on, and skated away.

“It wouldn’t do any good to find him,” Christian said. “He won’t know who paid him to leave the package.”

Luca agreed. The person had used cash so far and had donned a disguise at least once. It was almost certain the kid would have no idea who had bribed him to drop off the package.

“Found the note.”

Audria had slid on a pair of latex gloves and unfolded the crumpled paper the kid had tossed away. Their plate number was scribbled in black ink.

Luca glanced around again. Instead of checking the contents out in the open, he would wait until they were inside



the SUV. He removed it from the windshield and climbed into the back seat with Liliana.

The vehicle had been compromised. Rader knew their license plate. Luca texted BeBe, asking if she could secure another one in a different color. She answered five minutes later with instructions on where to make the switch. It probably wouldn't fool Rader, but it might slow him down.

Audria drove out of the lot and merged into traffic. Luca pinched the clip to open the envelope addressed to Liliana. Inside was a chunky ring with a faux red stone and a sapphire tennis bracelet. There was no doubt the bracelet belonged to Emilee Carden, Rader's original fourth victim, since it had been listed as missing from the crime scene. They would have to wait for a body to be discovered before the ring's owner could be identified.

Audria pulled up to the door to drop Christian and Liliana off at her studio. Luca ran in to make sure everything was clear before they headed to exchange the SUV. Instead of black, this one was forest green with tinted windows. After they moved everything to the new vehicle, they continued to the police station for the task force meeting.

Reese Reneau was already in the room when they arrived, working on his computer. He looked up when they entered, and his gaze zeroed in on the package.

"Another one? It looks like he is killing every single day."

Luca placed it on the table and shook out the contents. Reese took a pen and moved the bracelet. "This was documented as missing from Emilee Carden. There hasn't been a report of another—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Detective Torres arrived and announced, "We have another murder." He noticed the jewelry. "When did that arrive?"

"Early this morning." Luca showed them the tape from the parking garage.

"Damn it," Torres cursed. "Four victims and we have absolutely nothing to go on."

#

Audria was itching to go undercover and snare The Mortician. After they found out about Daisy May, she'd wanted to do it yesterday, but things needed to be set up, so she had to wait. Patience wasn't her strong suit.

Then another woman had been murdered. Maybe they could've caught him yesterday if she'd gone out last night, maybe not. The odds weren't great that he would pick her up, but they needed to be proactive.

Kelli Gilbert showed up with a pile of clothes and a tacklebox full of cosmetics. "You're beautiful, Audria. Let's make you gaudy."

The vice cop proceeded to back up her claim. After Audria had inserted green contacts, Kelli layered on the eye makeup, using a shade of blue Audria didn't think appeared anywhere else in the natural world. Her lips were a cherry red, her lashes could be used as fans in any nearby harem, and her hair was teased to Tina Turner proportions circa 1987.

The clothes Kelli chose were loud, tight-fitting, and frighteningly scandalous. Audria looked in the mirror and didn't recognize the person staring back at her.

"I won't be wearing a Kevlar vest with this," she muttered.

"That is a drawback," Kelli agreed. "But you are looking good, Audria. You'll be a hit."

"Great." Audria only hoped she attracted the attention of one man—Ted Rader.

She fluffed a portion of her hair, but it'd been sprayed into concrete status and refused to budge. The underwires of the pushup bra pinched her skin, and she felt out of sorts. T-shirts, sports bras, and yoga pants were her clothes of choice, and she felt comfortable in them.

In front of Audria's eyes, Kelli transformed into a hooker to rival Audria. She covered her auburn hair with a black wig and accentuated her big blue eyes with shades of green and white.

“You are not going out like that,” Reese blurted when Audria teetered into the conference room where the others were waiting.

She adjusted the mini-skirt that barely covered her ass and shifted the padded bra that added much-needed fullness to her modest chest. She wobbled in the electric blue stilettos but caught herself. “The wire and camera are in place, as is my Sig Sauer.” She patted the faux fur clutch. It would be harder to defend herself in the heels, but she’d simply kick them off if necessary. Plus, they would make magnificent weapons. Aim one of the sharp points at an eyeball, and it was goodnight, Irene.

“I didn’t even recognize you,” Luca admitted.

“That’s the point.”

Reese grumbled the entire drive to the red-light district.

“The command center is behind that building over there.” Reese pointed to where the mobile unit had parked. Reese, Luca, and Detective Torres would be in there, as would Liliana. They needed Christian’s eyes on Audria, and Luca didn’t want to leave her while they conducted the operation. Audria suggested having Liliana wait at the police station, where she’d be surrounded by people with guns, but Luca nixed the idea. He didn’t trust anyone else with her safety. Audria didn’t blame him. It was hard to put your faith in people you didn’t know, even if they swore an oath to serve and protect. Sometimes, rotten apples ended up in the bunch.

Christian was sitting in a vehicle near where Audria and Kelli would station themselves. He was Audria’s backup and would follow if she got picked up.

Reese dropped Audria and Kelli off a few blocks away, and they walked to an area buzzing with activity. Her feet were screaming in pain already—damn high heels.

“Diamond said Daisy May was picked up after seven-thirty,” Audria told Kelli. It was seven now, so they had time to get in place, assuming The Mortician kept to the same

timeframe. “He probably picked her out instead of her soliciting him, so let the person call you over.”

Audria eyed the other women prowling the streets, some walking into traffic to stop cars and proposition the drivers, feeling an overwhelming sense of sadness for them.

“You can’t let it get to you,” Kelli said, obviously reading Audria’s mind. “It will depress the hell out of you.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Audria murmured.

“When I was younger, I wanted to be an actress. I look at this as playing a part in a movie. It’s how I separate myself from the debasement.”

Audria had gone undercover before, but never as a woman selling her body to pay rent or feed a child or a drug habit.

“Here, I grabbed one of these for you.” She surreptitiously handed Audria a taser.

“Thanks.” Audria slipped it into her purse beside her Sig. It might be the best option since they wanted to take The Mortician alive. When she used a gun, she was trained to go for the kill shot.

Her mind briefly flashed back to the grieving mother she’d been forced to shoot, but she ruthlessly shoved the images into a box and mentally locked it tight, tossing away the key like one of the therapists had suggested. Though the event had traumatized her, she was confident she could pull the trigger again, if necessary, to save a life.

The change in Kelli was shocking as they neared the street. Her walk was different, as was her body language. Audria didn’t think she could pull this off, but she added an extra swivel to her hips and loosened her shoulders.

“Hey, what do you two think you’re doing here? This is my corner.”

Audria turned to see a brittle-looking woman in a cut-off tank top and frayed denim skirt. She was smoking a cigarette, and her bleached blonde hair was stringy and scraggly. She’d literally been around the block more than once. Even though

she probably hadn't hit thirty yet, she looked at least twenty years older.

"This is a free country," Kelli snapped. "You don't own the sidewalk." She made a shooing motion with her hand. "Move along."

"Who do you think you are, bitch?"

Kelli straightened and stared down at the woman. "You really want to do this?"

The woman frowned and turned away as a car slowed.

"Showtime," Kelli murmured.

The glass was tinted, so it was impossible to see who was driving the black sedan with a dented back fender. Audria was sure the window was about to lower when the car suddenly sped off, practically laying rubber in his wake. What would make him—

"Tango coming up from behind," she heard Christian warn through her comm device.

She turned to see a large man approaching them. He no doubt scared the would-be john away. The man was at least six-two and a solid three-seventy-five or four hundred pounds, wearing a silk polo shirt and several gold chains around his thick neck. He stopped in front of Audria and looked her up and down.

"You new here?"

Kelli glanced over at him and rolled her eyes. "Go away, Rolland. We have representation."

"Does this one?" He jerked a thumb in Audria's direction, and his eyes roved over her body again. "With your looks, doll face, I can double whatever you're making now. Dump your guy and let me rep ya."

Audria could not believe an actual pimp was courting her. "How do you know it's a guy?"

That seemed to intrigue Rolland, and he wagged his brows. "A chick. That's hot."

*Gross.* “Not interested.” Audria turned away and focused on the cars slowly creeping by. Her pulse quickened when she recognized the same black sedan as before. Something spooked him, probably Rolland again, and he screeched away.

“Look, you’re killing our business,” Kelli chastised. “Go work your girls and leave us be.”

“But I’m having such fun chatting with you two gorgeous babes. What are your rates? Maybe I’ll hire you both to service me.” He grabbed his crotch. “I’ve got a huge ... appetite.”

“I’m pulling out the taser,” Audria growled.

Kelli stepped in front of her before she could light Rolland up and pushed his chest. “Go away before I call my pimp. You might have a couple hundred pounds on him, but he doesn’t fight fair.”

Rolland glanced between them and shrugged. “Your loss.”

Audria watched him leave, waiting until he disappeared from sight before she turned back to the trolling vehicles. An expensive red sports car screeched to a halt, and the driver, who didn’t look a day over eighteen, waved at Kelli.

“That’s my cue,” Kelli whispered. “Keep in contact, and good luck.”

She shimmied to the car and leaned into the window to speak with the driver. Apparently, they agreed on a price, and she scurried to the passenger seat. An unmarked police car trailed behind to keep tabs on Kelli. Audria didn’t know how she did this for a living and hoped she would be promoted to a better assignment soon.

The back of Audria’s neck began to tingle. She was being watched. Was it Rolland? Some low-life degenerate looking to pick up a hooker? Or The Mortician?

“Now that your guard dog is gone, how about we discuss a joint partnership?”

Audria jumped and spun around. Damn. It was Rolland. She did not want to tase his ass, but she would if he didn’t

leave her alone.

“Look, how many times do I have to tell you I’m not interested? Go away.”

“I’m coming to you,” Christian said in her ear. “I’ll be your pimp and beat Rolland’s ass.”

“No. Stay there.”

“What?” Rolland looked confused. “I didn’t move.”

“Well, do. Go bother someone else.”

Before she realized his intent, he reached out and grabbed her necklace, tearing it from her neck. “Hey!”

“We’ll call this a parting gift.” He sauntered away.

Audria was torn between going after him and retrieving the jewelry or waiting for The Mortician.

“Don’t engage,” Luca instructed.

“The camera was on there,” she groused.

“Use the backup pen.”

“Yeah, okay.” Audria dug the pen from her purse. She was bummed because she’d liked the pendant of a swimming mermaid, even if it was a cheap fake. She’d picked it out from the choices Kelli had offered her.

Turning her attention back to the surrounding activity, she witnessed several deals being made, both of the prostitution and drug kind. She wasn’t surprised when the black car returned. This time, the window lowered, and a hand gestured for her to come to him.

“This could be it, guys.”

“I’m ready to roll,” Christian replied. He would follow her, along with another unmarked police car.

Audria approached the driver and tried to look sexy. She chewed on the top of the pen, attempting to look seductive, but in reality, she wanted the camera to capture his face.

“Got him,” Reese announced. “We’ll run him through facial recognition now.”

Audria smiled to herself. Luca would also send it to Tyler, and he would probably get a hit way before the FBI.

The man asked her price, and she quoted him the amount Kelli had recommended. It was in line with what the others charged. Not too low that she seemed desperate, not too high that he balked.

“Get in.”

With a deep breath, she rounded the hood, opened the door, and slid into the passenger seat. The car smelled like sweat and cheap cologne. She cataloged the driver. Thick, sable hair, scruffy cheeks and chin. He nervously glanced in the rearview mirror before merging into the flow of traffic.

“What’s your name, honey?” *Gah*. Audria winced. Kelli had told her to use pet names, but it so wasn’t her style.

He glanced over at her, and his gaze dipped to her cleavage. He licked his lips. *Gross*. She fought a shudder.

“You can call me Ed.”

Ed. Close to Ted, as in Rader. Was that a coincidence? He obviously wasn’t the original Mortician. Maybe he was a fan, copying his killing style.

“What’s your last name, Ed?”

He glanced over at her. “You need that for this?”

“Well, it helps.”

“Smith. Ed Smith.”

Yeah, right. She’d bet her favorite Sig Sauer his name wasn’t Smith. “So, Ed Smith, where are you from?” Maybe he’d slip and let her know he was from Minnesota.

“What does that matter?”

Hum, defensive. Did Ed have something to hide? “I like to get to know my friends, Ed.” She reached over and stroked his leg. She was unprepared when his hand slammed over hers, and he guided it to his erection. Oh God, she was going to be sick. She was going to throw up all over his brown



leather shoes that were in serious need of polish ... would be even more so when she vomited on them.

The car in front of them stopped suddenly, forcing Ed to stomp the brakes. That allowed her to yank her hand free. She was going to have to dip it in bleach or something.

“Ed, baby, where are you taking me?”

Damn, her tone was harsh. She needed to mask her disgust and play the vixen. She was so not good at this.

Ed frowned as he glanced in the mirror again. She knew he hadn't picked up on Christian following him. Christian was too good to be caught, especially by someone as seemingly inept as Ed, but something bothered him. He muttered under his breath and then slammed his foot on the accelerator.

Audria gasped as the belt locked her against the seat. Her arms shot out to brace herself against the dash as he weaved in and out of traffic like an untrained Indy Car driver. Her muscles tensed when he almost sideswiped a Mercedes.

“The hell is he doing?” Christian barked in her ear.

She hoped it was a rhetorical question because she was too busy clinging for dear life to answer him. In her side mirror, she saw the unmarked police car gaining on them, and the lights flicked on. She hadn't gotten any information from Ed, but then, she wouldn't if they were both dead. She was glad they decided to stop him now before something happened.

Dread filled her as they approached a red light going way too fast to stop. Ed veered around the line of waiting cars, bumping up on the sidewalk. The back end clipped a light post, but he kept going. Now she understood the other dents in the fender.

A van with the green light right-of-way was headed directly at them. Audria screamed as Ed swerved at the last second. Her head slammed into the window, and the world went dark.

#

Though he'd barely started his career with COBRA Securities, Christian Zamora already loved his new job. If the stories he'd heard were true, it would provide the rush that had fueled his time in the service. His position with the Drug Enforcement Administration had been okay, but he'd chafed at the endless rules and regulations, not to mention the politics involved with moving up the ranks.

Working for COBRA Securities would allow him to feed the thrill-seeking addict inside him while helping to make the world a better place by saving the innocent and capturing the guilty. Win-win.

He was getting to know his coworkers and liked each one. He'd had limited interaction with Audria before this mission. On the trip to Florida, she'd told him about her last assignment with the FBI, relaying the story about the grieving mother she'd been forced to kill. She wanted him to know her head was in the right place, and she wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger again if necessary.

Christian could tell it had cost her to admit what happened. She didn't like showing any weakness, and he respected that sentiment. He assured her he was confident in her abilities, and it was the truth. Having recently undergone the same rigorous training, he knew how physically and mentally demanding it was and how qualified someone had to be to pass.

He watched as Audria and the vice cop, Kelli, trolled for a pickup. He admired Audria for trying to attract The Mortician, knowing she was uncomfortable as hell doing it.

Kelli was selected first, but she wasn't his priority. He kept his focus on Audria as a black sedan that had been circling the block returned. When it slowed in front of her, Christian started the engine and shifted the SUV into drive.

"This could be it, guys," Audria murmured.

"I'm ready to roll." Christian checked for traffic and pulled out to follow as Audria climbed into the passenger seat.

He heard the man say his name was Ed, which was close to Ted. Could he be the man they were searching for? He hoped it was, but as he'd learned in the military and again with the DEA, nothing was ever that easy.

Christian had been following along at a leisurely clip when all of a sudden, the sedan shot forward like a fired bullet, dangerously weaving in and out of traffic and barely avoiding several collisions.

“Go ahead and stop him,” he ordered Malik, the officer in the unmarked car behind him.

“On it.”

Malik swung around him and surged forward, activating his lights and siren. Ed veered around a group of cars, up on the sidewalk, and then darted into green-light traffic. Two cars swerved to miss him, one of them slamming into the side of Malik's cruiser and the other causing a chain reaction accident.

Christian avoided the collision but couldn't get around the wreckage. “Damn it!” He picked up the police-issued walkie-talkie. “Malik, are you okay?”

He groaned. “I think so.”

Christian wanted to check on him, but he had to get around the mess, and help was already en route. Ed and Audria had gotten away.

“Audria, can you hear me? Audria?”

No answer.

“I need tracker information,” he told Luca.

“On it. What happened?”

“Ed caused a massive accident, and he got away with Audria.”

#

Pounding in Audria's skull woke her up. She tried to rub the ache, but her wrists were tied with some kind of cloth. She blinked her lids open to see Ed sitting in the driver's seat, holding the wire that had been tucked into her bra. Part of the

padding had come out, probably bringing the listening device with it. There was no chatter in her ear, so the comms must've jarred loose when her head slammed against the window.

"You're a cop?"

Audria shook her head and winced, regretting the move. "I'm not a cop, Ed, but I know who you are."

"She hired you, didn't she? I knew that was her behind me," he muttered.

"She who?"

"My wife."

"You think your wife was following us?"

"I thought I saw her car." His brows scrunched. "She knows my type, but what are the odds I would pick you up after she hired you?"

"Your wife didn't hire me," Audria informed him as she worked the binds free. She now realized it was the red tie Ed had been wearing. He wasn't much of a killer if he hadn't confiscated her purse. If she could get her hand free, she would be able to light him up with fifty thousand volts. "The jig is up. You confess now, and I'll put in a good word for you."

"Okay, fine! I confess. Happy? Yes, I picked up a hooker!"

"I prefer the term courtesan," Audria informed him haughtily. "It sounds classier. Or maybe pleasure procurer."

Ed gawked at her. "Who are you?" He shook his head. "It doesn't matter what you tell my wife, she'll castrate me anyway. Probably with those rusty scissors she refuses to throw away." He winced and covered his crotch.

Sheesh, Ed was positively pathetic. She was starting to feel sorry for him. Audria's instincts were usually spot-on, and she was certain this guy didn't have it in him to carry out a complex murder spree. Still, she had to be sure. "Where is your kill kit, Ed? In the trunk?"

“Kill kit? What are you talking about? Is that some newfangled term for a condom? Because that’s in my pocket.”

“A condom?”

“What? You didn’t want to be called a prostitute, so I figured you came up with different names for a rubber too. It stops sperm from fertilizing an egg, so a kill kit fits.”

Despite the situation, Audria almost laughed out loud. “I was talking about the materials you use when you murder the women.”

His mouth gaped. “Mur ... are you serious? Shit. Get out of my car.” He tried to push her, but she resisted. Before, she’d wanted out. Now, she wasn’t the least bit afraid of him, so leaving wasn’t as much of a priority.

“Why won’t you get out?”

“How am I supposed to do that, Ed, when you tied my hands?”

“I’ll take care of that.”

Her eyes snapped to where he’d reached a hand into his pocket. For a gun?

“I can’t believe—ah!”

She jabbed Ed with the taser a second before the door whipped open, and Christian yanked him out of the car. Good thing he’d unbuckled, or the seat belt would’ve strangled him.

Audria popped her door open ... or she tried to. It was stuck. Using her shoulder, she shoved at it until it shuddered and creaked open. She winced at the damage. The entire side was scratched and dented by his wannabe racecar driver moves.

She ran to where Ed was lying on the ground, twitching like a bass out of water. Christian pulled the leads out, forced his arms behind his back, and zip-tied them together.

“Thought you were going to get away with it, did you, Ed?” Christian mocked. “The Feds are on the way to arrest you.”

“Oh, man, no!” Ed wailed. “My wife is a stone-cold bitch. I only wanted a little companionship. You don’t have to turn me in to the FBI!”

Christian looked up at Audria. She shook her head, wincing again at the pain. “He’s not the guy.”

“Yeah, I was afraid of that.”

Sirens keened, and a police car, followed by an unmarked cruiser, screeched to a stop. Reese Reneau was out before the engine shut off.

“Audria, thank God. Are you okay?”

He wrapped his hands around her face, and she couldn’t help her gasp. His jaw tightened as he looked at the smear of blood on his palm. “I’m calling an ambulance. You’re going to the emergency room.”

“Reese, for goodness’ sake, I’m fine. It’s a scratch.”

Luca came over with Liliana. “Are you okay? You had us worried when we lost contact.”

“I’m fine, and that reminds me, I need to find the comm device.”

“Got it.” Christian held it up, along with the registration of the vehicle. “Edwin Beck.”

Ha, she got to keep her favorite gun since she’d been right that Smith wasn’t his name.

“Is it him? Did you catch the murderer?”

Liliana’s tone was so hopeful. Audria hated to crush her. “I’m afraid not. Ed here was simply a louse cheating on his wife.”

“She won’t let me touch her,” Ed wailed. “A man has needs!”

God, could he be more pathetic? Audria wondered if Mrs. Edwin Beck would bother to bail him out of jail.

She checked her watch. It wasn’t too late. She could go back on the street and try again to catch The Mortician. Before

she could voice her thoughts, Detective Torres came over with his phone to his ear.

“Got it. Thanks.” Sighing, he said, “Officer Gilbert is missing, and there’s been another murder.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Liliana had been duly impressed with the FBI Command Center. It was a mobile, state-of-the-art facility loaded with electronics that offered capabilities she never imagined existed. She'd only gotten a brief look at the equipment before they relegated her to a seat in the back of the vehicle. Apparently, they didn't want to advertise their resources to an average citizen.

It fascinated her to witness firsthand what Luca did for a living. He'd told her that his company also had a similar vehicle they used for cases, but it was way more remarkable than this one, and its faculties were unmatched.

He had been in work mode, talking with the FBI agents and the Miami Beach police. Even in a room full of authorities, he stood out over all the others. He was a born leader. People listened to him and respected his opinions. She couldn't take her eyes off him.

Watching Luca had helped calm Liliana's nerves about Audria's situation. Even though Audria was a highly trained professional, Liliana had encountered Ted Rader up close and personal and knew how ruthless he could be—and how dangerous. Eyes had been trained on Audria, and the police had fitted her with a wire, but she'd also worn a device that allowed her to keep in touch, specifically with Luca and Christian.

Sitting in the climate-controlled trailer, watching Audria put her life in danger, had been difficult, even though Luca assured her that Audria was well-trained. It should've been Liliana trying to draw out The Mortician since she was the one he was after.

Detective Torres had been so pissed when the man Kelli called Rolland stole Audria's necklace, he'd sent two cops to arrest him. He was a beefy man, and he'd put up a fight, but they'd been able to subdue and cuff him.



When the man who said his name was Ed had picked Audria up, Liliana had studied the picture she'd snapped from the pen camera. He didn't look at all familiar. She was sure she'd never met him before. He looked like a nondescript insurance salesman or advertising executive, not a cold-blooded killer. Then he'd started driving like a bat out of hell. They'd watched the dash cam on the unmarked police car until the crash. Thankfully, the officer hadn't been injured, but Ed had gotten away with Audria. When Luca had tried to reach her, there'd been no response. She'd worn a tracking device, so they'd piled into Detective Torres's car and followed with the lights and sirens activated. By the time they'd reached Audria, Christian had arrived, and Audria was safe.

Now, they were sitting in the emergency room as Audria was being checked out. She'd tried to refuse, but Luca and Reese had overruled her. They'd acquiesced to her wishes not to go by ambulance, and Christian had driven them.

Detective Torres and Reese had stayed behind to deal with the latest murder and keep tabs on the search for Officer Gilbert. Liliana prayed she was okay and not in the hands of The Mortician.

Audria came out and met them in the waiting room.

"Diagnosis?" Luca asked.

"As I told you, I'm fine."

"What did the doctor say?" Christian questioned.

"That I have a bump on my head, and I'm good to go."

"Do I need to go find him?" Luca pressed.

Audria rolled her eyes. "Slight concussion. A couple of stitches. Not anything to worry about. Have they found Kelli yet?"

"We haven't heard anything. Do you want to get that filled?" Luca pointed to the prescription in her hand.

"I don't need the painkillers." She ripped up the paper and tossed it in a trash can.

Liliana thought herself a badass, but Audria beat her by a country mile.

#

As they were leaving the hospital, Luca's cell buzzed. "Russo."

"Mr. Russo, this is Cosi Azan, from Home While Away Suites. You asked me to call if Mr. Douglas Speke checked out."

"Yes, Cosi. Thanks for calling. Did he leave today?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Housekeeping entered his room to provide weekly services, but his personal belongings were gone. He'd left the key on the dresser. I can't give an exact date on which he left, but housekeeping confirmed that he was present last week when they went to clean the room."

"That's the information I needed, Cosi. You've been a big help. Thank you for letting me know."

"No problem. Have a good day."

"That was Cosi?" Audria said.

"Yeah. He confirmed Speke had moved out but didn't know the exact date. Where are you going?"

Audria raised a brow. "Uh, back to the condo?"

"You aren't driving."

She frowned with her hand poised to open the driver's side door. "Why not?"

"Are you kidding me right now?" Christian huffed and snatched the keys from her hand. She made a swipe for them, but he held them out of reach.

"Audria, you have a concussion," Luca reminded her.

"Mild," she corrected. "I'm perfectly fine."

Christian had already slid behind the wheel, so her argument was moot.

Audria grumbled all the way around the SUV to the passenger side. Luca helped Liliana into the back. They

stopped to pick up sandwiches for dinner, though no one was particularly hungry. Too much was unknown about the latest murder and Officer Gilbert.

There was still no word on Douglas Speke's whereabouts. He'd vanished off the face of the earth. No credit card activity or hits on any of his accounts. His phone hadn't been used, so there was no way to track him. The disappearing act shot him to the top of the suspect list.

It was well past midnight when they arrived at Liliana's condo. The first thing Luca noticed when they reached the lobby was that Warren wasn't there. It was a woman with short, cropped black hair and a severe expression.

"Who is she?" he asked Liliana.

"No idea. I've never seen her before."

They approached the desk, and the woman glanced up at them over a pair of tortoiseshell half glasses. "Can I help you?"

"We're residents. Where's Warren?"

"He called in sick. I rotate to cover. I'll need you all to sign in, even if you are residents."

As they scribbled their names on the sheet, Luca asked, "What's your name?"

"Pricilla Lott."

"Ms. Lott, do you know why Warren couldn't come in?"

She shook her head. "No idea. They don't tell me details, just give me instructions on where to go. I assumed he wasn't feeling well."

Liliana had detoured to her post office box to pick up her mail. "Luca."

He was beside her in an instant. Included among the bills and junk mail was a manilla envelope.

He returned to Pricilla. "Who distributed the mail today?"

“I did. A stack was piled on the desk, so I placed it in the resident boxes.”

“You don’t know who left it?”

She smirked. “I would guess the mailman.”

Luca bit his tongue. It wouldn’t do to get into a verbal argument with the woman. He’d already texted her name to the office to research.

Once inside Liliana’s condo, he used a letter opener to slice through the tape. A diamond ring and what looked like a cigarette holder dropped out. It was embossed with the letters c-a-t.

“Have you heard from Torres yet?” Christian asked.

“No.”

“I’m betting Cat was the name of the latest abductee.”

Luca agreed. The ring looked expensive, and if Rader had kept to a timeline, it would’ve belonged to Hyun Choi, his fifth victim ten years ago. There was no record of it having been missing, but that didn’t mean anything.

Before he could call SSA Reneau and Detective Torres to notify them of the latest package, his cell buzzed. Torres.

“Sorry to call so late ... or early. I wanted to let you know we’ve located Officer Kelli Gilbert.”

“Is she—”

“Oh, she’s alive and relatively unharmed.”

“Thank God.” He moved the phone from his ear and told the others that she was safe, eliciting a chorus of relief. “What happened?”

“She was abducted by a college kid hoping to become a member of a secret club. He injected her with ketamine and took her to their hideout. Part of his initiation was that he had to have sex with a prostitute in front of the group.”

“Ah, hell, did he succeed?”

“No. She woke up when he was trying to undress her, broke his nose, and knocked him out. The others tried to scatter, but police arrived to round them up.”

“Good. What about the latest victim?”

“She’s been identified as Catherine Wilkins.”

“Goes by Cat,” Luca guessed.

“That’s right. How did ... another package?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll send a car to pick it up.”

## Chapter Twenty

Liliana didn't get much rest last night, and sadly, it wasn't because of any nocturnal activity with Luca. Audria had suffered a concussion, no matter how mild. Liliana had made it her mission to wake her every couple of hours to make sure she was okay. She'd grumbled each time, but there seemed to be no lingering effects except some bruising where her head had contacted the window.

Audria had wanted to go back out tonight in an effort to attract The Mortician, but Luca had nixed the idea. She'd been injured, and he refused to allow her to try again. Liliana was glad. The likelihood of Rader picking her wasn't good, and it wasn't worth the risk, in her opinion. No one wanted a repeat of what had happened with Ed Beck.

Liliana's phone vibrated with another text from her good friend, Nina Poole. She'd notified Liliana earlier that she couldn't come in, so one of the subs would teach her class tonight.

Nina had been pressing Liliana for all the spicy details on Luca. She'd been there the evening he'd arrived and swore that she could feel the sparks flying between Luca and Liliana. As much as she wanted to admit her feelings, once Rader was caught, Luca would leave, and she would be left to pick up the pieces. It was better to keep the specifics of the relationship vague, and that's what she'd done.

Liliana clicked on the message and gasped. It was a picture of Nina stripped to her bra and panties and tied to a bed. She looked absolutely terrified.

"Everything okay?" Audria looked up from her computer. Luca and Christian had left a few minutes ago, but she didn't know where they went.

"Oh, yes. Fine."

Liliana's breath sawed in and out as she read the text.

*You for her. If I see that goon hanging out with you, I will kill her. Come alone, or she dies. This is not a joke. I will end her life.*

An address was added to the end of the message. It was in an area about fifteen minutes away.

Liliana debated what to do. She couldn't leave Nina to suffer at the hands of The Mortician, but she couldn't tell Luca either. She didn't doubt Rader would make good on his promise to kill Nina.

Liliana stood abruptly. "Actually, there's an issue in the women's locker room. I'll be right back."

"Need help?"

"No, it won't take a minute."

Liliana concentrated on walking normally. If Audria had any idea what was happening, she'd stop her from going. Liliana had to save her employee and friend. Nina was innocent and shouldn't have been dragged into Liliana's mess.

She waved at Shonda as she passed her office. Kasey was on the phone, so she simply pushed through the doors, waiting until she was far enough away to run. Taxis cruised the streets constantly, so she had no problem flagging one down. She gave the man the address and silently urged him to go faster.

Liliana decided to wait until she got to the location before forwarding the text to Luca. That way, the person holding Nina would see she was alone, but not for long. Luca would come for her.

She watched the addresses as they navigated the streets. "That's it." When the driver pulled to the curb, she paid him before walking to the rendezvous point.

"Ms. Lima?"

She turned to see a thin man with shaggy hair and beard, wearing worn clothes. "Yes."

He didn't make eye contact. "I'm supposed to show you to your meeting."

She followed the man around the building and down a litter-covered alley. It smelled like rotten eggs and sour milk. Apprehension rose. Clandestinely, she opened the text and forwarded it to Luca.

“I’m very sorry, Ms. Lima.”

“Why are you—”

Before she could get the words out, he placed a cloth over her mouth. The scent was strong. Cloying. She started to fight back, but whatever chemical he used was too strong, and the darkness overtook her.

#

Luca and Christian worked out an issue with the camera they’d placed at the back exit of Liliana’s studio. An alert indicated the battery had malfunctioned, so they changed it out, and it was now operational again.

When they returned to Liliana’s office, she wasn’t at her desk. Luca glanced at the private bathroom, but the door was open and the light off. “Where’s Liliana?”

“There was an issue in the women’s locker room,” Audria said. “I’ll go see if I can help.”

Luca and Christian followed her out as she disappeared down the hall. His stomach dropped when she came jogging out, a look of concern on her face.

“She wasn’t there.”

Luca turned and headed to the check-in desk. “Kasey, have you seen Liliana?”

“I was on the phone but saw her step outside about ten minutes ago.”

What the hell? She knew not to go anywhere without one of them. He jerked his phone from his pocket and noticed a missed text. It was from Liliana.

His jaw clenched as he skimmed the message she’d forwarded to him. “She left.”

“What?”



Audria and Christian crowded around him to read the message. Audria pulled the car keys from her pocket. “Let’s go.”

They ran to the SUV and jumped inside. Audria tore out of the lot hell-for-leather, and they raced through the streets to the address she’d sent them. Luca traced Liliana’s phone, and the blinking dot told him it was in the general vicinity of the meeting point.

“This is it.”

Audria screeched to a stop and parked illegally against a yellow curb. Christian and Audria fanned out to check the surrounding perimeter while Luca followed the beacon of Liliana’s phone. It led to a dented blue dumpster. With his heart hammering, he flipped open the brown plastic lid, but the only thing inside besides a mound of refuse was her cell. He let out a relieved breath and reached in to snag it.

Christian jogged back. “No sign of her.”

Audria returned and shook her head. “She’s not here, but I found this.” She held up a white handkerchief.

Luca sniffed and jerked his head back. “Chloroform.” Though his eyes were watering, he pulled out his phone. “I’ve got another tracker on her.”

#

Liliana’s head pounded, and her mouth was as dry as an overcooked steak. She tried to remember the last thing she’d done to leave her in this condition, but it wouldn’t come to her. Then it hit her like a freight train. Nina kidnapped. Tied up. She’d come to trade herself for her friend.

Liliana was lying on her left side with her hands bound in front of her. The tile floor beneath her was chilly. An air conditioner running somewhere close spit out cool air. She listened for other noises, and a faint sound attracted her attention.

“Liliana?”

She blinked her eyes open to see Nina a few feet away, tied to a bed. “Nina. Are you okay?”

“I’m mad as hell,” her friend whispered angrily, “but okay.”

Good. That meant Rader hadn’t touched her yet. If Nina was talking, he must not be in the room. She lifted her head and glanced around but didn’t see him anywhere. She rotated her wrists back and forth to loosen the rope and tugged on one strand with her teeth. If she could get out of the restraints, they had a chance. He hadn’t tied her ankles.

Liliana froze at the sound of a key being inserted into a lock, and then the door slammed open against the wall, no doubt leaving a sizable dent from the knob. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and prepared herself to come face to face with the monster from her past. She could do it to save Nina.

When she blinked her lids open, the person who sauntered in wasn’t who she expected to see. Though his face was scabbed over and bruised, and one black eye was swollen shut, she recognized her former employee. “Douglas?”

“About time you woke up, bitch.”

Nothing made sense. Why was he here? What did he have to do with The Mortician ... unless *he* was the copycat? “You abducted Nina?”

“Now, don’t say it like that. I asked her out and everything. All the proper channels. Hell, I’ve wanted to date her since I first saw her. Just because she thought she was too good for me and turned me down doesn’t mean I’m a kidnapper.”

“It so does, you stupid, moronic bastard.”

Liliana shot Nina a look that telegraphed to not poke the bear, especially since said bear was holding a shiny black pistol. She turned back to the maniac in front of her. “Why are you doing this, Douglas?”

“Because you ruined my life!”

Liliana managed to deflect most of the blow from his brutal kick. Still, air rushed from her lungs, and her ribs ached. It took a minute before she could talk. “So, you chose to kill those women to get back at me? Is that what you’re saying?”

He looked at her like she’d grown two heads. “What are you talking about? I didn’t kill anyone.”

“What happened to you?”

“I told you, you ruined—”

“No, I mean your face.”

“That bastard Villanueva. He ambushed me. He’s next on my revenge tour. I’m starting at the top and working my way down.”

Funny, Rutger said Douglas had blindsided him. She believed Rutger, not the monster in front of her. And good luck to him trying to get the best of Rutger. The man was a martial arts legend. The only way Douglas could come out on top would be to shoot him.

Liliana gulped, hoping to stop him before he tried to harm Rutger. Nina was growling, so Liliana decided it was time to save her friend and get her away from Douglas. “Why did you take Nina if you wanted me?”

He tossed up his hands. “Because you were never alone. I had to get you away from that behemoth boyfriend of yours. Does he ever leave you alone? I would’ve grabbed Shonda, but that woman looks like she could do some serious harm to me.”

“I can too,” Nina spat. “Try me, you low-life, bottom-dwelling loser.”

Not helping. “Well, I’m here now. You said in the text you would trade me for Nina, so if you’re a man of honor, you’ll keep your promise and let her go.”

“I’m not leaving you, Liliana.”

“Yes, you are, Nina. Douglas, let her go.”

Douglas scratched his chin with the gun, and Liliana wouldn't hate it if he accidentally pulled the trigger. Unfortunately, he didn't.

"I changed my mind. I like having both of you under my spell."

"We aren't under anything of yours, you filthy piece of scum."

*Damn it, Nina.* Liliana needed to keep Douglas talking so that maybe she could reach some part of him that was still human. Also, to keep Nina from prodding him into shooting them.

"This is a felony, Douglas. You realize that, don't you? You are breaking the law."

His grin was pure malevolence, made even more frightening by the mangled face. "I don't have much to live for now that you ruined me."

Great. She was dealing with a suicidal psycho. "Then confess your sins. You can tell me, Douglas. You took out your hatred for me on the prostitutes, didn't you?"

"Are you accusing me of using hookers? I've never paid for sex in my life."

"How did you hook up with Ted Rader?"

"Damn, woman, you are certifiably crazy. Truly. I didn't know you had a screw loose. Maybe that's why you overreacted to my prank."

"Are you saying you don't know The Mortician?"

"Huh? Like a person who buries dead bodies? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Liliana wasn't getting anywhere, so she tried a different approach. "Why do you think I ruined your life, Douglas?" She hoped that by using his name, he might let down his guard.

"I can't get a job anywhere because you tattled to that asshole Villanueva, and he blackballed me to everyone in the

freaking state. I trained hard to get where I was and poof! It was gone in a heartbeat. All because of you.”

“No, Douglas, it was because of you. You attacked me, not the other way around.”

“I was trying to catch you off guard!”

This time, when the kick came her way, she was prepared. She’d kept him talking long enough to free her hands. Liliana grabbed his foot and flipped it up while kicking out and sweeping his other leg out from under him. Douglas slammed to the floor, and the gun went flying.

“You go, girl,” Nina shouted.

Liliana lifted her hips and rolled until her weight was on her shoulders, then placed her hands on the ground beside her ears and kipped to a standing position. She prepared to tangle with the martial arts expert as he started to get up. He might be good, but she was no slouch.

“Rookie move not tying my feet, Douglas. You’re not very smart, are you?”

“I knew you were a pathetic, weak girl. If you think you can take me, guess again, bitch.”

“Stay where you are, or I will blow a hole through your skull.”

Liliana’s head jerked up to see Luca burst into the room with Audria and Christian on his heels. Christian secured Douglas’s gun while Audria moved to release Nina.

Douglas looked as if he wanted to test Luca but dropped back to the floor with a huff.

“Roll over on your stomach,” Luca ordered.

“Go to hell,” Douglas spat.

“Roll. Over.”

If looks could kill, Luca would be dead, followed closely by Liliana when Douglas turned to glare at her. Then he rolled to his stomach but kept going until he grabbed her legs. Liliana’s training kicked in. She clasped his head and slammed

it into her knee. His nose shattered, and he screamed, but it was mainly because Luca had picked him up and thrown him against a wall before tackling him. Christian wasted no time slapping flex cuffs on his wrists and ankles.

“You’re hurting me,” Douglas whined.

“Good. You’re lucky I don’t put a slug in your brainpan,” Luca growled. Then he stood and strode over to her, gathering her in his arms. She hissed, and he instantly pulled back.

“What is it?”

“That disgusting pig kicked her,” Nina so helpfully supplied.

“Let me see.”

“Luca, it’s fine.”

He ignored her and lifted her top. Apparently, it was already bruising because he clenched his teeth. “I’m going to kill him.”

Liliana grabbed his arm to stop him from pounding Douglas into a pile of dust. “It’s fine, Luca. I don’t want you going to jail for assault.”

“I’ll only punch him a few times.”

When she refused to let go, he sighed and cupped her cheeks. “Damn, honey. You are something. You took him down twice.”

“Oh, you saw the first one, huh?”

“Yeah, I was ready to bust in, but Audria stopped me. Then you Bruce Lee’d his ass.”

Liliana laughed and winced when it pulled her side. “Thank you for saving me.”

He kissed her forehead, apparently forgetting they weren’t alone. “Babe, you saved yourself.”

“Police!”

Suddenly, the room filled with emergency personnel. When Luca went to talk to them, Liliana rushed to Nina and

hugged her. Audria had found her clothes, and Nina had been able to dress before help arrived.

“Are you okay?”

“Pissed, but fine.” Nina brushed the hair off Liliana’s face. “Girl, you are a rock star.”

“Are you kidding? I was terrified. You gave me the strength to confront him.”

Nina looked surprised. “How so?”

“You weren’t the least bit afraid. You taunted Douglas.”

Nina gave a sheepish grin. “Maybe not the smartest idea. I can’t believe your man busted in to save you. That’s so hot.”

*Your man.* The phrase sent a shiver through Liliana, and she glanced at Luca. He looked so steady. Totally in charge. He was her rock. He looked at her, and breathing was difficult. It wasn’t because of Douglas’s kick, but the one Luca gave to her heart every time she saw him. She was so head over heels in love with him it wasn’t even funny.

“Did you hear me?”

Liliana turned back to Nina. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“That it turns out, we didn’t need him. You were the savior.”

#

Following the signal of the backup tracker, Luca and the others drove down a busy road with houses separated by fences and palm trees. Audria parked along the street instead of pulling into the driveway, so they didn’t tip anyone off if they looked out a window.

Luca started for the house, but Audria grabbed his arm to stop him. “What?”

“We can’t go charging in without assessing the situation. I know you know that, Luca. You were a detective.”

Damn it, she was right. He couldn't go in guns blazing and risk Liliana being shot ... or worse. Nina too. But his head wasn't telling him to rush in and grab her. It was his heart.

This was why it was never wise to get involved with a client, though, technically, she wasn't one. He was doing this on his own, with his bosses' approval. Still, when you tossed feelings into the mix, mistakes could be made—costly ones.

“Okay. You're right. Christian, you head to the left side to check the windows. Audria, the right. I'll take the front. Status update via comms.”

They spread out and crept to the house. Luca stayed low as he moved to the porch and ducked beneath the window until he could look inside. A formal living room that seemed too perfect to be lived in. No stray soda cans, no toys on the floor, and no dust. There was also no Liliana.

“Got something.”

“What is it, Christian?”

“Bedroom, back left quadrant. Liliana tied up on the floor. Nina tied to the bed. Perp's back is to me, so I can't see his face. He's looming over Liliana.”

Luca firmed his jaw. “Going in through the front door.”

“Wait for us,” Audria chastised. Again, all he wanted to do was rush inside, but Audria was thinking clearly.

When he felt Audria and Christian behind him, he picked the lock, and they whispered inside. The house was furnished with comfortable furniture, tasteful artwork, and trendy accessories. Luca couldn't care less about any of it as he made his way to the room at the back of the house where the love of his life was being held.

The door stood open, and he spotted the man looming over Liliana. It took everything in him not to pull the trigger. Again, Audria grasped his arm to stop him. When the man cocked back his leg to kick Liliana, Luca raised his arm. Before he could squeeze the trigger, Liliana flipped the man's leg up and took him down before performing an acrobatic



move that brought her to her feet. Luca stared in awe. She was magnificent.

This time, the shove Audria gave him was to get moving. The man was rising from the floor. Luca ordered him to stay put and then roll to his stomach so they could cuff him. When he kept going and grabbed Liliana again, he almost fired. Once again, Liliana bested the man, shattering his nose, judging from the amount of blood pouring from his proboscis.

She was poetry in motion and the most incredible woman he'd ever met. He wanted to march over to her, wrap her in his arms, and kiss her into tomorrow. Instead, he grabbed the man's shirt and hurled him against the wall, taking immense satisfaction in the grunt of pain.

Christian was there to cuff him. The man whined about being hurt.

"You're lucky I don't put a slug in your brainpan," Luca snarled into his ear. He got his first good look at the man's face, or as much as he could with the blood. It wasn't Ted Rader but Douglas Speke, Liliana's former employee. Luca jolted, recognizing the man from the pictures he'd studied of him. What was Speke's connection to Rader?

He'd find out soon. First, there was something he had to do. He stood and strode over to Liliana, gathering her in his arms, uncaring of his nearby coworkers. She hissed, and he instantly pulled back.

"What is it?"

"That disgusting pig kicked her," Nina told him.

"Let me see."

"Luca, it's fine."

When he lifted her shirt and revealed the bruising that was forming, he saw red. No one hurt his Liliana and got away with it. He was fully prepared to kill Speke when she talked him from the ledge.

When Detective Torres and the calvary arrived, he hated leaving Liliana to meet with them, but he needed to let them

know what had happened.

A car horn blared, followed by the screech of tires and then a loud thump. Luca ran outside with Christian on his heels. One cop was sitting on the ground looking dazed, while others rushed to the street where a bus was stopped. Then he saw why. Douglas Speke was lying in the middle of the road several feet away, a bloody, broken heap. Luca knew without checking for a pulse that he was dead, judging from the unnatural angle of his neck, arms, and legs.

He turned to the nearest cop. “What the hell happened?”

“The perp did some type of jujitsu move or something, kicking the hell out of Officer Gaines, and then took off running. The bus hit him.”

Yeah, he got that last part. The driver looked shaken up, and Luca didn’t blame him. It wasn’t his fault, but he would have to live with the knowledge that he’d killed a man for the rest of his life.

As they returned inside the house, Luca glanced around again. Everything was too perfect, not even a speck of dust on the furniture, no dirty dishes in the sink. The house didn’t look lived in. It looked staged.

Detective Torres appeared at the top of the stairs. “Luca, I need you to come here.”

He took the steps two at a time to the second floor. A technician snapped photos in a bedroom that showed signs of someone living there. There were clothes strewn about, pizza boxes stacked in a corner, and empty beer bottles everywhere. It reminded him of Speke’s abandoned hotel room.

“We found Douglas Speke’s wallet and other things with his name.”

“This was where he was staying?”

“It appears so,” Torres agreed. He motioned with a hand. “Take a look at this.”

Luca moved to where Torres was standing next to a dresser. On top was an assortment of costume jewelry that

looked similar to those taken from the prostitutes, as well as more expensive pieces. Luca took out his phone and snapped a picture.

“You think he’s the copycat?”

“We’ll test the jewelry for prints, but it’s possible. We need to get him into a room and interrogate him.”

“Yeah, you’ll need to hire the best medium around.”

Torres’s brows dipped. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Speke tangled with a bus outside. Bus won.”

Torres’s mouth dropped open. “Holy shit. How did that happen?”

Heavy footsteps sounded, and then a uniformed officer appeared in the doorway. “Detective Torres, we need you to come outside immediately.”

Torres turned to Luca. “I guess I’m about to find out.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

Liliana was worried about Nina. She was putting on a brave face, but she had to be terrified after her ordeal. Liliana tried to get her to go to the hospital to be checked out, but she refused.

Judging from the honking horns and shouting, something big happened outside, but Audria wouldn't let her leave to check it out. When Luca returned, she could tell something was wrong.

“What is it?”

“Speke's dead, and it looks like he was the copycat.”

Liliana gaped at him. “Douglas is dead? How?”

“He used martial arts to get loose from the officer escorting him to a waiting cruiser and took off running into the street. A bus struck him.”

“Oh, Douglas,” Liliana murmured. She was mad as hell at him, but he didn't deserve to die. He'd proven to be a bad guy, but he wasn't the killer. She told Luca as much.

“We might have proof.” He took out his phone and scrolled to a picture. “Do you see anything that belonged to Erin?”

Liliana took it from his hands and studied the photo. There was an opal ring, a diamond Rolex, and a gold drop necklace. She shook her head and handed it back to him. “No, I don't recognize any of it.”

He slid the phone into his pocket. “We'll have forensics test the items.”

“Luca, Douglas didn't know what I was talking about when I asked him about the murders.”

“He was lying. He's a criminal. It's what they do.”

“I don't think so. Otherwise, he's an accomplished actor. But I truly believe he was clueless.”

Luca didn't look convinced. "He's from Minnesota, so he probably knows about The Mortician. Maybe he even knew him personally. Why else would he kidnap you? By the way, we'll have a discussion later about you leaving on your own."

Liliana winced. She knew it was coming but dreaded it. "Luca, he would've hurt Nina. I couldn't let that happen."

His face softened. Barely. "How is she?"

"Shaken, but okay. She's tough. As to why he took me, he said he'd been blackballed and couldn't get a job anywhere in Florida."

"He held you responsible instead of Villanueva?"

"He thinks I tattled to Rutger."

"We'll stay vigilant until we can prove one way or another he's the copycat. Now, you're going to the emergency room to be checked out."

"Luca, I'm fine." Yes, she'd been chloroformed, but that was a while ago, and she was clear-headed now. No sense in wasting anyone's time. She expressed as much to him, but he didn't look convinced.

"You might have cracked a rib."

"I didn't. I've had a broken one before, and I know what it feels like. Besides, there isn't anything they could do about it at the hospital."

Thankfully, the FBI arrived and postponed the discussion for now. Unthankfully, Liliana had to repeat what had happened for the hundredth time, it seemed. She knew they needed to hear it from her, but gosh darn it, she was tired.

She'd wanted to take Nina home, but Detective Torres said he would have someone drive her. Before she could argue, Nina elbowed her and tipped her head toward the handsome police officer a few feet away. With close-cropped hair and eyes the color of melted chocolate, he was adorable. And he was smiling at Nina.

Liliana hugged her, told her she loved her, and watched as the man cupped her elbow and guided her from the room. At

the last second, Nina turned and wagged her brows. Liliana smiled.

#

SSA Reese Reneau pulled Luca and Detective Torres aside. “We researched the ownership of the house. It was recently for sale, but the listing has been deactivated.”

*That’s why it looked staged,* Luca thought. “Can you find out who took the listing down?”

“The agent on record is Georgia Perkins.”

“She works for Rex Raines. His office is next to Liliana’s studio.”

“I’m headed there now. You want to come?”

“Yes. I’ll have Christian and Audria escort Liliana home.”

“I need to stay here to clean up this mess,” Torres said. “Keep me posted.”

Luca motioned to Christian, and they walked over to where Liliana was chatting with Audria. “I’m going with SSA Reneau to follow a lead. I need you two to escort Liliana home and keep her safe.”

“Of course.”

“Will do.”

“Be careful,” Liliana called out as he turned to leave. He gave her a reassuring smile, hating to leave her, but he wanted to end this ordeal so she wouldn’t be in danger any longer.

As they made their way through the throng of police cars and personnel to Reneau’s vehicle, Luca’s gaze passed by their SUV parked at the curb and snapped back. There was another envelope, this time slid inside the door handle.

“What is it?” Reese asked when he stopped walking.

“The Mortician was here.”

“What?”

Luca pulled on a glove and removed the legal-sized envelope. Inside was a pink silicone breast cancer awareness

bracelet. Elise Snyder, Rader's sixth victim, had worn one to support her mother. The other item was a simple silver chain with a peace symbol.

"I assume this means we're about to learn of another murder," Luca said.

Reese spoke into his phone, and less than a minute later, a man in a charcoal suit arrived with an evidence bag. Luca dropped it in, and the agent disappeared to have it analyzed. Then he and Reese asked around to see if anyone had witnessed who left the envelope. Unsurprisingly, no one had.

It couldn't have been Speke, so that meant either he wasn't the perp, as Liliana believed, or he had an accomplice. As soon as they were in Reese's car headed to Rex Raines's office, Reese asked, "You think Speke and Georgia Perkins are in it together?"

Luca nodded. "I think it's an excellent possibility. There was so much activity, she could've snuck in and left the envelope while everyone was distracted." The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. "It's likely they met at Liliana's studio. Georgia works out there and could've run into Speke, maybe even took one of his classes. Plus, her ex-husband thought she was having an affair. Although, there wasn't anything that suggested a woman was staying in the house with Speke."

"Maybe she just visited but returned to her place," Reese suggested.

Possible. Luca took out his phone and dialed Robert Eckerd, the private eye who'd been tailing Georgia, and put the call on speaker.

"Eckerd."

"Are you still tailing Georgia Perkins?"

"Who is this?"

"The FBI," Reese informed him.

"Oh. Well, no. I'd only had the job for a short while before I was warned away by two extremely rude assholes

who threatened to have me arrested if I returned. I was simply minding my own business and doing my job. On public property, I might add. I'm assuming I'm talking to one of them?"

"You are," Luca confirmed. "During the time you watched her, did she ever visit a house on ..." Luca checked the address and read it to Eckerd.

"Nope."

"Did you witness her meet with anyone?" Reese asked. "Maybe for dinner or drinks?"

"The only time I saw her interact with anyone was when she left work. Again, I was a short-timer."

"Is the ex still paying you?"

"Nope. I gave him what little I had, and he decided to end the contract."

"That's all the questions we have. Thanks, Eckerd," Luca said.

"Yeah, whatever." He disconnected.

Luca's lips quirked. "Can't blame him. Christian and I were pretty discourteous to him."

Reese chuckled as he turned into the parking lot and found a space near Rex Raines's office. A bell chimed when they entered.

"Welcome to Raines Realty," an older woman with curly white hair greeted them. The nameplate in front of her revealed her name to be Pearl. "How may I help you, gentlemen?"

"Good afternoon, Pearl. We need to speak to Georgia Perkins." Reese flipped open his leather wallet to reveal his badge.

Pearl leaned forward to read the credentials, and her hand flew to her chest. "Oh my, the FBI. I'm sorry, Ms. Perkins isn't in today."



Luca spotted Rex in his office on the phone. Rex glanced up and saw him. He hung up and came out to greet them. “Luca, can I help you with something? Did you decide to look for a place in Miami Beach after all?”

“They’re asking about Georgia,” Pearl informed him.

“Oh, well, she’s not here today.”

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“They’re with the FBI,” Pearl supplied.

“Sure. Come back to my office.”

Once they were inside, he closed the door. Luca introduced Reese, and they shook hands.

“I didn’t know you were a federal agent, Luca. Liliana didn’t mention that.”

“I’m not. I’m simply facilitating the meeting.” He didn’t elaborate. Liliana had told everyone that he was an old friend, and Christian and Audria were doing research to open their studio. He wouldn’t say anything that would reflect poorly on her.

“Oh, okay. Why did you need Georgia?”

“She deactivated a listing on a house that was used in a crime today,” Reese told him.

“How do you know it was Georgia?”

“She was the agent of record, and our experts traced it to an IP address located here.”

Rex frowned. “She shouldn’t have deactivated anything on the multiple listing service without talking to me first.” He jiggled the mouse of the computer on his desk. “What’s the address?”

Reese recited it, and Rex typed it in. “I remember this place. It is one of our listings from a couple of weeks ago. I accompanied Georgia but let her take the lead.” He scrolled down. “She tagged it as temporarily off-market. She’s by the book, so I can’t see her doing something like that without letting me know. I’ll call the owner and see if they asked her

to. If I recall correctly, they moved to Tampa to be closer to their daughter.”

“I was about to ask you to do that,” Reese said.

Rex read the number from the screen and punched it into his cell. “Hello, Mrs. Burns? This is Rex Raines. I’m good, thank you. No, we don’t have an offer yet. I wanted to know if you spoke with Ms. Perkins and asked her to pause the listing?” He listened for a minute and shook his head. “You didn’t?” Reese motioned for the phone. “Mrs. Burns, I’m going to have you speak with an FBI agent.” He handed the cell to Reese.

“Mrs. Burns, my name is Supervisory Special Agent Reese Reneau. I’m afraid there was an incident at your home today.” Without giving names, he explained what had happened and reassured her that the home hadn’t been damaged too severely. “I’m going to have a local FBI agent in Tampa speak with you. Can you give me your address?” He wrote it down and thanked her for her cooperation before returning the phone to Rex.

“I’ll take care of having the house cleaned and back on the market as soon as possible,” he assured the woman before disconnecting.

“Do you know why Georgia didn’t come in today?” Luca asked.

“She’s taking a couple of days off.” Rex looked troubled. “She didn’t say anything about it yesterday.”

“She didn’t request the time off earlier?”

“No, and it’s strange because she has a meeting with a big client this afternoon. She was looking forward to it because it would be a huge commission. I’ll have to cover for her or send Theo.”

“How did she let you know she wasn’t coming in?”

“She left a note on Pearl’s desk. It’s not like her at all. I’ll try calling her.”

Rex punched her number and put the call on speaker. It rang for ten seconds before kicking to voicemail. He left a message for her to get in touch with him immediately.

“Do you have her home address?” Luca asked.

“I do.” He found it in his phone contact list and wrote it down, passing the paper to Luca.

“Does she have a family?”

“Recently divorced, no kids. The split wasn’t amicable. She lives alone now.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“I had a showing yesterday afternoon and went home after, so around one.”

“What about anyone else in the office?”

“Pearl told me she left before Georgia, but I think Theo was here.” Rex stood. “I’ll call him in here.”

Rex left and returned with a man Luca recognized from taking classes at Liliana’s studio. Rex introduced him to Reese.

“Wow, why is the FBI here?” He looked from Reese to Rex.

“He’s here about Georgia. When was the last time you talked to her?”

“Yesterday, around five. She had a meeting with a client but seemed distracted and upset. I offered to go with her, but she refused.”

“You haven’t heard from her since?” Reese asked.

“No, but it’s strange that she didn’t mention taking time off. It surprised me when Pearl told me she wasn’t coming in this morning.”

“How well do you know her?” Luca asked.

Theo shrugged. “As well as you get to know a coworker interacting daily. We started around the same time. Good, but not great, I would say.”

“Do you know if she was seeing anyone?”

“Georgia?” He chuffed a laugh. “No, she was down on the entire male species, as she called us. She told me more than once that Rex and I were the only men she could stand to be around for any period of time.”

“What about female friends?” Reese asked. “Did she mention hanging out with anyone?”

“She hasn’t lived in Miami Beach long but enjoys spending time with the women at the studio next door. Liliana, Shonda, Kasey, and Jody.”

“That’s all the questions I have for now.” They stood to leave. “If you hear from her, contact me immediately.” Reese handed Rex a business card.

“I will, and I would ask for the same courtesy if you find her.”

“I’ll let you know,” Reese assured him.

Once they left the office, they headed to Georgia’s apartment across the Julia Tuttle Causeway. It was an older building, nicely landscaped, not far from the interstate. Reese parked, and they walked up the iron steps to the second floor.

Luca knocked and waited for an answer, but there wasn’t one. A curtain covered the small window, making it impossible to see inside. Luca pounded harder this time, but still no response.

Having been a cop, he knew it was risky to pose a solution to Reese. He’d once lived by the rules, but now that he was no longer on the force, he’d learned to bend them to the breaking point. “If you step away for a minute, I’ll get us inside.”

Reese shook his head. “We need to do this by the book. If we find something, we don’t want it thrown out on an illegal search. Let’s find the building manager.”

He was right. They wanted an airtight case if it turned out Georgia was in on the killings.

They followed the sign to a leasing office. When they walked in, the woman sitting at the reception desk looked up, and her eyes widened. “Welcome to Meadowbrook Apartments. How can I help you?”

“We need to speak to the building manager.” Reese flipped open his badge. “Official business.”

The woman looked at it, and her mouth dropped open. “The FBI? What’s happened?” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m the building manager, Ruth.”

“We’re conducting a welfare check and need access to an apartment.”

“O-okay. Which one?”

Reese recited the number. She typed into the computer in front of her. “Georgia Perkins. Let me call her first.” She dialed the number, but as it had when Rex called earlier, it kicked to voicemail.

Ruth pushed her chair back and stood. “I’ll get the key.” She disappeared into a room behind the desk and returned. They followed her outside and to the second floor.

“After you unlock the door, step back, and don’t come inside,” Reese cautioned.

With eyes as wide as saucers, Ruth nodded. “Okay.”

Though they had never worked together before, Reese and Luca synced perfectly. With hand signals, Reese motioned he would go in high, with Luca taking the lower quadrant. They pulled their weapons and waited for Ruth to insert the key with shaking fingers. As soon as the lock turned, she dashed away.

Reese nodded at Luca, and they burst inside. Reese disappeared down the hallway while Luca checked the other rooms. The apartment was small, so it took no time to clear it. Georgia wasn’t home.

“Luggage in the closet on a shelf,” Reese noted.

“Milk in the fridge with two days left before expiration,” Luca said.

*“Meow.”*

Luca glanced down to see a gray cat winding around his legs. The empty bowl in the kitchen told him the cat was hungry. He checked the cabinets and found one stocked with a variety of canned food. He chose salmon and opened it, trying not to gag. The stuff looked and smelled nasty. The cat disagreed, trying its best to climb his leg.

He dumped the contents into the bowl, and the cat pounced.

“He was hungry,” Reese noted.

“Look around,” Luca instructed. Everything was cat-related, from the clock on the wall with the tail that acted as a pendulum, to the dishtowels plentifully bestrewn with kittens, to the gigantic carpet-covered cat tree with deluxe scratching posts.

“She wouldn’t leave the cat to its own devices,” Luca insisted.

“You’re right. Nothing looks out of order or as if a struggle has taken place. She either left in a hurry ...”

“Or she didn’t leave willingly,” Luca finished.

The cat had polished off its meal and began rubbing against Luca again.

“Aw, it likes you,” Reese observed.

Luca bent down and picked it up. He’d never had one as a pet, only dogs growing up. This one was very affectionate and rather cute. He scratched its head, and its green eyes went to half-mast as he purred. He checked the tag. Smoke.

“What do we do with him?” Luca didn’t want to leave it to fend for itself.

“Take it with us until we contact family,” Reese suggested.

Luca was afraid he’d say that. He placed the cat on the floor and grabbed several cans of food. Reese found a canvas carrier, and Smoke crawled inside. A check in the closet

produced a tub of litter. Luca added a couple of the toys lying around, and they were on their way.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Liliana watched the scenery as Christian drove home. Luca, Detective Torres, and Reese Reneau were cautiously optimistic that Douglas had been the killer, but Liliana wasn't convinced at all. Finding items that belonged to the victims was a giant neon sign flashing he was guilty. How else would he have them? As Luca said, Douglas was originally from Minnesota. Maybe he'd known Ted Rader, and the killer had revealed the location of his earlier mementos.

Nope. She still didn't believe it. When she'd questioned him point blank, he'd had no idea what she was talking about. She didn't think he was faking, either. His confusion had been genuine.

While she would be ecstatic if the killer had been caught, she didn't know how she would say goodbye to Luca when he left. She'd walked away once, and it was the hardest thing she'd ever done. She wasn't sure she could lose him a second time, though she'd never really had him ten years ago. Her fault.

When they were inside her condo, Liliana watched as Christian cooked dinner. She offered to help, but he waved her away. She wasn't the least bit hungry but didn't want to offend him. He let Audria help, and they whipped up a tasty stir fry with fresh vegetables she had on hand and some frozen chicken over brown rice. As soon as dinner was finished and cleaned up, she headed across the hall to the bedroom in the rented condo. Audria followed but stayed in the living room and flicked on the television.

Liliana wanted to soak in a bath to erase Douglas Speke from her memory. A glass of wine would be nice too, but she was more interested in washing the stink of the last few hours off her body.

Liliana was happy to find bath bombs under the sink. She added a gardenia-scented one and waited until the tub filled



before she stripped and slid inside, groaning as she sank into the scented water.

“Is this a private party?”

She opened her eyes to find Luca standing before her with a glass of wine in one hand and, bless him, the bottle in the other.

“Come on in, the water’s fine.” Liliana cringed at the overused cliché.

Luca didn’t seem to mind as he handed her the glass, placed the bottle on the floor next to the tub, and stripped in record time. She didn’t get to appreciate his impressive body long enough before he slid in across from her. He should’ve looked silly in the mountain of purple bubbles, but he was magnificent.

“Did you and Reese find anything?” She wasn’t sure what they had left to do but knew it involved Douglas.

“No, we didn’t.”

Liliana sipped the wine, savoring the feel as it slid down her throat. When she opened her eyes, it was to find Luca staring at her with naked desire.

Before she knew what was happening, he surged forward and scooped her in his arms. Water sloshed over the side of the tub, but it said something that she didn’t spill her wine.

“Damn it, Lil. You scared the hell out of me today. Why didn’t you trust me to keep you safe?”

The starkness in his voice made her heart clench. “I did. I do. But, Luca, I couldn’t risk Nina’s life. If something happened to her because I didn’t follow the instructions, I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself.”

Luca took the glass from her hand, placed it on the shelf beside them, and kissed her. Consumed her was a better description. There was passion and heat but also desperation that spoke to his fear. For her.

Liliana wrapped herself around him, feeling his need for her. She didn’t want to wait any longer and neither did he as

he sheathed himself. She rose to take him inside her. The feelings were intense. Exquisite. She wanted them to last, but they needed each other too much. After simultaneously exploding, she collapsed against him.

“Don’t ever do that to me again, Lil. I couldn’t take it.”

His heart beat a steady rhythm beneath her ear. She understood his passionate plea and would feel the same in his position. Maybe it had been a stupid decision, but she had trusted him to come for her, and he had, in more ways than one.

Luca scooped her out of the tub and carried her to the bedroom.

“Luca, wait. What’s that?”

“Oh, that’s Smoke.”

“*Meow.*”

Liliana scrambled out of his arms and cuddled the feline.  
“You brought me a cat?”

“Technically, it belongs to Georgia Perkins.”

“Georgia? Why do you have it?”

“Because she’s missing.”

Liliana stood, dread replacing her feelings of euphoria.  
“What happened to her?”

Luca explained the possible connection to Douglas Speke.

“Now that you mention it, I remember seeing them talking several times.”

Was it possible Georgia was in on it? She didn’t seem the type, but then, wasn’t that what people always said about serial killers?

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Luca had fallen asleep last night with Liliana tucked in his arms and Smoke butted up against his legs. He'd been scared out of his mind when he discovered Liliana had left without protection. If something had happened to her, he wasn't sure his heart would survive.

Smoke was up early, batting at Luca's face and licking him with a tongue that felt like sandpaper. He eased away from Liliana with Smoke in his arm and dressed. He headed to the kitchen. Audria was up and drinking a cup of coffee.

"I thought you were taking the cat to Liliana's room?" She raised one brow, letting him know he wasn't fooling anyone. She knew where he'd spent the night.

He refused to dignify her question with a response. He deposited the cat on the floor and opened a can of ocean whitefish and tuna feast in sauteed seafood-flavor gravy. *Gag.* It looked like something the cat barfed up.

Smoke had the opposite reaction, pawing at Luca's leg, trying to get to the chow.

"Knock yourself out, kitty." He placed the bowl on the floor, and Smoke practically dove in headfirst.

Luca checked his messages to find one from Reese. He dialed the FBI agent, glad he was keeping Luca in the loop.

"What's up?"

"Still no trace of Georgia Perkins. No hits on her credit cards or contact with her family. She's disappeared."

It was becoming more plausible that she was involved with Speke in the murders and had been spooked after he'd been caught and killed. She'd ghosted. But why hadn't she swung by to pick up Smoke?

"I spoke with her mom and sister. They insisted she wouldn't leave without telling anyone and she'd never leave her cat. She called him her baby."

“Did she talk to them about a boyfriend?”

“They were adamant that she wasn’t dating either. Her sister said she’d sworn off men after her ex did a number on her.”

“Did you check on him?”

“He’s on a Caribbean cruise with his secretary.”

“He could’ve hired someone and used the trip as his alibi.”

“We’re checking his bank accounts as we speak.”

Liliana appeared, and Luca’s heartbeat sped up. She was so damn beautiful. The front ends of her hair brushed her shoulders, and her green eyes seemed to sparkle. When their gazes met, he forgot how to breathe.

“Russo?”

He shook his head to dissipate the Liliana-induced stupor. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I asked if you still had the cat.”

Smoke had finished his breakfast and was butting up against Luca’s ankles. He crouched down to pick him up and rub his head. “Yes. Did Georgia’s mother or sister want to come get him?”

“Her sister is allergic, and her mom lives in Atlanta in a building that doesn’t allow pets.”

“What do we do with him?”

“I guess we can take him to the shelter until we find Georgia.”

Luca hated to take the sweet kitty to a place that might kill him due to overcrowding. “I’ll keep him here for a while. He’s used to being alone if Georgia leaves him while she works.”

“Sounds good. We’ll chat later.”

Liliana walked up to him, and for a moment, he thought she would rise to her tiptoes and kiss him. Surprisingly, he didn’t mind that Audria and now Christian, who had come in

while he was talking to Reese, were a few feet away. His only thought was on those cherry-red lips that tasted like sunshine. She reached up and ... slid her hands around Smoke, lifting him from Luca's grip.

"Good morning, sweet Smoke." She cuddled him close and murmured to him. His eyes closed, and he purred in kitty contentment.

Damn lucky cat.

#

Liliana hated leaving Smoke all day. It didn't matter that he might be used to it. She didn't want him to be stranded in a strange place. Instead, she convinced Luca to let her take him to the studio. He could hang out in her office with them.

The change of plans meant a detour to a pet store for a litter box. Liliana knew he might be with her for only a day or two, but it didn't stop her from buying extra supplies and cute toys.

Smoke was now napping happily in his cushy new bed covered in a paw print theme.

Kasey had called in sick, so Creed Clements, the man Liliana had hired a few weeks ago as the marketing manager after her old one took maternity leave and decided not to return, was covering the front desk. Creed was a recent graduate, and his creativity had impressed Liliana. He was also a social media expert. Business increased almost instantly after he began promoting the studio across various platforms. He could work on his laptop while he monitored the comings and goings.

Liliana glanced up from her desk to see Rex and Theo arrive for spinning class. Rex looked troubled as he said something to Theo, who nodded and headed to the room with the bikes. Rex turned and approached her office. She motioned for him to come inside.

"Was the FBI able to touch base with Georgia?"

"No. They're trying to track her down, but she hasn't contacted her family. You haven't heard from her?" Luca

asked.

“Not a word, and I’m worried. It’s not like her,” Rex insisted. “Something is wrong.” He reached into his gym bag and withdrew an envelope. “A package arrived at our office addressed to you, Liliana.”

Luca was instantly at her side. “Who left it?”

“I don’t know. Theo found it.” He glanced between them. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Liliana assured him as she stood and rounded her desk. “I’ll ask Theo.”

Luca and Rex followed her as she headed to the room where Denny was putting the class through a grueling spinning routine. Theo was peddling hard when Liliana gestured to him. His eyes widened in surprise as he slowed the bike, grabbed a towel to mop his face, and slid off. Liliana guided him out of the room.

“What’s up?”

“How did the package for me end up at your offices?”

Theo winced. “It was my fault. A delivery man came in, and Pearl was in the restroom. I signed for it, not even looking at the name. I didn’t realize it was addressed to you, or I would’ve sent him next door. Sorry.”

“What did the delivery man look like?” Luca asked.

“To be honest, I didn’t pay much attention. He wore a red and black shirt and a backward baseball cap if that helps. That’s about all I noticed. It wasn’t until after he was gone that I realized it was for Liliana.”

“What about the name of the delivery service?”

“I guess I’d make a terrible detective. Maybe Speedy Delivery. Aren’t their uniforms red and black?”

“I think so. Thanks, Theo,” Liliana said. “Sorry to interrupt your workout.”

“Are you kidding? I should thank you. Denny is in a particularly sadistic mood today.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll skip,” Rex decided. “I’ll see you back at the office, Theo.” With a wave, he left.

Liliana and Luca returned to her office while Theo resumed his workout. Though the conference table was out of view of the window, she punched the button to make the glass opaque so no one could see inside. Luca slid on latex gloves and sliced through the package. He turned it over, and a gold watch and a necklace tumbled out.

“Susan Powers, Rader’s seventh kill, was missing her watch,” Christian said. “The description didn’t match the one found in Speke’s room yesterday, but it does this one.”

“Let me see that.” Liliana looked closer at the pendant. “I’ve seen this before.”

“It’s the shape of the state of Georgia,” Audria noted.

“Oh no, that’s it,” Liliana realized as sadness filled her. “Georgia Perkins wears one like it.”

“Damn,” Luca muttered. “We thought she was working with the killer, but it looks like she was the latest victim.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Luca called Reese Reneau and Detective Torres to let them know another package had arrived. They were on the way over. Georgia Perkins was the latest victim of The Mortician. The question was, why? Georgia wasn't a prostitute. Had she somehow put herself in the crosshairs of the killer?

Audria voiced Luca's concerns. "She doesn't match the current victim profile at all."

"Yeah, I thought about that," he responded.

"What do you think that means?" Liliana asked. "Is he changing his methods?"

"Maybe it wasn't The Mortician, but someone using the story as a cover to kill her," Christian theorized.

Luca nodded. "Like the ex-husband. He did hire a PI to investigate her."

"That's a solid hypothesis," Audria agreed, "but how would that person know about the jewelry or to send it to Liliana? That information hasn't been released."

"Good point," Christian admitted.

"Plus, the watch matched one reported missing from Susan Powers." That alone made Luca confident it was the same person who had killed the other women. Maybe Georgia had been a victim of convenience. Or perhaps something else was in play.

He dialed Rex Raines. "Did you say Georgia was going to look at a house yesterday before she disappeared?"

"She was," Rex confirmed.

"Do you have the address?"

"I don't, but I can go to her office and find it."

"Please do."



There was a pause. “What happened?”

Luca didn’t want to tell him about the necklace, especially since the information was being kept close to the vest. Nor was it his place to reveal her potential death, especially without a body. Plus, her family would need to be notified first. “I wanted to run by there and check it out.”

“Oh, sure. Hold on.”

Luca listened as Rex said something to someone and then started tapping keys. “Here it is.” He recited the address. “Are you going there now?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll need the code to the lockbox. It’s computer-generated. Call me when you arrive, and I’ll text you the sequence.”

Luca thanked him and disconnected as Creed escorted Reese and Torres into the office. He looked intrigued by the newcomers but left without asking questions.

Luca showed them the latest arrivals. “The necklace most likely belongs to Georgia Perkins.”

“I found a picture of her wearing it.” Liliana turned her phone around to display a group picture. She zoomed in on Georgia, and the necklace was clearly visible.

“I didn’t see that coming,” Detective Torres admitted. “She’s a victim instead of an accomplice.”

“That blows the profile out of the water,” Reese said. “I’ll run the change by the analyst and see what she says.”

“I want to go by the last home she visited yesterday before disappearing,” Luca told them.

Reese nodded. “You have the address?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll drive.”

Detective Torres held up the evidence bag. “I need to get back, so I’ll drop these to be evaluated. Keep me posted.”

“I’ll stay here with Liliana and Smoke,” Christian offered.

Luca, Audria, and Reese headed out the door and climbed into Reese’s sedan. Luca provided directions, and twenty minutes later, Reese pulled into a paved driveway of a one-story, Mediterranean-style house with a red-tiled roof and stucco walls. It was nicely landscaped, the lawn was manicured, and the porch was freshly painted. The red and white for-sale sign in the front yard featured Rex’s smiling face.

Luca texted the real estate agent, and he sent the code to the lockbox. Luca typed in the sequence and took out the key to open the door. All three had their weapons in hand as they entered. The home had been staged with contemporary furniture that didn’t fit the Spanish-influenced exterior. Plants added color, even if they were fake. Several business cards and flyers detailing the house’s features were stacked on the granite island.

“You check that wing,” Luca told Audria, pointing past the kitchen. “Reese, you clear the rooms in front. I’ll cover this way.”

It said something about his character and professionalism that the FBI agent didn’t flinch at being told what to do. He made a good teammate.

Luca headed down the corridor, looking inside entries as he passed. Pantry, laundry room. Judging by the double doors at the end of the hallway, he’d picked the side of the house with the main bedroom. He opened them and came to an abrupt stop. His instincts had been correct. Georgia Perkins had been killed here.

“Clear,” Audria called out.

“Clear,” Reese repeated.

“Not here,” he responded.

The other two came running. “Georgia Perkins?”

“Yeah.”

There was no doubt it was the work of The Mortician 2.0. Her nude body was fully on display, colorful makeup had been applied to her face, and in her hand were seven lilies.

“Why did he deviate from his routine and kill her?”

“Good question.”

“This means Douglas Speke wasn’t the copycat,” Audria said.

“Yeah. We’re back to square one.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Luca was on high alert. The killings were happening daily, and seven women had already died. Ten years ago, Rader had murdered eight. Did that mean he was coming after Liliana now? Over Luca's dead body. She'd become the most important person in the world to him.

He'd chosen to skip today's task force meeting and stay with Liliana. There were no new details anyway, so he and Audria wouldn't be missed. Detective Torres and Reese Reneau could fill the others in on the information about Georgia.

The day passed quietly, without notifications of another murder or any new packages. Every time someone walked in the door to the studio, Luca tensed, and it happened often with all the classes going on.

Smoke was still with them. Now that they knew Georgia was dead and wouldn't be coming back, they needed to decide what to do with him since her family didn't want him. Liliana had become attached to the feline, as had Luca. Neither wanted to see him end up in a shelter.

When it was time to leave, they called in a to-go order at a restaurant close to Liliana's condo and were sitting down to eat when her cell buzzed.

"Put it on speaker," Luca advised.

She punched the button. "Hello?"

"Ms. Lima? It's Warren from the lobby. I have a delivery person here for you, but they need you to sign for the package. They won't let me do it."

Liliana looked at Luca for guidance. He nodded, and she said, "I'll be right down."

Liliana disconnected and slid her phone into her pocket. "You're coming with me?"

"No, Liliana, you aren't going."

“He said—”

“I don’t care. It could be a trap. Christian, make sure she stays here. Audria, with me.”

They took the stairs to the lobby. A man stood before Warren’s desk, holding a clipboard and a package. Speedy Delivery. Wasn’t that the name of the company who’d left the envelope for Liliana at Rex Raines’s office? Coincidence? Luca didn’t believe in them.

The deliveryman looked up and spotted them. “Ms. Lima?”

“I’ll be signing for her,” Luca announced.

“I’m not supposed to release it to anyone but her. Those were the specific instructions. If she’s unavailable, I’ll have to return later.”

“She won’t be available then, either. Who sent you?”

“I can’t—”

Glass shattered a fraction of a second before shots rang out. Luca and the deliveryman flew sideways with the impact. Audria wasted no time grabbing Luca’s shirt and dragging him behind Warren’s desk for cover. Though breathing was difficult, he rolled to his knees with his gun drawn and peered over the edge beside Audria. Warren was currently beneath the counter, curled in the fetal position and whimpering. Like hell, he was trained.

The shooting had stopped, but Luca didn’t move until a siren wailed. Either a cop was close and heard the shots, or someone had called them. It most likely had scared the shooter away.

“Are you okay?” Audria asked him.

“Yeah.” He lifted his shirt to reveal the two slugs in his vest. “Thanks for pulling me out of the line of fire.”

“Any time.”

Luca stood gingerly and moved around the counter. The deliveryman was lying on the ground with two holes in his

chest. He hadn't been wearing Kevlar.

Two cops announced themselves before racing into the lobby with weapons drawn. Luca and Audria held their hands in the air. "We're both carrying," Luca informed them before they found the guns on their own.

"Get down on the ground!"

"We're the victims," Audria insisted. "He was shot."

"Down, now. I won't tell you again."

Luca eased to the floor. When a cop came to cuff his arms behind his back, he groaned in pain.

"Damn it. He was hit with two slugs. The front windows are shattered. Even a rookie cop could tell the shots came from outside."

"How do I know you aren't the shooter and then came inside to witness your carnage?" the cop challenged.

"Call Detective Diego Torres and SSA Reese Reneau of the FBI right now," Audria growled.

Warren pushed up from behind the desk. The cops turned their guns on him, and he hit the floor again. Probably wet his pants too.

"Stand with your hands up," the cop ordered.

Warren did so, but his arms were trembling. "They were here with me when the shots were fired from outside."

One cop ignored him and cuffed him too.

Five minutes later, Reese Reneau strode inside and held up his badge. "FBI. Uncuff these two immediately."

"They're suspects," the cop argued.

"Remove the cuffs," he repeated.

With a huff, the cop unlocked the shackles from Audria first and then Luca. He groaned and rolled onto his back.

"Luca, what's wrong?"

"He was shot," Audria said.

Reese kneeled and lifted his shirt. He unzipped the vest and peeled it away from Luca's body. Luca stifled another groan.

"This man was hit, and you cuffed him instead of calling for help?" His tone was incredulous.

"There was a dead guy on the ground," the cop defended himself. "They had weapons."

"We tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen," Audria chastised.

Reese stood and held a hand to Luca, who grasped it and got to his feet. Damn, his side ached.

"What happened?"

"The hit was meant for me."

"Why do you think that?" Audria asked.

"Because the shooter could've sprayed bullets, but he concentrated on where I was standing. It was to get me out of the picture. The deliveryman was collateral damage."

"Luca!"

He turned to see Liliana rushing to him. He guided her away so she wouldn't see the dead body. "What are you doing? You were supposed to stay upstairs. Where the hell is Christian?"

Christian came half-running, half-limping. "Sorry, Luca. She blindsided me."

Liliana didn't look the least bit apologetic as she inspected the bruises on his torso.

"How did you know what happened?"

Audria winced. "My fault. I texted Christian since there would be so many sirens."

"I'm glad you did," Luca told her, then pointed to Christian. "But you, I'll deal with later."

Liliana looked from him to Christian and back. "Oh, no. You will not blame him, Luca. It wasn't his fault. I tricked

him.”

“His job was to keep you in the apartment.”

“No one tells me what to do, Luca. You should know that by now.”

He jammed a thumb in his chest. “I do.”

“You do not.” She rolled her eyes. “I was worried about you. You should be relieved that I left him conscious.”

As mad as he was right now, he couldn’t deny how sexy it was that she was so capable.

“What was in the package?”

Luca had forgotten all about it with the commotion. He searched but didn’t see it on the ground. Then he remembered it flying from the deliveryman’s hand when the shooting started and checked behind the desk, finding it on the floor.

Warren had recovered from his case of stark fear and was talking to the cops with his chest puffed out, acting like the man in charge. Luca shook his head and returned to where Liliana stood with Christian and Audria. He’d wanted to inspect the contents without Liliana around. If Rader continued to parallel his earlier crimes, there would be something of Erin Simon’s inside the package. But he couldn’t keep it from her, so he slipped on gloves, unsealed the flap, and withdrew a velvet box. He opened it to reveal a diamond ring.

Liliana moaned, “It’s Erin’s. It belonged to her grandmother.” Tears coursed down her cheeks as she stared at the reminder of her dear friend. Once the police released it, Luca would ensure it was returned to Erin’s family.

Luca took out another object and held it up. Christian grabbed Liliana before she hit the ground and eased her to the floor.

“Liliana, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“T-that bracelet. It belongs to Shonda. I gave it to her.”



## Chapter Twenty-Six

Luca was worried about Liliana. First, her friend Georgia had been considered by authorities to be an accomplice, only to end up a victim herself. Then Liliana had to relive her former roommate's murder after seeing Erin's ring. But knowing that her best friend might now be suffering the same fate was gut-wrenching.

Christian had swiped Warren's chair and brought it over for her to sit. Luca needed to apologize to his coworker. He knew there was nothing Christian could've done to keep Liliana inside the apartment when she was determined to get out. Hell, Luca wouldn't have been able to stop her. She had mad skills.

He'd called Reese over and told him about the latest package. He immediately sent two agents to Shonda's apartment to check on her, and they were waiting to hear any word, one way or another. Liliana had called her a dozen times, but there was no answer.

"I had the office trace her phone," Christian informed them. "It's at her apartment."

Liliana's eyes welled with tears. "Why isn't she picking up?"

Luca was afraid of the answer.

Detective Torres walked over and announced, "We've got the shooter's vehicle on tape. Generic brown sedan with tinted windows, no license plate."

"In other words, impossible to trace," Luca translated.

"Affirmative."

Yet another in a long line of dead ends.

"What about information from the delivery service?"

"They didn't have any record of a stop here tonight. It turns out they had a uniform swiped from one of their trucks a

couple of days ago. The guy wasn't one of theirs."

"The vic's name is Nelson Weber." Audria looked up from her phone. "He has a record."

"You know this how?" Torres asked.

"I might've scanned a fingerprint."

"Audria," Reese chastised.

"What? I didn't touch him or contaminate the scene at all."

Before Reese could respond, his cell buzzed, and he moved away to take the call. Luca gave Audria a nod to let him know he approved of her methods.

"He's changed again if he took Shonda and not a prostitute," Detective Torres noted. "Georgia Perkins wasn't a fluke. Something made him switch things up on his last two kills."

"He took Shonda to impart maximum suffering to Liliana." Luca was sure of it. Shonda was her closest friend, as Erin had been in college.

Reese ended his call and said, "That was the profiler. I ran the last two murders by her. She agreed that something triggered his actions. Whether it was that Georgia Perkins discovered who he was or another underlying factor, she was somehow a threat to him. Though he deviated from his routine, he could continue it with the modification. She agreed that Shonda is a personal vendetta."

Against Liliana.

#

Liliana wasn't sure how she was holding it together. First, Luca had been shot and could've been killed. Thankfully, the vest had caught the slugs, or he might be lying on the floor next to the deliveryman. Luca didn't think she'd seen him, but she had.

She glanced over at Christian and felt a pang of regret. He probably hated her now. It made her ill that he might get in

trouble because of her. His phone had been sitting on the table, and she happened to read the text from Audria when it popped up. It felt as if she had taken the bullet when she read that Luca had been shot. Getting to him as fast as possible had been her only thought.

Liliana knew Christian wouldn't let her go to Luca, so she'd tricked him, telling him she needed his help to get something off the shelf in the pantry. It wasn't her plan to use physical force, but when she started to lock him in, he'd caught on to her intent. Sweeping his legs out from under him had been instinctual, as was shoving him backward and slamming the door. She'd even pulled a decorative sideboard the staging company had placed against the wall across the entry to slow him down. Then she'd gone to Luca.

Frankly, Liliana was surprised Christian had been able to get free so quickly. She'd barely beat him down the stairs, and she had jumped several at a time.

Usually, when she felt off-kilter, she'd call Shonda, and her friend would calm her down. Agony engulfed her, and her chest squeezed painfully. If The Mortician had her, she was suffering, and it was all Liliana's fault. Why hadn't she insisted Shonda go away on a trip or stay with her? Luca, Christian, and Audria would've protected her.

Because she never thought The Mortician would go after her.

Reese was talking on his phone, his expression grim. He disconnected and walked over to Luca. Liliana jumped up and rushed over to hear.

"The agents arrived at Shonda's apartment. There was no answer to the knock, but one looked inside a window and noted signs of a struggle. They announced themselves and kicked in the door. Shonda was not there, but her phone and purse were inside."

"Liliana, honey, breathe."

"He's got her, Luca. You know he does."

#

Luca hated to see Liliana in pain. “We don’t know that for sure.”

“Don’t baby me, Luca. You know as well as I do that he has her.”

“They are following up on security camera footage now,” Reese told them. “I’ll keep you posted.”

“I’m going to take her upstairs. If you need anything from me, call.”

Reese nodded.

Luca instructed Audria to stay with the authorities while he and Christian took Liliana to the condo. She moved on autopilot, and it was all he could do to refrain from gathering her into his arms and hugging her tight. If not for Christian, he would have indulged in his instinct.

Once they entered the condo, Liliana tried Shonda’s number again, knowing she wouldn’t answer. She picked up Smoke, buried her face in his fur, and headed dejectedly to her bedroom. Luca wanted to follow, but there was something he needed to do first.

“I’m sorry about calling you out earlier.”

Christian shook his head. “Don’t be. I deserved it.”

“No, you didn’t. You never expected her to deceive you. Plus, her skills rival ours. You saw her in action against Speke. I’d have had to tie her up, and we both know that wouldn’t have flown.”

Christian chuckled. “She’d have gotten out of any binds we put on her.”

“Exactly. I overreacted, and again, I apologize. I trust you implicitly.”

Christian nodded. “Apology accepted.”

“I’m going to check on her.”

Luca thought she would be changing her clothes or brushing her teeth. He didn’t plan on finding her curled up on

the bathroom rug, sobbing her eyes out, with Smoke clutched in her grip.

“Oh, honey.” His heart cracked in two as he gathered her in his arms and held her while she cried, wishing he could absorb her pain. Smoke butted his head against her, trying to do the same.

“He killed her, Luca.”

As much as he wanted to reassure her, the words stuck in his throat. There was an excellent possibility that her best friend was suffering an unimaginable fate. All he could do was hold her and love her, and that’s exactly what he did.

#

Liliana never thought she’d be able to sleep last night, but tucked into Luca’s arms was her safe place, and she was able to rest. She feared dreams would plague her, but Luca’s powerful presence kept them at bay. She didn’t wake up refreshed, but she felt as if she might be able to make it through the next few hours.

Breakfast was out since her stomach was still in knots. Although she wanted to climb back into bed—into Luca’s arms—she had a business to run. It wouldn’t stop because she was having a crisis. Besides, she needed to keep her mind occupied so she didn’t go crazy worrying about what her friend might be enduring. Luca reached over and clasped her hand as they drove to her studio. She clung to him, absorbing his strength. Smoke slept contentedly in her lap.

They were the first to arrive, so Liliana deactivated the alarm, and they entered the building. Audria peeled off to clear the women’s locker room while Christian did the same to the men’s. Luca checked the other rooms while she entered her office and placed Smoke on his bed. He curled up and went to sleep.

After stuffing her bag in the credenza behind her desk, Liliana removed the lightweight jacket she used to cover the bulletproof vest and discarded it as well. Then she headed to the bathroom to grab the watering can to nourish the plants.

Liliana twisted the handle on the door to open it and froze.  
Then she screamed.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Luca lost twenty years of his life when Liliana screamed. It was the most terrifying sound he'd ever heard. He reversed course and sprinted to her office to see her standing in the doorway of her private bathroom with her hands covering her mouth.

"Liliana, honey, what is it?"

She was in full-blown shock and didn't answer him. Christian and Audria had joined him with their guns drawn. He eased around her to peer inside. His stomach roiled, and he backed out. "Oh, no."

"Luca," Liliana wailed.

He clutched her and hugged her tight, guiding her away from the gruesome image of Shonda Johns dead inside, her face painted in grotesque shades of pink, blue, and red.

"I'm going to be sick."

Luca grabbed a trash can and held it for her. They'd known it was a good possibility that The Mortician had Shonda, but this was the proof.

When there was nothing left in Liliana's stomach, Audria handed him a wet washcloth, which he gave to her before guiding her out of the office. Christian called the police and stood guard outside to keep any of Liliana's employees from entering since the entire studio was a crime scene.

He eased Liliana onto a bench beside a bubbling fountain as first responders began to arrive. Audria had put Smoke inside his carrier, and she placed it beside Liliana. Christian handed off the task of blocking entry to one of the uniformed cops and came inside. He motioned to Luca and Audria, and they gathered a couple of feet away from Liliana.

"I reviewed the video feeds, and there is no footage of anyone entering or exiting the building after it closed last night until we arrived today."

“How is that possible?” Audria asked.

“Maybe they used a jamming device?” Luca guessed. He had asked Liliana about other exits when he’d planted the cameras, and she’d assured him there were only two.

“I’ll see if the office can determine what happened,” Christian said, tapping keys on his phone.

Reese Reneau and the FBI arrived, and soon the place was filled with people.

#

Liliana sat on a bench in the atrium, watching emergency personnel rush in and out of her studio, feeling completely detached from reality. She didn’t hear the burbling fountain, usually a source of immense relaxation, or the crackling of police radios or the din of conversation. Even Smoke’s presence didn’t soothe her.

She spotted Kasey and Creed outside waving to get her attention. One of them must’ve called Jody because she was there too. Liliana didn’t acknowledge them because she didn’t want to explain what had happened.

Her sanctuary, her place of ultimate happiness, had been breached in the most monstrous way imaginable. Shonda had been killed here. She clutched her stomach, afraid she would be sick again, though nothing was left inside her.

How was it possible that Shonda was dead? Liliana had just spoken with her. She had been so full of energy. She’d always been a dreamer, planning on bigger and better things with the studio and her life. Liliana had known that she would accomplish whatever she set her mind on. Shonda had been a force of nature and the kindest, most amazing person she’d ever met.

Liliana could never step foot inside the building again without remembering the unspeakable horrors that had taken place in her office. Shonda had been brutally raped and murdered, her body drained of blood. It felt as if a knife had stabbed into her heart and sliced it to ribbons.



It pained Liliana to think of the horror Shonda had felt at the hands of a madman. She'd probably begged him to stop, but he'd ignored her pleas. His only goal had likely been feeling superior over the sweetest, most incredible woman Liliana had ever known.

The numbness that swamped her was the only thing keeping Liliana from screaming out her pain. She wasn't sure what her next move would be, but she couldn't stay in Florida. The place she'd called home for over ten years had been irrevocably tainted. The picture of Shonda's broken body would haunt her for the rest of her days. She would have to leave.

Packing up and moving wasn't something she was looking forward to, but it was necessary. If the police would let her, she would flee now.

"Liliana!"

Someone was calling her name, but she didn't care. If she ignored them, maybe they would go away. She didn't feel like dealing with anyone right now. She wanted to grieve her friend alone.

"*Liliana!*"

The voice's urgency made her turn to see Theo rushing over. *Leave me alone*, she wanted to scream. Couldn't he tell she was in mourning?

"Liliana, you have to come quick. Rex collapsed, and I'm pretty sure he's having a heart attack. I know I took the CPR class, but I'm panicking and don't remember one single thing! Do I check his airway or what? Pump his chest? Help!"

A friend in distress jarred her from her shock. She couldn't save Georgia or Shonda, but she could save Rex. Luca and Christian were speaking with Detective Torres. Audria was in a deep conversation with Reese Reneau. It would be up to her.

"Liliana, we have to do something. The instructor said seconds matter. I remember that much."

Theo was right. Time was critical when someone was having a heart attack. She left Smoke in his cage and hurried after Theo, grabbing the portable defibrillator that they kept onsite for such emergencies. It had yet to be used, but she'd been trained in what to do, so she felt confident she'd be able to administer aid.

Theo held the door open that led to her storage room.

“Rex is in here?”

“Yes. Hurry.”

Liliana stepped inside, glancing around for Rex, but she didn't see him anywhere. Suddenly, something hard slammed into her head, and the lights went out.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Liliana's head throbbed as consciousness seeped into her. What had happened? Why did her skull feel as if it'd been used as a punching bag by a gang of angry pugilists?

The cloying scent of flowers assailed her nose, overpowering in intensity. Was she in a garden? Or, heaven forbid, a funeral home? My God, was she dead? Would she feel the pain in her head if she were?

A voice drifted toward her, and she stilled, trying to ascertain its origin. Wherever she was, she wasn't alone.

“Are you finally awake, darling Liliana?”

Her eyes popped open, and a memory hit her. “Theo?” She'd followed him to help Rex. He'd had a heart attack. She blinked to bring him into focus. “What are you doing? Where's Rex? How is he?”

Theo ran a knife along her foot and up her body, stopping at her neck. That's when she realized her hands were tied together and she was strapped to a table by a band around her waist. Vases of blood-red lilies surrounded her, the same flowers as the bouquet that had been delivered to her condo. Flames flickered on fat white candles on several stands. It felt as if she was displayed on an altar.

Liliana blinked, trying to process what was happening. Was Theo Harvey the killer? He'd always seemed so nice. She'd never felt uneasy around him.

Her heart pounded as the knife caressed her neck. Would he slice her jugular so she would bleed out like the other women? The table beneath her was cold, and her gut cramped when she realized it had gutters along the sides. It was designed to keep bodily fluids away from the person performing an embalming. The strap around her stomach anchored her in place, but if he came close enough, she might be able to snap his neck with her legs. However, she still felt lethargic and wasn't sure she could get her muscles to do what she wanted.

“Time to remove these clothes.”

Oh, hell to the no. Liliana did not want to be naked and vulnerable in front of Theo. She needed to keep him distracted. “Theo, what happened to Rex? Did he have a heart attack?”

His hand stilled, and a look of regret crossed his features. “I had to do it. Don’t you see? He was figuring it out.”

Dread filled her belly. “What did you do, Theo?”

He looked pained. “I had to get rid of him.”

*Oh, no.* “Please tell me you didn’t kill Rex, Theo. He was so good to you.”

Theo winced. “I didn’t want to. He realized it wasn’t Georgia who had changed the listing. He figured out it was me. I couldn’t risk him ratting me out to the cops.”

Rex was dead? Liliana felt sick that the man filled with hope and happiness had been senselessly slaughtered. He had loved selling houses, and he was good at it. He’d donated time and money to charity. Rex Raines had been a good man. “What did he figure out, Theo? That you are a killer?”

Theo’s mouth creased into a frown. “I don’t like that term. It’s disgusting. I rid the world of the unnecessarys, the throwaways. I provide a service, if you will.”

Liliana gaped at him. “How can you say that about human beings?”

Now he sneered. “Those women are a scourge on society. They spread their legs for the almighty dollar or a hit of nose candy. Nauseating. Their morals are on par with an alley cat. They don’t deserve to share our air.”

How elitist of him. “Who are you to be judge and jury?”

The blow was unexpected, and her head whipped to the side. At one time, she would’ve been crying hysterically at the hit, but she’d taken so many during training it barely fazed her. It did hurt like hell and would leave a nasty bruise.

“I grew up with practically next to nothing. My mother prostituted herself out to one man, who threw scraps our way but was never physically involved in our lives. I made something of myself anyway. Those women could’ve done the same thing instead of using their bodies.”

Goading him probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do, but she needed to keep him distracted from cutting her clothes off.

“Georgia wasn’t a prostitute, Theo. She was a smart, intelligent woman. Neither was,” she swallowed heavily, “Shonda.”

“Georgia’s death was a necessity. She realized I was the one who’d delisted the house where Speke had been staying.”

“You did that for Douglas?”

Theo nodded. “I did. He needed somewhere to stay and wanted to bunk with me. That wouldn’t do, so I told him I would find him a place. I knew the family had moved out of town and couldn’t check on the status. Perfect solution.”

“You and Douglas were buddies?”

“Yep.”

“Did you know each other back in Minnesota?”

“Nope. We met when he started working at the studio.”

“You were friends, yet you framed him as being The Mortician.”

“That wasn’t nice of me, was it?” He chuckled. “It was too easy. As stupid as they are, I knew the cops would eventually figure out he wasn’t the killer. But it bought me time to do this with you.”

He ran the tip of the blade down her cheek. She held her breath. When she didn’t feel the steel pierce her skin, she asked, “Why did Theo use Rex as his real estate agent instead of you if you were close?”

“That was my idea. I told him to have Rex show him a unit in your building. I went along and pretended to sign my

name. The stupid guard didn't even check. While they looked at the condo, I detoured by your place to leave you a gift."

"How did you get The Mortician's souvenirs?"

His smile was pure malevolence. "That, my darling Liliana, is a secret I'll take to my grave."

As much as she wanted the answer, Liliana prayed that mystery would die in the next few minutes. "What did Georgia do when she discovered what you'd done?"

"She figured out I had used her computer. She was going to tell Rex and he would've called the cops. I had no choice but to stop her. She'd always acted better than me because she went to college, and I didn't. Haughty bitch. No wonder her husband divorced her. Raping and strangling her had been fun. She'd begged and pleaded with me."

He was sick. Liliana was afraid she didn't want the answer to her next question. "Why Shonda?"

Theo shook his head. "I had nothing against her. She'd always been nice to me. But I needed the one person closest to you, and she drew the short straw. Your fault."

Liliana wanted to scream and throw up at the same time. It wasn't fair that Shonda had to die.

Even if Theo killed her here, she knew Luca would track him down and make him pay. She prayed he didn't do something that would ruin his life. She wanted him to lead a long, happy existence, even if she couldn't be part of it.

Hatred for Theo bubbled up inside her. He had ruined so many lives. She did not want him to touch her before he killed her. Death was preferable to rape. Maybe she could taunt him into using the blade now. "Why did you steal the MO of a known serial killer? Couldn't you come up with anything original yourself, Theo? You even ripped off his moniker. Have you no imagination?"

"It's my own," he protested. "I do it my way."

"No, you do it Ted Rader's way. You are nothing but a pathetic copycat."

“You bitch!”

Theo lifted the knife, and Liliana realized she’d provoked him too far.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Luca's heart ached for Shonda Johns. She'd suffered badly before her death and now she was being studied and photographed, with no regard for her dignity. It was necessary to bring her killer to justice, but it seemed so unfair.

He hadn't had the chance to know Shonda, but she'd been Liliana's best friend, so that made her special. Her death would leave a scar on Liliana that would never heal. She would try to blame herself, but Luca wouldn't let her. He would constantly remind her she wasn't responsible for the acts of a deranged monster. In fact, he needed to do that now.

He glanced to where she was sitting ... or had been a few minutes ago. Smoke was there, meowing insistently inside his carrier and pawing to get out. "Did you see Liliana leave?" he asked Christian.

"No."

Luca tapped Audria on the shoulder. "Where's Liliana?"

"Right—" She spun in a circle. "She was just here." Audria craned her head around. "Did you see her leave, Reese?"

"No."

Luca grabbed one of the uniformed officers. "Have you seen Ms. Lima?"

"Yeah, a guy came rushing up to her, and she went with him down that hallway." He pointed toward the storage room. Only emergency personnel had been allowed inside, so it must've been a cop.

"How long ago?" Reese asked.

"Five, ten minutes."

"Was he wearing a uniform?" Luca questioned.

"No, casual clothes."

"What did the guy look like?" Audria asked.



“Short reddish-brown hair, medium build, about five-ten.”

“It sounds like Theo Harvey,” Audria said.

“He wasn’t here when we locked the building down,” Reese noted. “How did he get in?”

“There is a back exit.”

Luca headed down the hall and stopped, noting the empty case that had held the defibrillator.

Audria picked up on it too. “Maybe someone in Rex’s office suffered a heart attack with all the commotion.”

A cop was stationed at the emergency exit. “Did anyone come by here in the last five to ten minutes?” Luca asked.

The woman shook her head. “No. No activity.”

“Christian, Audria, check the other offices.”

They dashed down the hall while Luca opened the door to the storage and laundry room. The scent of fabric softener slapped him in the face as he flicked on the light. Liliana wasn’t inside, but the defibrillator was lying on the ground.

“Luca, look.”

He turned to where Reese was pointing. A filing cabinet had been shoved aside, and a wall panel moved, revealing a hole.

“Clear,” Audria said as she and Christian returned. “Liliana didn’t take her purse or cell phone with her. What the hell?”

“This has to be how the killer brought Shonda inside.” Luca had a sick feeling as he crouched down and crawled through the opening. He stood and looked around the storage room of Rex Raines’s real estate office.

“Oh, damn.”

Luca turned to see Christian holding up a watch. It was Liliana’s—the one with the backup tracker.

The place was quiet. Eerily quiet. Deathly quiet. With hand signals, he motioned Christian to go one way and Audria

the other. He and Reese made their way to Rex's office with their guns drawn. The man was sitting in his chair with his back to the door.

"Mr. Raines?"

No answer. Reese eased forward and spun the chair. Rex Raines slumped over, leaving a trail of blood on the white leather.

"One down in front," Christian informed them. "Female, mid-sixties."

"One here too," Luca replied. "Rex Raines."

"Any sign of Liliana?"

"Negative," Christian responded.

"We cleared the rest of the office," Audria said. "Nothing."

Luca tried to remain calm. He needed his wits to find Liliana. "I'll pull up the security feeds."

The others met him in the hallway as he found the footage and played it on his phone. He started with the back exit. Crime scene personnel combed the alley for clues, but no Liliana or Theo. He switched to the front of the building. Emergency crews came and went, but again, no Liliana.

"There." Reese pointed to the top corner of the screen. "Can you tighten it up?"

Luca tried, but the brown car was out of range.

"There is a side exit out of Reese's office," Christian informed them. "He must've left that way to avoid the authorities."

"We need to check street camera footage," Audria said. She and Reese started making calls.

Luca kept the panic at bay and reverted to his detective training. Something clicked into place. "The murders occurred at houses that were on the market. We assumed Georgia was the accomplice, but it had to be Theo."

Christian picked up on his thoughts. “Who better to know what’s empty but a realtor?”

“Exactly. We need to look at the search history on his computer.”

They found the cubicle where Theo worked. Luca ceded the task to Christian, who was an expert with computers. Christian sat in the chair and started manipulating the keys. “There are four in his most recent history.” Soon the printer began spitting out pages. Luca grabbed them.

“The FBI followed the car to a busy parking garage two blocks away,” Reese reported. “They’re sending cars now.”

“He switched them.” Theo had outwitted everyone so far.

“He’d want the location to be remote,” Audria reasoned. “No neighbors to see or hear anything.”

“It’s this one.” Christian tapped the paper showing the house located outside of Coral Gables. “No close neighbors. House surrounded by trees.”

“We can’t afford to focus on one and ignore the others,” Luca protested.

“I’ll have people sent to the alternate locations,” Reese said.

Luca glanced around. “We need to get out of here. It will be crawling with emergency personnel.”

As if on cue, officers arrived en masse, led by Detective Torres.

“I’ll deal with them,” Reese said. “You three go and keep me posted.”

“Take care of Smoke,” Audria yelled over her shoulder as they raced for the SUV.

Christian drove while Luca punched the address into the GPS. His phone buzzed, and he answered on speaker when he saw Tyler’s face.

“Audria called a while ago about digging deep into Theo Harvey.”

Luca glanced back at her. “I had a gut feeling when the cop said the man Liliana left with looked like him and texted Tyler.”

“Good for you.”

“I’ve got intel, and Luca, you aren’t going to believe this. Theo Harvey is Ted Rader’s brother.”

## Chapter Thirty

“*What?*” Luca shook his head. “Ted Rader didn’t have siblings.”

“Theo is his half-brother. His father had an affair, and Theo was the result. The old man never acknowledged him, so their connection wasn’t revealed.”

“How did you find that out?” Luca asked. “And why wasn’t it discovered ten years ago?”

“Why it wasn’t discovered earlier, I can’t answer,” Tyler responded. “I uncovered it through old payments Ted Senior made to a Marta Harvey. She was the secretary at the church where the Raders worshipped. Seemed innocuous. He must’ve been making his yearly tithes to the church, right? In fact, that’s what he claimed on taxes. But I dug deeper.”

Damn, Tyler was incredible. Luca had no idea how much Tyler made, but he was worth ten times his salary.

“The payments stopped when Ted Senior died of a massive coronary,” Tyler continued. “Mrs. Rader didn’t keep up with them. So, she either didn’t know about the payments ...”

“Or she’s the one who insisted he had nothing to do with a bastard son,” Christian theorized.

“Exactly. My search moved to Marta Harvey, the recipient of said payments. She never married but had a son, Theo, short for Theodore.”

“And Ted Rader’s full name is Theodore Rader,” Luca realized.

“Yep. More digging produced a birth certificate. Marta listed Theodore Rader Senior as the father and named her only son after him. But wait, there’s more.”

Tyler proceeded to drop another nuclear bomb.

*Sonofabitch.* He thanked Tyler and disconnected. “If only I’d had him research Harvey sooner,” Luca muttered.

“That’s not on you,” Audria insisted. “There were absolutely no red flags with him. He was background, and there was no way we could investigate everyone. Besides, Tyler might not have dug so deep and found the connection if he were doing a cursory search.”

“We’d have discovered he was from the same hometown as Ted Rader,” Luca pointed out. Audria didn’t have an answer to that one.

With Theo being related to Ted by blood, he’d continued his brother’s wicked ways or was involved from the beginning. “How old is Harvey?”

Audria looked down at her phone. “He’s twenty-four.”

“It’s unlikely he was involved with Rader’s crimes ten years ago,” Luca theorized. “He’d have been too young.”

Christian glanced over at him. “He inherited Rader’s stash of souvenirs.”

“Strange thing to leave a half-sibling, who you would think Harvey resented,” Audria said. “Their father acknowledged Ted but not Theo.”

“Somehow, they connected, and it seems like Theo idolized his brother, continuing his legacy.”

“Why did he target Liliana?” Christian wondered.

“Maybe he blames her for his brother’s death,” Luca conjectured. “If she hadn’t returned home when she did, Rader would’ve gotten away.” He glanced at the GPS. “We’re almost at the address. We need to come up with a plan.”

“First, we should send Tyler’s drone to ascertain their location,” Audria suggested. “I’ll be the sniper while you two go inside.”

“Good plan with the drone, but I want both of you to take up positions outside. I’ll go in alone. Turn here to park.”

Christian swerved onto a dirt road on the property adjacent to the one they were banking on Harvey using and cut the engine. They piled out and headed to the back to gear up. Audria took out a drone the size of a bug, and they moved to the line of trees.

“White SUV parked by the detached garage,” Luca noted.

Audria set the drone in flight and piloted it with her phone. She found an opening beneath the front door of the one-story structure. The living room was empty, as was the kitchen. She moved to a room in the back. “Bingo.”

Luca crouched closer to the screen. “Liliana.” His blood ran cold. She was lying on a stainless-steel embalming table, surrounded by vases of lilies and burning candles. Theo was walking around her, gesturing with a knife. Her wrists were tied together and bloody, as if she’d tried to break loose.

“The room is directly across from the garage,” Christian said. “We’ll climb to the roof and get in place.”

“Roger that. I’ll wait for you to signal me to go in, then you wait for my sign to shoot.”

Audria returned the drone and placed it in its box before strapping on a rifle and following Christian through the trees. Luca circled to the front, staying out of sight of the bedroom window.

It took everything in him to resist busting inside and firing at Harvey, but he didn’t want to risk hitting Liliana. He inhaled deeply to slow his racing heartbeat. He’d need to remain calm to outwit Harvey.

“In position,” Christian said through the comms.

“I’m going in.”

Luca tested the doorknob, and it opened. He whispered inside. With his gun ready, he moved to the door and cracked it open. He waited for Theo to circle behind the table. He couldn’t risk a shot going through him and hitting Liliana.

“You bitch!”

Theo lifted his arm, forcing Luca's hand. He burst inside. "Drop the knife, Harvey."

Theo's head snapped up. "The hell? Why are you here?" He released a strap securing Liliana to the table and jerked her off, holding her in his grip with the knife at her throat. "No, don't come any closer, or I will kill her. Who's with you?"

Luca's jaw clenched. A bruise was forming on one side of Liliana's face. Theo Harvey would pay for hitting her. "I'm all alone. It's just you and me, Theo." Luca stopped his advance. "You're taking over for your older brother, Ted, aren't you, Theo?"

Liliana's head whipped toward Luca. "Ted Rader didn't have siblings."

"Oh, yes, he did," Theo corrected. "Half-brother. We had the same daddy. But he refused to acknowledge me, his bastard son, his secret mistake. He even tried to get my mom to abort me. Can you believe it? He was this holier-than-thou wanna-be preacher who was banging the church secretary, and he gets her pregnant. Then he had the gall to demand she clothes-hanger me."

Too bad she didn't listen. How many lives would've been saved?

"Others might not have known about you, but Ted did," Luca guessed.

"He did. He was fifteen years older than me, and I idolized him. His bitch of a mother refused to let us have a relationship. Guess who he came to when he needed help?"

"After he was shot," Luca stated.

"Yep. I was only fourteen, but I took care of him. I had to hide him in the shed in the backyard, so my mom wouldn't find out. She was such a goody-two-shoes. Surprising that she had the chutzpah to carry on an affair with a married man. Anyway, the entire world was looking for him. I couldn't call a doctor, so I did my best. I sat with him for hours a day as he talked about his women, as he called them, describing what he did to them. It sounded so wonderful."



Good lord, the man was talking about murdering women, and he thought it was appealing. Luca was disgusted.

“He hung on for almost two weeks, but I came home from school one day and couldn’t wake him.”

“What did you do with him?”

“Buried him behind the shed.”

Luca made a note to have the police dig up Rader’s body. “So, you took over where he left off?”

“It sounded so glamorous,” Theo enthused. “He told me where he left his brag box. I found it, and it held souvenirs from all his kills. He took something unique from each one, a talisman, if you will.”

Sick bastard.

“Killing someone isn’t easy, Theo. How did you get started?”

“I practiced on wild animals or ones I caught from the neighborhood. Once I got the rhythm down, I took my first woman.” He laughed maniacally. “As soon as I strangled her, I threw up. I knew Ted would be so disappointed in me, so I steeled myself and finished the job.” He shook his head, clearly back in time to that kill. “I was sloppy. I knew I had to get better to do justice to Ted’s name.”

“Where did you find the victims?”

Theo’s lip creased into a sneer. “Hookers. Homeless shelters. Promise a junkie a hit, and they’ll follow you anywhere.”

That explained why they couldn’t find a pattern around the country. He practiced on women who wouldn’t be missed. “How many before you came to Miami Beach?” Damn it, why wouldn’t he move the knife from Liliana’s throat? An infinitesimal amount of pressure, and he’d break the skin.

“Eight, no ten.” He nodded. “It took a while to get it down properly, plus I had to wait for dear old Mom to croak.”

“Did you kill her too?”

Theo snorted. “No. As much as I wanted to, cancer beat me to it.”

Luca focused on Theo to keep him talking but glanced at Liliana. She didn’t look the least bit scared. She looked pissed.

“You’ve told me all about you, Theo. Now let me tell you a little about me. You see, I work for a security company, the best in the country. That’s how we tracked you down.”

“We?”

“Oh, when I told you I was alone, I lied. In about five seconds, you will see your brother again.”

Theo gaped and looked around. “How did you—”

The sound of glass breaking preceded Theo’s head exploding. Luca lunged for Liliana but was a fraction too late as a figure stepped from behind a door and grabbed her first. Luca knew who it was before seeing his disfigured face.

“Rader.”

“Well, if it isn’t the cop who shot me,” he sneered. “Detective Russo. Call your sniper down here now.”

#

Audria spied through the binoculars, waiting for Luca to give a sign. The house was a dilapidated structure that looked a strong wind away from becoming a pile of rubble. The next hurricane would no doubt take it down. She feared the garage might collapse under her and Christian’s combined weight, but it was holding up so far.

Being away from the city and with the clouds covering the moon, plenty of shadows made it difficult to see clearly. The burning candles were the only illumination in the room. Thankfully, Harvey had lit several.

Theo Harvey would die tonight. She’d been prepared to take the shot, but Christian overruled her. Three damn days. That was all the seniority he had over her in signing their COBRA Securities contracts. But those seventy-two hours held weight.

Audria regretted telling Christian her history with the FBI. That was why he pulled rank to take the shot. She needed to overcome her demons and couldn't do that if she didn't get the chance. Shooting the hell out of immobile targets was one thing, and she'd done plenty of that since the incident. She knew she could do the job if necessary, and today, it would be, but she wouldn't be the one pulling the trigger.

She'd texted Reese to let him know they'd found Liliana and Harvey but asked him to tell any emergency personnel to come in cold, without lights and sirens. They didn't want to spook Harvey into harming Liliana.

*"Oh, when I told you I was alone, I lied. In about five seconds, you will see your brother again."*

"That's the sign," she whispered to Christian.

"Got it." He inhaled deeply and held his breath while sighting through the scope. Then he squeezed the trigger, nailing Theo Harvey dead in the center of his forehead. It was a perfect shot. Impressive.

They rose in tandem to go to Luca when Christian grabbed her arm to stop her. "Wait."

Audria lifted the field glasses and spotted another man who had suddenly appeared, and he was now holding Liliana.

*"Rader."*

*"Call your sniper here now."*

"You go," Christian said. "I'll get in place to take him out."

Audria rolled to the roof's edge and swung over the side, dropping to the ground. She jogged to the front of the house. Her Sig Sauer was in a holder at her back, and she had another gun strapped to her ankle. She walked into the room with her rifle and held it up before placing it on the ground and standing next to Luca.

"Well, aren't you the pretty one," Ted Rader mused. "Sweetheart, you are just my type. Too bad we won't be able to get to know each other better."

“Yeah, too bad,” Audria deadpanned.

“How did a beauty like you become a sniper?”

#

Rader had done his homework if he knew Luca’s name and that he’d been promoted to detective. He’d been a beat cop when he’d shot Rader. “Your brother said you died, and he buried you.”

Rader glanced at what was left of Theo without the slightest bit of remorse. “He was protecting me. He was always my biggest fan.”

Luca was afraid to look at Liliana. He knew she must be terrified. Rader had his arm around her neck. Thankfully, the gun in his other hand pointed at Luca, not Liliana.

“The shot is too risky with Liliana in the way,” Christian said through the comms.

“Don’t do it,” he told him.

Rader tilted his head, thinking Luca was speaking to him. “Do what? Kill her? I told her I would be back for her, and here I am. I’m a man of my word.”

Luca chanced a peek at her face, expecting to see her frozen in terror. Instead, she looked mad. And determined. Her bound hands clutched Rader’s arm. She gave him a slight nod.

Rader noticed their silent communication and turned his gun on Liliana. Luca’s lungs seized.

The floor creaked, and Audria stepped inside. Perfect timing. She placed her rifle on the ground before standing beside Luca. Audria was Rader’s type, and he was instantly infatuated with her, praising her looks. Luca needed to keep him talking so he’d move the gun away from Liliana. “How did you hide from the cops all these years, Ted?”

Rader looked surprised Luca was still there. He’d taken an instant liking to Audria.

“Theo was telling the truth about caring for me in the shed behind his mother’s house. But the kid knew diddly squat

about first aid. My mother had hired a mortician who used to be a doc until he drank himself out of work. He could be bought for a bottle of Jim Beam.”

“Jasper Meeks,” Luca recalled. They’d tried to interview him, had searched for him for months. “He disappeared.”

“Yep. I couldn’t risk his drunk ass ratting me out. *He* is buried behind the shed.”

And he’d done a particularly nasty job of stitching Rader up. The scar on his face looked like it belonged to Frankenstein, and his eye appeared sewn shut. How apropos. Freaky looks for a genuine monster.

“Theo’s mom never found out about you?”

“That looney tunes?” Rader shook his head. “I could’ve walked right up to her, and she wouldn’t have known who I was. I’m afraid Theo got his crazy genes from her.”

Nah, they both got them from their father, or maybe ...  
“What about your mom, Ted?”

Anger transformed his disfigured face into a mask of rage.  
“Don’t speak of that evil woman!”

“She was your mom, Ted. Or should I call you Teddy?”

“Shut up! Never call me that. She was no mother. She was my tormentor! What woman takes out her hatred of her husband and the entire world on her only son? She never showed me an ounce of love or affection. Ending her was the most satisfying kill of my life!”

There was speculation that Rader murdered her, but nothing had been proven. The fire that had destroyed the funeral home was an unsolved mystery, until now.

“I’ve got news for you, Teddy. She wasn’t your biological mother.”

“What are you talking about?” Rader scoffed. “Of course she was.”

“Nope. Margorie Deakin Rader couldn’t have children. She’d been sick when she was young and had to have a

hysterectomy. You were born to the woman your father had an affair with. Would you like to know her name?" Luca didn't wait for his answer. "Marta Harvey."

*"Liar!"* Rader roared.

Luca shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Teddy. Your mother took her firstborn from her, probably so she would have an heir to her funeral home legacy, but that's pure speculation on my part. She let Marta keep her second. Theo was your full brother."

"Strange she named both kids Theodore," Audria mused. "I'm thinking she might have had an obsession with her lover."

"I don't believe you," Rader spat.

Luca hitched a shoulder. "That's your prerogative. Why did you wait so long to kill again?"

One side of Rader's lip curled. "Thanks to you, I no longer have the strength, and my eyesight is shit. Theo was too young, and he needed to get his education first. I insisted upon it. He is ... was, going to make something of himself."

Why? So the brains he stuffed with knowledge could end up splattered across the hardwood floor of a vacant house? There was no other way this could've ended when Theo graduated from accomplice to perpetrator. Maybe he'd have become a twisted serial killer without Rader's influence. Maybe not. They'd never know now. "You taught him your methodology."

"Well," Rader drug the word out, "instructed is a better word. I encouraged him to carve out his own niche. Follow his own path. I was merely his spiritual guide."

Spiritual. Sheesh.

"It was his idea to leave flowers?" He purposefully didn't say lilies to keep Rader's attention from her.

Rader grinned. "I might've planted that bug in his ear."

"Why the expedited timeframe? Before, you took your time. Theo killed every day."

“I’m afraid that was my fault. My days are numbered. Cancer. It’s ravishing my body. Theo wanted to fulfill my greatest wish before I succumbed to the dreaded disease.”

Ah, too bad. Couldn’t happen to a better person. Luca hoped he’d suffered. Rader wouldn’t live long enough for cancer to claim him. His death would come from lead poisoning in the form of several bullets.

“You let him use trinkets you took from your earlier kills. They were your prized possessions, weren’t they, Teddy?”

Rader heaved a sigh, and the gun moved from Liliana. Luca inhaled for the first time in minutes, but there wasn’t an opening for Christian yet.

“I didn’t want to let them go. Yes, they were my treasures. My memories. But when things looked dire, and I didn’t think I’d make it after you shot me, I told him where to find them. The story about Liliana surviving was big news. Young Theo became fixated on her. It was his idea to pick women that looked like her and to send her gifts.” He leaned close and whispered something in her ear.

“Yeah? Well, you have always been my nightmare.”

Luca made eye contact with Liliana. “Now.”

Liliana grabbed his arm with both hands and crouched into a squat. The move threw Rader off guard. The sharp retort of his gun sounded as she whipped her foot out and tripped him, tipping him over backward. Luca feared she’d been hit, but she used her elbow to crack him in the head, and he went out like a light.

Luca ran to her and wrapped her in his arms. He’d been so damn frightened when he saw Rader grab her.

“Luca.”

It sounded as if she was talking through a tunnel. “What?”

“You’re bleeding.”

He looked down to see a pool of red at his feet. Huh. No wonder everything looked fuzzy. Before he could pass out, he spotted movement behind Liliana. “Watch out!”

Luca tackled her to the ground and covered her with his body as Rader surged up and roared with an unholy fury. Gunshots rang out, and despite Luca's best efforts to stay conscious, the blackness claimed him.



## Chapter Thirty-One

The elation Liliana felt after Theo had been killed was short-lived when someone else caught her off guard and grabbed her. Before she could implement her training, the poke of a gun stopped her in her tracks.

“Hello, Liliana, darling.”

*That voice.* She heard it in her nightmares. Ted Rader. Theo said he’d died, but he’d obviously lied since Rader was here and very much alive.

Liliana had visualized meeting him again over the years, and each time, her reaction was the same—horror and panic, even after she’d learned how to defend herself. He was her biggest fear. Now that it had happened, her reaction was pure, unadulterated rage.

This man had taken so much from her, from so many people. He wasn’t some invincible being. He was a flesh-and-bone man who deserved the same fate as his victims.

Liliana let Luca extract information from him while she bided her time and lowered her heart rate. Despite the precariousness of the situation, a calm settled over her. Ted Rader would not win this time.

Liliana had been as shocked as her captor when Luca announced that Rader and Theo shared the same father *and* mother. That Theo was his full brother didn’t seem to faze him for long, nor did his sibling’s death. Lack of empathy for others was a trait of a sociopath. Rader was most definitely that.

She fought a shudder when he whispered in her ear, “Theo might’ve loved you, but you were my obsession.”

“Yeah? Well, you have always been my nightmare.”

“Now,” Luca instructed.

Liliana grabbed Rader’s arm and crouched into a squat, throwing him completely off guard. The heat from a fired

bullet singed her as she whipped her foot out and tripped him before cracking him in the head with her elbow. He was down for the count.

Luca rushed to her, but all she saw was the trail of red in his wake. Rader's bullet must have hit him. She tried to tell him he was bleeding, but she wasn't sure he understood her words. Then he tackled her to the ground as a bellow of rage almost deafened her. Two simultaneous gunshots abruptly cut off the howl.

"Luca, are you okay?"

He didn't answer. Audria dropped and carefully rolled Luca off her. Liliana scrambled to her knees and grabbed his hand. Blood coated his left arm.

"It was a through-and-through," Audria deduced. "It looks like it also broke the humerus bone."

Christian barreled inside the room and crouched down to assist. "Ambulance is on the way." He took out a knife and cut the binds around her wrists.

On cue, a wail of sirens grew louder.

"Quit hovering. I'm fine," Luca muttered.

"Luca." Tears spilled unchecked down Liliana's cheeks. His eyes were closed, but at least he was conscious. That was a good sign.

"How do you feel?"

His lids blinked open, and though his eyes were clouded with pain, he smiled. "Ready to go. Help me up."

Liliana firmly said, "No."

"You stay there," Christian ordered.

"Quit moving," Audria admonished. "You're making the bleeding worse."

His lids closed. "Sheesh, you guys are mean."

The room soon flooded with emergency crews. Paramedics came toward them, and Liliana had to relinquish

his hand and stand back. They started an IV to replenish his lost fluids and stopped the bleeding. As they stabilized his arm in an air cast, he passed out again. He didn't wake up when they transferred him to a gurney.

"I'm going with him," she told Audria.

"Good. We'll handle things here and meet you at the hospital as soon as we're free to leave."

Liliana hurried after the medics as they wheeled Luca through the house and outside. Once he was loaded into the ambulance, she climbed aboard and settled on the bench beside him. She picked up his hand, trying not to jostle the IV. A grin spread across his face.

"Are you awake, Luca?"

"Yeah. I was faking, so I didn't have to deal with questions from the police."

"Liar."

He smiled, but it quickly vanished. "Hey, why are you crying? I'm not dying, am I?"

"No, but you scared me."

"Right back at you, babe. When I saw Rader grab you ..."  
He couldn't finish the sentence. His voice was rough when he added, "I'd never felt incapacitating fear like that."

"I was terrified at first," she admitted, "but then I was furious at the lives he'd ruined. Plus, I trusted you to save me, and you did."

"Babe, you saved yourself. You did it. You took Ted Rader down. I'm so damn sorry you were hurt."

"I'm fine. If you hadn't come for me, I wouldn't have been able to get away from Theo. It's all you."

"Christian and Audria fired the shots, so it was a team effort."

She clutched his hand. "It was."

The ride passed quickly, and soon, the back doors whipped open.

“Make sure she gets checked out, especially her wrists,” Luca told the paramedic, who nodded.

He was the one who’d taken a bullet, yet he was worried about her. She loved him so much.

Aids were standing by to lift out the stretcher, and Luca was wheeled through a set of double doors that swung closed in their wake. She wanted to go with him, but the medic he had tasked with ensuring she was examined said something to a nurse who came for her. Knowing she had no choice, she followed and sat on a bed behind a curtain while the nurse cleaned and bandaged her wrists and applied an ice pack to her cheek. She hadn’t told Luca about Theo hitting her in the head and knocking her out, but she did tell the doctor. He ordered a scan and concluded it was a mild concussion.

Though her blood pressure was slightly elevated, her other vitals were fine. Once the doctor cleared her, she proceeded to the waiting room and informed the nurse behind the desk she was with Luca. Audria and Christian hadn’t arrived yet. She imagined there would be a ton of paperwork since two men had died at the house, not to mention Rex and, she swallowed heavily, Shonda. Reese and Detective Torres would now be able to close a wretched case that was a long time coming.

Half an hour later, Audria and Christian walked in and sat beside her.

“Any news?” Christian asked.

“Nothing yet. Luca was conscious in the ambulance. Did you have trouble with the authorities because you killed Theo and Ted?”

“None, besides the usual red tape,” Audria replied. “You will have to speak with both the Miami Beach PD and the FBI to give your official statement.”

“I figured as much.”

A commotion outside had them turning to see several ambulances rolling to a stop at the emergency room entrance.

“I wonder what that’s about,” Christian said.

“Maybe a traffic accident,” Audria supposed.

A few minutes later, the automatic door leading from the parking lot slid open, and Reese Reneau walked into the waiting room. He glanced around and, when he spotted them, headed their way. Liliana could tell something was wrong, and she got to her feet.

“What is it?”

“There’s no easy way to tell you this. A bomb detonated in the storage room of the real estate office, destroying it. Your studio suffered substantial damages.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Eleven. A few are serious, but no deaths yet.”

Thank goodness. Liliana couldn’t care less about her studio. She never planned on stepping foot inside again, anyway.

A thought struck, and she clutched Reese’s arm.

“Smoke?”

“One of my agents is taking care of him. I’d already packed up his things and stashed him in my car, along with your purse, when the explosion happened.”

She exhaled in relief. “Thank you.”

“I think you should keep him.”

“Luca?”

Reese chuckled. “Well, him too. I was talking about the cat.”

“Oh.” Heat filled her cheeks. Though they had tried to keep their budding relationship a secret, it seemed everyone already knew about it.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Luca's arm ached, but he was ready to leave. Unfortunately, the doctor wouldn't release him until he replenished his lost fluids. That meant he had to spend the night. Great. He hated hospitals.

The door opened, and Liliana appeared. An overwhelming sense of relief washed over him. He wanted to leap out of bed and go to her, but she ran to him and hugged his good side before he could. Then she brushed a hand over his forehead.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too, babe."

"How do you feel?"

"Better now that you're here." He lifted one of her bandaged wrists. "What about you?"

"Better now that I'm with you."

He smiled, loving her so much he felt as if he might burst. She'd gone through so much in the last week but was resilient. "He can't hurt you anymore, Lil."

A shudder passed through her. "I can never thank you enough, Luca. You gave me my life back."

"No, babe, you did that yourself." Something had been bothering him. "How did Harvey get you to go with him? I know you wouldn't have gone willingly." She didn't answer, and he lifted his head to look at her, but she wouldn't make eye contact. "Liliana, what did he do?"

She sighed. "He lured me by telling me Rex had a heart attack. Then he knocked me out."

Luca jackknifed up, sending a nearby machine into a beeping fit. "He hit you?"

Liliana was pushing at his uninjured shoulder to get him to lie back. "Luca, calm down."

"Liliana, he hit you. You might have a concussion."

The door swung open, and a nurse appeared. “What are you doing in here, Mr. Russo?” She marched over to the machine to silence the noise and then reinserted the IV he’d inadvertently ripped out. “Your heart rate is up.”

“She has a possible head injury. She needs to be checked out immediately.”

“Relax,” Liliana admonished. “The doctor did a scan and said it was a mild concussion. I’ve been cleared already, and I’m perfectly fine.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Not too bad.”

The nurse left but returned a minute later with two ice packs. “Keep these on there so the swelling goes down. I assume you’ll be spending the night?”

“If you’ll let me.” Liliana obediently applied one to her face and the other to the back of her head.

“I’ll have a cot rolled in.”

When she left, Liliana grumbled, “I feel ridiculous holding these like this.”

“Well, you look adorable.” And she did.

A knock sounded on the door, and Christian and Audria entered, followed by Reese and Detective Torres. They asked how he was doing and filled him in on the cleanup. Torres told him about the bomb that detonated in Rex Raines’s office and significantly damaged Liliana’s studio. She’d lost her best friend and now her beloved business. His heart ached for her.

He told them about the information Tyler had discovered regarding Rader and Harvey having the same father and mother.

“I can’t believe that link wasn’t uncovered before,” Reese grouched. “That’s a significant detail that was missed.”

“Your guy is good,” Torres said.

Half an hour later, the nurse returned and shoed everyone except Liliana out. “You have to leave. He needs rest.”

They set a time to meet at the police department in the afternoon so Luca and Liliana could give their official statements, and then the group headed for the exit.

“We’ll be back in the morning to spring you,” Christian said over his shoulder as they walked out the door.

The nurse had made good on her promise, and an extra bed had been wheeled in and situated against the wall. Instead of using it, Liliana climbed in beside Luca and fell fast asleep. A minute later, he joined her.

#

Audria was pleased to note that she felt no unpleasant side effects from shooting Ted Rader dead. He was evil and needed to be eliminated. Her aim had been accurate, and Rader now needed his own mortician. How fitting.

Christian had come down from the garage roof and snuck inside. He’d shot simultaneously, so it was a toss-up on whose bullet killed Rader, but it didn’t matter to Audria. She knew she could use her weapon if necessary. A weight had lifted from her shoulders.

As glad as she was that the case was closed, she would miss working with Reese. They complimented each other well, and she enjoyed spending time with him. It had been different not working for him, but with him. He hadn’t treated her like an underling, even seeking her out for her opinions and respecting her thoughts. He made her feel like a valued equal, even though he was an FBI superstar on the fast track to upper-level management.

“Audria, can I talk to you for a minute?”

She turned to see the object of her thoughts, and her heart slammed against her ribcage. She was so damn attracted to him.

“I’ll be in the SUV,” Christian said, giving them privacy.

Reese nodded to an alcove away from the hustle and bustle of the busy hospital, and she followed. She looked up into his blue eyes, and the surrounding noise stopped. She



didn't hear the names paged over the intercom or the clamor of conversation. It was as if they were alone in their own world.

“Great job on the case.”

“It was all Luca,” she insisted. “He was the leader.”

“Don't downplay your contribution.”

“I'm not, but it was a team effort.”

“You took the shot.”

Reese had been there when she'd been forced to kill Wanda Bunker after the woman's estranged husband had murdered their children. He knew how it had gutted her to take the grieving mother's life. Suicide by cop, he'd repeatedly told her, but it hadn't made the aftermath of pulling that trigger easier.

“Christian did, too, so we don't know which bullet killed him.”

“Doesn't matter. You stepped up. I'm proud of you.”

His praise did funny things to her insides.

“I'm impressed by how COBRA Securities does business and, my gosh, the resources. It looks like you ended up with a great company. I'm glad.”

“It is, and thank you.”

He stared at her for so long that she was about to pull him down for a kiss when he lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers.

All the cliché romance novel descriptions of love happened at once: sparks ignited from his touch, fireworks went off inside her brain, and somewhere, a choir hummed an enchanting hallelujah. She moaned and pressed against him, wanting more, wanting him.

She whimpered when he broke contact, and a thumb caressed her kiss-swollen lips. “Take care of yourself, Audria.”

She could only watch as he smiled before turning and walking away. “You too,” she murmured, knowing she would

probably never see Reese Reneau again once she left Miami.

#

The doctor signed the papers to release Luca the following morning. Christian and Audria arrived, and they drove to Liliana's condo to freshen up. She was so happy to find Smoke when she opened her door. The cat was just as delighted to see them, meowing and twining around their legs. They gave him the attention he needed before heading to the bathroom.

Liliana helped Luca shower since he needed to keep his stitches dry. She reveled in the task of washing his muscular, perfect body, though he made it hard by trying to reciprocate with one arm.

She batted his hand away from her breast. "Luca, we don't have time."

"I'll always have time for you, babe," he said before kissing her.

She almost gave in.

Dressing was another trial. Instead of cooperating, he wanted to fool around. She managed to keep him in line, and ten minutes later, they were on their way to the police station.

Liliana knew it would take time, but she didn't expect it to last most of the afternoon. They spent hours giving their statements and going over minute details. It was exhausting reliving the ordeal over and over again, and it served as a constant reminder that Shonda was gone. Liliana was beyond relieved when they were finally allowed to leave.

Dinner was at a trendy restaurant on the beach. This time, when Liliana ordered a glass of wine, the others joined her. Time passed with delicious food and good friends. She was able to eat a little, something she didn't think possible after the horror of the last twenty-four hours.

When they returned to her condo, Liliana undressed Luca and insisted he lie back while she did all the work and made love to him. He didn't seem to mind her taking charge one bit. In fact, he seemed to revel in it.

She needed him too much, and it didn't last long. After they both shattered in ethereal bliss, she collapsed against his good side and listened to the steady beat of his heart. His hand stroked her hair.

"I'm sorry about your studio."

"I'm not."

"You aren't?" He sounded surprised.

"No. I would never have been able to go back, even if it hadn't been destroyed. Shonda was killed there."

"Oh, babe, I'm so sorry."

She fought the urge to cry. "Me too."

"Will you rebuild?"

"I'm not sure."

Liliana had no idea what her next steps would be. They hadn't talked about the future. She wasn't sure if he was interested in continuing their affair. She certainly was.

Liliana heard Audria telling Christian that the company plane would arrive in the morning. The thought of Luca leaving made her stomach cramp.

When she woke the following day, she made love to him again. Each time had been glorious, but this time was different. The feelings were infinitely more intense, bringing tears to her eyes. She refused to think of it as goodbye.

After they dressed, they headed to the kitchen to feed Smoke. They still hadn't addressed the ten-ton elephant in the room—him leaving. She'd just tossed the empty cat food can in the trash when Luca blurted out, "Come home with me."

Liliana's heart pounded. Though she wanted that more than anything, she needed to handle Shonda's affairs. Her only family was her father, who had nothing to do with Shonda. Liliana would make sure she had a proper funeral and burial.

She also needed to take care of the insurance for her studio and sell her condo. She would not be staying in Miami Beach.

“I can tell by the look on your face you are going to decline.”

“Luca—”

He cupped her cheek. “I lost you once, Liliana. I don’t want to do it again. Come and see where I live. Meet my friends. If you don’t want to stay, we’ll go anywhere you want.”

“You would do that for me? Quit your job?”

“Don’t you realize it by now? I would do anything for you, Liliana. I love you. I think I always have.”

“Oh, Luca, I love you too. From the moment we met.”

He kissed her, and she melted against him.

“As much as I want to go with you, I can’t leave here yet. Shonda . . . her affairs. I need to settle things. She didn’t have anyone else. Plus, I need to make sure my employees are okay.”

He smiled sadly and murmured, “I understand,” before kissing her again.

A knock sounded, and Luca released her. Liliana wanted to beg him not to let go. To hold her forever. Instead, he opened the door. Christian and Audria were standing outside.

“The plane is almost here,” Christian told him. “We need to get to the airport.”

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

Liliana hugged Audria and then Christian. She thanked them for everything and promised to keep in touch.

Once they were gone, she ran to Luca and clung to him. Even Smoke seemed to realize he was leaving. The cat rubbed against his legs and purred loudly.

“I really do love you.” He kissed her again as tears fell unchecked down her cheeks. “Take care of yourself, Lil.”

“You too, and I love you so much.”

When he walked out the door this time, he didn't take half of her heart with him. He took it all.

# # #

## Epilogue

Liliana followed the directions to the COBRA Securities complex on her Jeep's GPS. She'd driven for two days instead of flying so she could bring Smoke with her. Liliana didn't have the heart to surrender him to a shelter. He was the sweetest cat, and he'd been her constant companion all week, providing comfort when she desperately needed it. There was no way she'd let him go. She'd loved him from the moment Luca had brought him home.

A check at the GPS told her she was almost at her destination. It felt as if she already knew the place since Luca had sent her videos and pictures. It looked incredible, and she couldn't wait to see it in person.

Liliana feared she wouldn't hear from Luca once he was gone. She hadn't walked away this time like she had ten years ago, but she was responsible for him leaving just the same. If she'd asked him to stay with her, he would have. She didn't doubt that. But he had a job he loved, and she didn't want to stand in his way.

Her fears were unfounded. Luca had called her as soon as he'd arrived home and each day since. They'd spent hours talking about everything and nothing. He'd told her all about his job and coworkers. She couldn't believe he lived in the same complex as an Oscar-winning actress, a Grammy-winning singer, a best-selling author, and many other celebrities. She'd even met Kai Costa, the son of one of his coworkers, via FaceTime. He was absolutely adorable and a bona fide hero. Luca had told her stories of how Kai had single-handedly saved his sister, the granddaughter of the President of the United States, and another girl, and he wasn't even in his teens yet.

Leaving Miami Beach hadn't been difficult, though saying goodbye to her friends had been hard. Her employees had ganged up on her and begged her to rebuild. She hated disappointing them, but that would never happen, at least not in Florida.

Saying goodbye to Rutger had been especially rough. He'd been a big brother to her and a friend when she'd needed one. Nina had been inconsolable with Shonda's death and then Liliana's departure. They vowed to text each other often, and Nina promised to visit her wherever she ended up.

Liliana packed her belongings with Nina, Kelsey, Jody, and Creed's help, letting them take any of the furniture they wanted. The rest of her things were in storage until she decided where to go next. She'd listed the condo the day Luca left, and it had sold almost instantly.

Her former employees offered to help her clean out Shonda's apartment, and she appreciated the support. She would've fallen apart if she'd had to do it herself. Almost everything had been donated to charity, as Shonda would've wanted.

She was still working with the insurance company for the destruction of her studio. It would most likely take months to wrap it up, but she wasn't expecting any issues.

Burying her best friend had been excruciating. Everyone from the studio was in attendance, from the instructors to the smoothie bar workers, as were Shonda's dance students, both past and present. Luca's office had sent an exquisite bouquet of white roses that blanketed the casket. It had to have cost a fortune. Liliana chose to keep the lid closed. She wanted everyone to remember Shonda as the gorgeous, vibrant woman she had been before Theo Harvey.

Liliana had shared fond memories of her best friend and spoken of the beautiful life cut short by a senseless act of violence. They'd laid her to rest on a sunny, balmy Tuesday.

The voice from her GPS told her she was close to her destination. Her heart thumped in her chest. She rounded a corner and saw the most magnificent sight standing at the road's edge. *Luca.*

#

Luca could barely contain his excitement. Liliana was coming to visit, and if he had anything to say about it, she

wouldn't be leaving.

Walking out the door of her condo had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He'd almost gone back several times but forced himself to put one foot in front of the other and climb the steps to the plane.

Christian and Audria had attempted to lift his spirits on the flight home, but it was impossible. He'd left a big part of himself in Miami, the part that brought happiness to his life.

Luca had promised himself he'd give Liliana time to decide what her next steps would be, but that lasted all of eight hours. He'd called her that night and every one since. He'd hoped that showing her pictures and videos of the compound would persuade her to visit—and it had worked! She would be here any minute.

With Ted Rader's death, a burden had been lifted off Luca's shoulders that had weighed heavily for ten years. The Mortician could not harm another woman. He'd been relegated to the depths of hell, and there was no more deserving soul.

Luca had made sure Erin Simon's grandmother's ring had been returned to her family, as well as the mementos from the other victims to their next of kin. There would be no trial, so there was no reason for the police to keep them.

Though he still wore a sling—thanks to the insistence of Dr. Amelia Hollister, the COBRA Securities doc—his arm was much better. Each day, he'd checked to ensure Liliana's various injuries were healing: the bruised face, the bump on her head, the scraped wrists, and the contusion on her torso from Douglas Speke. She'd assured him she was fine.

He'd given her instructions on how to enter the complex, from stopping at the speaker outside the initial gate to continuing down the road to the booth and meeting Tucker Nash, the head of security. She wouldn't need to worry about any of that now because he couldn't wait. He'd walked to the entrance to meet her.

An SUV rounded the curve, and he saw her through the windshield. His heart thumped in his chest, and when she



smiled, he knew then and there he was not letting her go again.

Liliana turned into the driveway and stopped. Luca barely gave her time to turn off the engine before he whipped open the door and reached for her.

“Luca, let me unbuckle,” she laughed.

“Hurry.” His patience was gone.

As soon as the latch clicked open, he pulled her into his embrace.

“Your arm—”

“Is fine,” he said before kissing her. It had been too long, and he needed to taste her. She melted against him, and he wanted to squire her away in his apartment and make love to her for the next decade. Unfortunately, a compound full of people was waiting for them.

“I’ve missed you,” she said when he reluctantly broke the kiss.

“I’ve missed you too, babe.”

*“Meow!”*

“Aw, hey, Smoke. I missed you too, buddy.” He brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. “How was the drive?”

“Long.”

“Are you up to meeting everyone? My coworkers look for any excuse for a party, so they’re all waiting at the park with grills fired up and beverages on ice.”

She looked down at herself. “I dressed for comfort, not socializing.”

“You look beautiful, though I would prefer you wear nothing at all—but only for me.”

“We’ll see how the afternoon goes.” She wagged her brows, and he had to kiss her again.

“I guess we better go before they send a search party.”

Luca climbed into the passenger seat and reached back to pet Smoke through the carrier. “I’m glad you decided to keep

him.”

“Me too.”

The gate opened without them having to hit the call button, which meant Tucker had been watching and most likely witnessed their public display of affection. His smile when they reached the security booth confirmed it.

Luca made the introductions, and Tucker chatted with her while processing her information. Luca pointed out the various buildings as they passed. “I’ll give you a more in-depth tour tomorrow. Our destination is Duquesne Park, in the heart of the complex. “

“Is it named after the president?”

“It is. She donated funds for the buildings.”

Luca had Liliana park at the apartments, and they dropped Smoke off in his unit before taking his golf cart to the picnic. The party was in full swing, with music blaring through the speakers and the smell of grilled meat filling the air.

“Audria texted me saying she wouldn’t be here,” Liliana said.

“Yeah, she’s on an assignment.”

Christian spotted them first and ran over to hug Liliana. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too.”

They chatted until a group of children came bounding over, headed by their ringleader, Kai. He fist-bumped Luca. “Hi, Liliana. It’s nice to meet you in person.”

“You too, Kai.”

He smiled. “Hey, Liliana, what do you call a pig that practices karate? A pork chop. What do you call a sheep that does karate? Lamb chop.”

“Hey, you didn’t even let us guess the punch lines,” Luca scolded him.

“Yeah, they were lame, so I had to motor through them as quickly as possible.” He shook his head sadly. “I seriously need to upgrade my material.”

Liliana laughed, and it wrapped around Luca and squeezed. He could happily listen to that sound for the rest of his life.

Two people headed their way, and Luca’s heart rate kicked way up. This meeting was crucial. It could be the difference between Liliana staying or going.

“Hi, I’m Cassidy—”

“Cassidy Swain. I know who you are,” Liliana said. “I watch you on Dancing with The Celebrities.”

“It’s Cassidy Rossi now.” She patted her husband’s chest. “This is my better half, Mason.”

Liliana shook their hands.

“I’m sorry about what happened to you,” Cassidy said.

“Thank you.”

“Luca told me all about your studio, and it sounded like it was a fabulous place. I pulled up your website and was impressed.”

“It was.”

“I own a dance academy that I’m getting off the ground. It’s way more work than I realized, plus I’m still dancing professionally. I’m being pulled in several directions. My husband complains I don’t spend enough time with him.”

“You don’t,” Mason rumbled.

She patted him again. “I could use someone with your business acumen. I’d love for you to come by the facility, look around, and see if it’s something you would be interested in pursuing.”

“You want me to help run it?”

“Well, yes, but I was thinking of a joint partnership. Co-owners. You would buy in. I have wanted to add fitness

classes and martial arts for a while but haven't had time to follow up."

Luca watched Liliana's face. She looked shell-shocked. Then she glanced suspiciously at him.

"Did Luca put you up to this?"

"No, when I heard about you, I came to him and asked if you would be receptive to the idea. I seriously need the help."

"She does," Mason concurred.

"It sounds ..."

*Exciting, wonderful, intriguing*, Luca chanted in his head. He wanted this for her and, if he was being honest, for him too.

"Perfect."

Luca's knees weakened in relief. Cassidy smiled, and Mason nodded in satisfaction. They talked about a time to visit the facility.

Before he could revel in the minor victory, the group swallowed them up, engulfing them in friendship, laughter, and good times.

#

Liliana was pleasantly exhausted after the two-day drive and then the party that lasted well into the night. She loved meeting Luca's coworkers and their families. They welcomed her with open arms and made her feel as if she belonged.

As soon as they left the park, Luca practically dragged her to his apartment and made love to her. Having only one working arm didn't slow him in the least.

She was lying across his chest, tracing the muscles of his abdomen, one of her favorite activities.

"What do you think of the compound?"

"I love it. It's beautiful, and I can't believe how friendly everyone is."

She already had plans with several women for various activities, the most important being visiting Cassidy's dance academy. The opportunity was too good to be true. Everything she wanted was here, including the man who held her heart.

“Does that mean you want to stay here? Stay with me?”

She thought about dragging her answer out, making him sweat. But his happiness was all that mattered. “Yes. I want it more than anything, Luca. I love you. You've made all my dreams come true.”

###

## Notes

I hope you enjoyed *Be Very Quiet*, the twenty-seventh book in the COBRA Securities series. Several characters from previous books made appearances or were mentioned in *Be Very Quiet*. If you would like to read their stories, you can find them here:

Logan Bradley from [\*The Fan\*](#)

Dante and Kai Costa from [\*Hide and Seek\*](#) and [\*Kidnapped\*](#)

Dan and Kaitlyn Colton Bradley from [\*Killer Cuisine\*](#)

Luke Colton from [\*Face the Music\*](#)

Mason and Cassidy Swain Redmond from [\*Last Dance\*](#)

Tyler and Lyra Redmond from [\*Fatal Dreams\*](#)

Dr. Amelia Howell Hollister from [\*Without a Trace\*](#)

Tank and BeBe Davis Hale from [\*Held Hostage\*](#)

Quinn Billings and Vanessa Lacroix in [\*Worth the Risk\*](#)

Gage and Brooklyn Fontana Monahan from [\*Dressed to Kill\*](#)

Ryan and Dr. Harper Hillman Marx from [\*Mind Games\*](#)

Owen and Melanie Delgado Durant from [\*Vanished\*](#)

Chase and Kaiya Quillen Corrigan from [\*On the Run\*](#)

John and Sloan Lorince Cruz from [\*Rescue Me\*](#)

Colt Fontaine and Willa Ashford from [\*Match Point\*](#)

## About the Author

Velvet Vaughn is the author of *The List*, *The Fan*, *Committed*, *Violets are Blue*, *Trust No One*, *Hide and Seek*, *Killer Cuisine*, *Vigilante*, *Face the Music*, *Tough as Nails*, *Total Surrender*, *Hunted*, *Say Goodbye to Melody*, *Last Dance*, *The Viper*, *Golden Girl*, *Fatal Dreams*, *Without a Trace*, *Running Scared*, *Iron Cross*, *Worth the Risk*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Mind Games*, *Vanished*, *On the Run*, *Match Point*, and *Be Very Quiet*, the first twenty-seven books in the COBRA Securities series, as well as *Saving Santa*, *Kidnapped*, *Held Hostage*, and *Rescue Me*, COBRA Securities short stories. In addition, two novellas: *A Christmas Miracle* and *Flying High Christmas* are available as stand-alone books or in the anthologies *All I Want for Christmas* and *Yuletide Treasures*, respectively. *Phoenix Rising*, the twenty-eighth book in the COBRA Securities series, will be published soon.

### Connect With Velvet

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### From Velvet

Thank you so much for purchasing *Be Very Quiet*. I hope you enjoyed Luca and Liliana's story. If you did, I would appreciate you leaving feedback on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere book reviews are accepted. Thank you!

The twenty-eighth book in the COBRA Securities series will be out soon. *Phoenix Rising* is COBRA Securities agent Audria Giroux and FBI Agent Reese Reneau's story.

If you would like to read the story of one of the characters from my books, let me know. You can reach me through the

[contact page](#) on my website or my [Facebook Fanpage](#). I'd love to hear from you. Like my Fanpage so you can take part in giveaways, and be sure to sign up for my newsletter for a chance to win a gift certificate in each issue.

Thank you again for your support!