



Passion

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Being stuck in the middle of a storm gets better when a hot stranger rescues you...

with his private jet.

I thought Lucas would be my undoing but I ended up moving in with him.

I had no choice – heck, I had no job.

Living with him made me feel like an obsessed teenager.

I could barely look away from his shirtless body.

Trust me, Lucas was no better.

But we could never be together – not when we came from two different worlds.

Little did I know that we, in fact, had one thing in common.

An unborn baby.

Now, would this news be our undoing or make me realize that we're meant to be together?

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VERA

Just outside the threshold of the tiny, dark bar, the din of travelers passing by wrenched my heart. I threw back the stiff drink, chasing the three before it. I wasn't supposed to be sitting alone in an airport bar watching news of an approaching hurricane. I was supposed to be boarding a flight with my soon-to-be fiancé, destined for Elbow Cay, a few hundred miles off the coast of Miami.

The room stank of unwashed bodies, travelers who had arrived from overseas after long flights. Unwashed and tired, they cluttered the small space. I was fortunate enough to have gotten a seat, but my flight was delayed for departure due to the weather. They assured us the flight would happen, but several flights headed directly south had been canceled. So, I waited it out, drowning my broken heart in vodka.

“Traveling alone?”

The man who sat beside me—straight-laced, dark hair, smoldering eyes—leaned toward me as he spoke. He was a handsome man but not my type—no facial hair. And besides, I was literally ready to board a plane for a trip that should have been a fantasy, dream-come-true proposal event. The thought drew tears to my eyes. The way Daven broke my heart was unforgivable.

“Oh, wow. I'm sorry.” The man winced and offered me a white paper napkin. I wiped my eyes with it and shrugged at him. Even if I told him the entire story, which would take ages, he wouldn't believe me, and he was probably in this for a quick score for

his Mile-High Club card or something. I gave him the short version.

“This was supposed to be a ‘honeymoon’ of sorts, and we broke up.” Daven didn’t deserve an ounce of my attention or emotional energy ever again, but here I was, bawling my eyes out to a stranger while waiting on the plane that was supposed to have carried us away from the world to connect. It was his problem that he wasn’t ready to board with me.

“Fuck, that’s harsh.” The man picked up my empty glass and waved it at the bartender, who promptly headed our way. I shook my head.

“No, really. I shouldn’t.” I couldn’t accept a drink from him right now because I was vulnerable. He’d see that and think I was on the rebound, and I was definitely on the rebound, but not with a stranger in an airport.

He set the glass down and dropped a few crisp bills on the bar before standing and pushing his stool in. The wooden legs scraped across the worn wooden floor. He picked up his own glass and finished the drink off then sighed. “Hope you find what you’re looking for.”

As he walked away, I breathed a sigh of relief. It opened a stool for another man to take his place, and I turned my attention to the television. The bartender turned up the volume and the bar quieted slightly. A newscaster stood outside in the rain talking about the pending storm. His yellow coat blew in the slight breeze, an umbrella over his head protecting his obvious toupee from the precipitation. The camera shot was unsteady, wobbling at times with each gust of wind.

“And it looks like the path of the storm will take the western prediction that meteorologist Erin Drysdale predicted. This means Floridians on the West Coast could see as much as five inches of rain with winds up to 90 miles per hour and gusts up to over 110. Now this is still considered a category two storm, and authorities have

not issued mandatory evacuations, but residents are urged to be cautious, take shelter, and make sure you have a backup power source like a generator.”

I rolled my eyes. Every person in the state right now was probably thinking the same thing as myself. Category two storms were nothing, just some blowing and thunder. It meant one day of my trip would be cloudy and the rest of the time would be fine, if maybe on the chilly side a bit. I turned back to my empty glass, now wishing I’d taken the man up on his offer. The first few drinks had kicked in, but my mood had soured considerably.

“Another, Miss?” the bartender asked, wiping a puddle of condensation from the bar and taking the previous guest’s glass. He was a younger man of about twenty, handsome, and too much like Daven for me to give him a second look.

I shook my head, deciding I didn’t want to be banned from boarding the flight for being overly drunk. I wasn’t sure they’d do that, but I wasn’t going to take any chances. We’d spent good money on this trip, and single or not, I wasn’t letting that go to waste.

“Where are you headed?” The bartender draped his towel over his shoulder and leaned on the bar, both hands planted firmly on either side of me. He gave me that big-brother feel, like he’d seen my type before and knew I needed a shoulder to cry on.

“Elbow Cay. Dumped my trash a few days ago and I’m hitting the beach.” I reached for my purse, hoping to fish out enough cash to pay for the drinks I’d downed. I knew I didn’t have much. I’d have to stop by an ATM if I intended to get snacks on the plane.

“Trash?”

“Well, that’s what you’d call someone who cheated on you and then fired you for figuring it out. Right?” I set my small clutch on the bar next to me and pulled out a few ones. It was all the cash I had left. Sighing, I slid my credit card out of my wallet and handed it to him. “Just add a tip on there. Twenty bucks or something.”

“Sure.” He walked away just as another man took the seat next to me. He smelled fresh, like he’d just walked out of the barber shop or something. I didn’t dare look at him, not as inebriated as I was. I knew me. Bad breakups meant throwing myself at the first available man in hopes of forgetting the pain, but not in an airport. Not like this.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your story.” His husky, gravelly voice curled around my senses, compelling me to look in his direction, but I refused, my eyes on the bartender who had my credit card. “Mind if I buy you a drink?”

He had that sort of voice that if he were singing, every woman in this bar would swoon. My ability to resist looking at him was slowly waning. I was too heartbroken to do this, but the alcohol screamed louder than the voice of reason. Why did I always do this?

I turned, immediately noticing his silver hair, loose and framing his amber eyes. The flecks of gold mesmerized me. He had to have been almost twice my age, but he exuded confidence and an air of sexual prowess I couldn’t deny. Not to mention the smolder—his presence tangled into my thoughts as if reading my mind and knowing exactly how to press every button I had in a way that made me his, and all he had to do was look at me.

“Uh, I think I’ve had enough drinks,” I muttered, barely able to form words. It wasn’t the alcohol, either. He was just that hot. His eyes sparkled as he drank me in. I was a total wreck. I’d been crying. My eyes were puffy. I wore an old gray hoodie with stains down the front and some yoga pants that had a tear in the knee. I probably

looked like a homeless runaway who only had two dollars to her name and a laundry list of addictions.

It almost made me want to run away, this incredibly attractive man checking me out in my obviously disgusting state. At least I'd had the decency to brush my teeth that morning, though he'd only be able to smell the vodka on my breath, anyway. His designer jeans and Armani shirt screamed "money", and I wanted to disappear from the face of the planet.

"How could anyone ever cheat on someone so gorgeous?" The man nodded at the bartender, who slid a Budweiser in front of him, and then he looked back at me. The look was compassionate, though the pickup line hit its mark. I felt myself being reeled in like a fish on a line.

I'd heard that at least a dozen times—that I was gorgeous. I was a model, so I knew I had looks, but the words never worked on me. I wasn't the type to need a boost to my self-confidence in the form of compliments. I wanted a man who would know my soul and love me inside and out. A man who would be honest and faithful to me at all times. This guy was too gorgeous to do that. Men this hot were players.

I rolled my eyes, feeling my stomach churning, and turned my head away as I belched. How was that for first impressions? I was mortified. The bartender couldn't give me my card fast enough. I didn't even waste time putting it back into my purse. I slid off my seat and dashed out of the bar into the terminal, making a beeline straight for the toilets where I vomited at least two of the drinks I'd ingested.

How humiliating.

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Between the emotion of the day, the alcohol, and the intense and overwhelming desire to jump right on that guy's lap and let his cock whisk me into another dimension, my brain wasn't handling the yo-yo very well. It was definitely for the best that my stomach had decided at that very moment to empty itself in such a hostile manner. That man was like crack, and I was the whore who needed a fix—or at least that's how I felt.

Men were all the same. Cheaters, liars, manipulators. I was just the stupid one who always fell for their crap. I sat on the ground of that airport bathroom sobbing, wondering when I'd actually meet a man who would treat me right. How was it that I always got stuck with the type of guy who was so full of himself that he'd convince me he was my soul mate, then lie to me, cheat on me, or otherwise break my heart?

Maybe my mother was right and I needed to move back home, be a teacher like she always thought I'd be, and marry the neighbor's son who sang in the church choir. God knows, I'd tried to find my Mr. Right and come up empty every time.

I'd consider going back to the Big Island after my trip to Elbow Cay. I needed the solace to lick my wounds.

2

LUCAS

“Uh, thanks.” The stewardess set the bottle of scotch on my tray table next to the tiny bag of cookies and pushed her cart down the aisle. I listened to the squeaking wheel that reminded me of the two-dozen or so times I'd been to Elbow Cay. It had become

my unofficial home away from home over the past few years, so when this visit came up and I asked my business partner, Henry, if the company jet was available, I was disappointed to find he had already scheduled it to bring him home from Denmark.

Flying commercial didn't bother me. I'd grown up roughing it and made my way from ground zero, so First Class was still a luxury of sorts. Besides the fact that it was just an hour and twenty-minute flight, which made the mundane parts bearable, and the jet was free after today to bring me home whenever I wanted to return.

I glanced over my shoulder again at the stunning blonde, now being served by the stewardess. When I'd seen her in the bar, her hair was disheveled and hanging in her face. Her eyelids had been heavy with drink, a sadness about them that even if I hadn't overheard her story, I would still have understood. Her tell-tale sweats and yoga pants said all she needed to say. She was in mourning—though I may have mistaken that for grief over a death, not just a relationship.

When I looked at her on the plane, however, her face looked fresh, like she'd washed it and applied makeup. Her hair was tied up in a bun, and a fresh sweatshirt replaced the stained one. She was absolutely breathtaking. If I wasn't mistaken, I thought I recognized her from somewhere as well. A face like that never escaped my memory.

I turned away before she noticed me looking at her again, focusing on my drink. Scotch from a minibar poured into a glass just wasn't the same as the aged variety in my liquor cabinet at home. One of the drawbacks to not having my private jet, but a compromise I made to keep my schedule intact.

We were over halfway into the flight before I started to get too curious. The drink cart had done its rounds and collected the trash, and I couldn't help but glance over my shoulder every few minutes to watch what the mysterious beauty was doing. She had her eyes shut, headphones on, head tilted back. But she wasn't sleeping. I watched her lips move like she was lip syncing to her favorite song.

Since her eyes were shut, I took the moment to study her further—the beauty mark on her left cheek beneath her eye, the way her cheekbones gracefully supported her eyes. The tiniest bit of the end of her nose turned upward, not so much that it was prominent, but enough to make me want to touch it with the tip of my finger. She was young, probably in her twenties, maybe even her early twenties, but I couldn't pull my eyes off her.

I noticed then that she had dropped a pair of glasses. They lay at her feet, just inside the aisle where they wouldn't be stepped on but close enough to her feet that she might crush them. It gave me the in I needed to stop and talk to her, so I rose, readjusting my shirt to smooth any wrinkles, and headed down the aisle toward the toilets. As I neared her seat, I stooped to pick up the glasses.

“Miss?” I tapped her shoulder, and her eyes fluttered open. She looked shocked, yanking the headphones off her head and sitting straighter. In the brighter light of the airplane cabin, I noticed how blue her eyes were, almost as if she wore colored contacts to change their hue.

“Uh, yeah?” She smoothed her hair and blinked her eyes several times. I'd seen it before. Women found me attractive, and the minute they knew I was paying attention to them, suddenly, their appearance meant something. It made me smile.

“You dropped these.” I handed her the sunglasses and smiled, and she blushed, taking them from me. She had this exquisite beauty that needed no makeup or jewelry to shine. Just her in her natural state was enough, which is why I had been drawn to her in that airport bar.

“Thanks.”

I crouched next to her seat, holding onto the armrest for balance. “Vacationing alone?”

“Wait, you’re that guy from the bar.” She hugged her arms over her stomach and searched my expression.

“Yeah, I am. I’m sorry if I was a bit too forward in offering that drink. I was trying to be polite.” The way she’d run out had made me feel like I’d said something wrong, but after much thought, I decided that maybe she was just feeling pressured.

“Oh, no. Thank you, though. I just had too much earlier.” She relaxed a little, her eyes turning down toward her lap where she fiddled with the sunglasses. Her perfectly manicured nails spoke of a woman who cared about her appearance all the time, which stood in contrast with the outfit she wore. Whoever hurt her must have done a number on her self-confidence.

“Well, it looks like we’ll be on the island together. Maybe I can buy you that drink this week sometime?” I rose, deciding if I pushed her too much, I’d never get my shot to find out more about her.

She nodded, peering up at me. “Yeah, maybe. I’m just going to be spending a lot of time on my own.” She shrugged. “You know, sort of unwinding or whatever.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to look you up. Your name...?” I waited, expecting her to give me a fake name or brush me off entirely. If she really had broken up that recently, then maybe she just wasn’t ready.

“Vera Davids.” She sighed, and her face fell again.

“The Vera Davids?” I whistled through my teeth. I knew I had seen her face before—and most of her body, for that matter. “Sports Illustrated, June this year?”

She bit her lip and shrugged. “Yeah, but?—”

“Well,” I interrupted her, not wanting her to feel like I was going all fanboy over her, “it was very nice to meet you. I do hope we can catch up this week.”

She smiled and put her headphones on as I walked to the lavatory. It didn't matter to me what she did for a living, but the fact that I'd stumbled upon a woman of her prominence by chance—a very available woman—made me feel energized. I locked myself in the lav and relieved myself, and while I was washing my hands, I stared at my reflection in the tiny mirror.

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My face wasn't as recognizable as hers was. I wasn't on any billboards or posters, and the magazines where my image had been shared weren't the sort a supermodel would peruse. She hadn't asked my name either, and I liked it that way. Oftentimes, when people heard the name Lucas Allen Smith, they associated me with the dollar signs that followed my name and the influence I had in the government tech sector. The longer I could keep her from knowing all that, the more likely it would be that I had a shot to know the real her.

When I passed by her on the way to my seat, she was engaged in conversation with her seatmate. I felt bad for that because I knew how it was. When people found out who I was, they'd want to talk my ear off. She'd let the cat out of the bag, and by now, everyone in three rows on either side of her knew who she was. To make matters worse, all 127 people on this flight were headed to the same destination—Elbow Cay—and that meant they'd all follow her around the entire week.

I slumped into my seat, prepared to make her trip as private and relaxing as possible, even if I had to give her my suite to make it happen. Vera Davids intrigued me, and that didn't happen often—I was too picky for that. This trip may very well change both of our lives.

3

VERA

The bellhop was kind, delivering my bags to my condo. The tiny resort was comprised of squat buildings surrounded by palm trees of all sizes and palmetto

plants arranged in flower beds lined with paved walks that took you anywhere you needed to go. I loved the feel of the remote island, no need for cars or motorized transportation. Daven would have loved this too—or maybe he'd been here before and that's why he thought to bring me.

I slumped onto the foot of the bed, phone in hand. The weather app called for sunny skies and 96° today, but cloudy and cooler the rest of the week. If I wanted to get sun, today was the only day it would happen, thanks to Hurricane Bryan set to sweep the western coast of Florida. I groaned. Being alone on a tropical paradise island wouldn't have been so awful if not for the impending cloudy skies.

I tossed my phone to the bed and unzipped the suitcase lying at my feet. A week's worth of clothing, condoms, and sex toys stared back at me as I rifled through it, searching for my bikini. When I had looked up photos of the resort, I was immediately drawn toward images of their pool and spa area. I had to have been a mermaid in another life because the water always beckoned me. I had also planned to enjoy the amenities with my boyfriend who was now probably fucking my former best friend and enjoying it.

I found what I was looking for, grabbing my bikini and extracting it from the suitcase. I didn't even bother heading to the bathroom to change. The tiny bungalow-style condos were secluded, divided from the others by hordes of palms and palmettos. Anyone who wanted to sneak a peek at me could easily do so through the large picture windows facing the front walk, but I kept my back turned.

The plane ride had been a nightmare. That guy from the bar had asked me my name, and instead of giving him an alias as I was prone to do on any normal flight, I had given him my real name, which turned into the entire flight being a conversation with people around me about my job. Being well known had its perks, but the drawbacks were torture sometimes. I came here wanting privacy, and if even so much as one person approached me and annoyed me, I would be seeing the resort's security team

about it.

The resort left a brown wicker basket with striped beach towels nestled next to the door, so I snatched one out before grabbing my floppy hat and sunglasses. I paused for a moment to decide whether I should bring my phone, almost leaving it behind, but I opted to take it. If someone annoying tried to talk to me, I could at least fake a phone call and leave.

But before I was even down the steps to the walk, I regretted my decision to take my phone. It rang, my mother's image displayed on the caller ID. If I ignored her, she'd go into full panic mode due to the hurricane approaching. She had no idea I was on a tropical island—I never told her where I was or she'd randomly appear like Spock on that Sci-Fi show with his tractor beams.

“What, Mom?” My annoyed tone should have told her everything she needed to know, but she never paid attention. She was like a bad cold you couldn't get rid of, lingering in my life far longer than most parents should have. I left home six years ago at the age of eighteen, and she still treated me like a child sometimes.

“Oh, Vera, dear. The weather is looking awful. You can still catch a flight home. Listen, Aunt Gertrude is visiting and she would love to see you. How about I buy you a ticket and you come home before the storm hits?”

Mom was like that, always trying to get me to come home. I gave a hard eye roll I knew she'd never see, but I bit back my snarky remark. I didn't want this to turn into a lecture. I was certain she was just worried. I'd lived through hurricanes every single year, and this one was not only a very weak hurricane, but it wasn't even close to me. I would be fine.

“No, Mom. I'm fine. I'm just going to ride it out,” In the sun, on a paradise getaway...

“But Aunt Gertrude?—”

“Is your aunt, Mom. Not mine.”

“She’s your great-aunt.”

“She’s a bajillion years old and calls me Vanessa.” My mother’s maternal aunt was a very sweet lady. When I was a child, she’d come visit and give us candies she’d collected from all her trips around the world. A very wealthy woman, but prone to forgetfulness. Probably dementia or something.

“Now, Vera Laine, you know that’s not polite.” Mom clicked her tongue at me. “I thought I taught you better.”

I could see the beach just down the path that wrapped around the northern side of my condo—the honeymoon suite. I could also see the path leading me straight to the pool area where I wanted to be. It was quiet, not a single hint of children’s voices or loud music, only the sound of waves crashing and gulls calling.

“Sorry. I just have a lot going on. I can’t come home, and I’m going to be fine.” I tapped my bare toes on the paved walk, thankful the sun had been prohibited from kissing this section of the ground. My flip flops were still in my suitcase, ignored because who needs shoes in paradise?

“Well, if things get bad down there, I’m going to buy you a ticket and you’re coming. No arguments. Got it?”

I shook my head, frustrated. If I ignored her direct commands, she’d just stop talking to me, which wouldn’t be horrible, except that every woman needs her mother at times. The occasional stipend of cash she’d throw my way didn’t hurt, either. She wasn’t extremely wealthy, but the alimony she got from my father was a source of

comfort for us both.

“No arguments. I have to go, Mom. I’ll call you later.”

Before she could protest, I swiped right and ended the call, heading toward my glorious destination—a lounge chair in the sun. I hadn’t even bothered to do anything with my hair. It was still tied on top of my head with a rubber band and a dozen hair pins. At least I’d taken the time to wash my face and do my makeup after vomiting. All I wanted to do was drink too much, get baked by the sun, and forget the name Daven Michaels.

I was right, there were only a few folks seated around the pool area, more than enough empty chairs for me to select one. I found a lounge in direct sunlight and spread my towel out. For a moment, I considered jumping in the water to give the sun more moisture to work with—I firmly believed water on the skin enhanced the effects of UV light—but I was exhausted. Day drinking had already taken its toll on me.

So, I sat down, stretching my legs out and flipping through my phone. I heard voices approaching from the left and looked up to see who was approaching. To my pleasant surprise, it was the handsome man who had offered to buy me a drink at the airport and then later stopped by my seat on the plane. The island wasn’t that large, and there were only a few resorts here, but I was still shocked to see that we were staying at the same place. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to grin or hide.

The latter won out.

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I slapped my floppy hat on my head faster than a seagull steals a French fry on the beach, covered my eyes with my sunglasses, and pretended to be fully absorbed in my phone. He didn't look in my direction, but I didn't want him to. Today was about me, and if I spent it talking to yet another man, I'd end up being swept away by his charm and being played. It's how I met Daven. It's how I met almost every man I'd dated after that first creep.

No, I was fine being alone for a while. Or at least I thought I was. I snuck glances at him as he stood talking to resort security personnel, and secretly, I was disappointed when he walked away without even noticing I was there. It was for the best. For all I knew, he wasn't vacationing here. He probably owned the place or something.

I removed my sunglasses and laid my head back. A nap before dinner sounded nice. If it was meant to happen, the fates would line it up. If not, I'd just drink myself into oblivion and stare at the wall feeling sorry for myself later on.

4

LUCAS

I'd sat in my dark corner of the resort lounge staring at her for the past hour. She had showered. Her hair now screamed of style and elegance. The short, choppy inverted bob bounced with curls and product. She was sexy and she knew it. Her red lipstick stained the glass she made love to, laughing and flirting with the bartender. She hadn't seen me, and I had no idea she'd be staying at Firefly, my usual dive.

I was biding my time, waiting for the right opportunity to go and speak with her,

maybe buy her a drink. She seemed to like the solitude, though. Each time someone sat next to her, she moved to a new space at the bar with seats on either side of herself. I could read her like a book. She was here to sulk and get wasted, but she wanted everyone to leave her alone except for the man giving her the whiskey.

My phone rang and I pulled it out. It was late. The only person to ever call me at this time was Henry, and he'd have landed after his trip to Europe.

"Yeah?"

"Lucas, man, we almost didn't land. Winds are something awful." Henry sounded out of breath like he'd been running. "It's starting to rain here. Did you hear the path of Bryan changed? Looks like he'll drive straight up the peninsula. Miami's going to get smacked."

I hadn't heard, but I wasn't worried. The projected path took the hurricane far enough west to leave the island alone, and my staff at the house knew how to protect the property when storms like this rode in.

"I didn't hear, but I'm sure it will be fine. They haven't made any announcements here yet." I sipped my gin and tonic and kept my eyes glued to Vera. She'd moved to yet another seat, yet another drink in her hand.

"Well, they've grounded all commercial flights. We have that important board meeting on Thursday. I'm concerned you won't make it back." Henry was a worry wart, always mothering me. My mother had passed years ago, but here he was, acting like I still needed her.

"It's fine. I'll call Harvey and have the jet sent over when I'm ready to come back. Money talks, buddy. I'll be there." Yet another simple luxury that our software genius had provided us. When others were grounded, we just paid a higher price to use the

runway. It had gotten us out of Reykjavik when a blizzard was bearing down, and so long as Harvey was confident flying, I was certain he'd get me off this island and back home in time for the darned meeting Henry insisted I attend.

"Well, you're just an important player. The Feds want this deal pretty bad, and we can make it happen, but you're the face guy." Henry was finally starting to catch his breath.

"I'll be there. Just keep the jet fueled and ready for me." I hung up just as Vera stood and strolled to a new seat. I wasn't waiting around anymore. She swayed as she walked, which meant she was starting to get tipsy, and I wanted a chance to talk to her before she was too drunk to remember me.

I stood, heading straight to the bar to order her another drink and one for myself as well, and when I turned to make sure she was still in the same place, she was gone. No longer seated at the end of the long bar, she was standing on the stage, microphone in hand. Karaoke was beginning, and she was the first one in line. The DJ started a track, and she swayed as she hummed the first few lines.

When she got to the chorus, the entire place lit up with cheers. "Baby you're a firework. Come on, show 'em what you're worth..." I was mesmerized like everyone in this place. Not only was she drop-dead gorgeous, but she could sing. I listened intently as she continued, moving her body seductively as she finished the song, and I was there to greet her as she stepped off the stage to make space for someone else to sing.

"Wow, that was amazing." I handed her the drink I had bought for her, and she eyed it suspiciously without saying a word. "I swear it's safe."

"What do you want?" She walked past me, heading toward the bar, and I followed, chuckling at her snarky tone.

“I want to talk.” I had to jog a few steps to catch up to her, and we found spots at the bar to sit. She placed the drink down without taking a sip and stared up at me.

“I came here to get over someone, not to hook up.” She wasn’t unpleasant, but I could tell she was guarded. Rightly so. It was impossible to determine based on someone’s looks whether they had ill intentions or not. My only intention was to get to know her a bit better.

“Look, you don’t have to drink it if you don’t trust me. I can have the bartender pour you a drink right here so you know it’s not doctored.” I raised my hand for the barkeep to come my way, but his back was toward us. She yanked my hand down and shook her head.

“I believe you.” When I relaxed, she took the drink and downed it in one swallow, which made me grin. “I just don’t know why you’re targeting me. Are you following me? I mean, the airport bar, the plane, and now here?”

“I think that is called coincidence, not following. But I’m not disappointed by the coincidences that led us to this spot.” I finished my drink and set the empty glass on the bar. “Are you?”

“I don’t know you.” Vera shrugged nonchalantly. Still guarded. I didn’t blame her.

“I’m not a bad guy, Vera. Take a moment to get to know me and let me show you that.” The bartender looked my way, and I raised two fingers, indicating we’d each like another drink. He nodded and came in our direction, but he knew better than to interrupt us. I’d been a regular around here long enough to build a solid rapport with the entire staff of this place.

She sighed. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I just got out of a relationship and I’m feeling a little skittish, that’s all.” She angled her body more toward me, the dip of the black

dress she wore revealing more cleavage than the bikini I'd seen her in at the pool when she didn't notice me looking at her. My cock stirred, but I focused on her face to keep my body under control.

"So, tell me. Why you'd come to this island alone? Was he that horrible?" The bartender set our drinks out and took the empty glasses and vanished. I offered her the new drink, and she took it, this time sipping instead of chugging.

"He cheated on me with my best friend. When I called him on it, he fired me. He was my agent. So now, I have no job and no best friend. This trip was entirely paid for, so why not?" She stared into her glass, a sullen expression on her face. Then she looked back up at my face through her thick lashes. "What's your story? Why are you here alone?"

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I sipped my gin and tonic and raised my eyebrows. “I come here alone a lot. My name is Lucas Smith. I own Tri-Tech. We make security software for governments.” I watched her face, but nothing registered, which pleased me. I wasn’t averse to telling her how much money I had. I just wanted to know that her interest in me was genuine and not because I was loaded. It didn’t bode well that she was out of a job, but with her looks, she’d find another agent soon enough.

“Never heard of it. Still doesn’t tell me why you’re single. You’re fucking hot. What’s wrong? Do you have a micro penis or something?” She cracked the joke with such a straight face I couldn’t help but burst out laughing, which made her smile. “So you have a sense of humor. I like that.”

The karaoke made it hard to hear each other talk, and I really enjoyed talking to her. “Want to sit over there where it’s quieter?” I pointed to my corner, dark and cozy. It would allow us to get to know each other better while still affording her the comfort of knowing others could watch her and that she was safe.

Vera followed the line of where I was pointing and turned back to me, leaning forward seductively. I couldn’t resist peeking down her dress. Her tits drew my eyes right in. She wore no bra, her hardened nipples peeking out at me.

“Or we could go back to your condo. It’s here in this resort?” Her hand rested on my thigh. She went from zero to ninety in two seconds flat. The closer her fingers pushed to my cock, the harder it got.

“Uh, sure? You sure you want to do that? You came here to get over someone, not hook up. Remember?” I finished my drink, not wanting this moment to end. She

downed hers too and took my hand as she slid off her barstool.

“I’m sure. Now take me home.” Her eyelids were heavy with drink, but I wasn’t about to say no to fucking a supermodel. I let her lead the way to the lounge exit then guided her toward my condo. My only rule was, no more drinks. I wanted both of us to remember this fully.

5

VERA

He was hot and I was horny, and that’s how it all started. He opened the door to the condo he was occupying for the week and led me in, locking up behind us. It had been seventy-two hours since I broke up with my ex, but I was throwing myself into another man’s bed this quickly because it was what felt good. Besides, after this trip was over, I’d never see him again, and the alcohol coursing through my body had my inhibitions practically nonexistent.

I turned on him like a vixen, threading my fingers through his hair and pulling him down for a kiss. He didn’t have time to react. His hands still busied themselves with the condo key and his wallet while I devoured his mouth, my tongue forcing its way between his teeth. Eventually, he backed me toward the bed with his hands on my hips. A single overhead light revealed the ritziest condo in this resort.

“You’re really drunk,” he whispered against my lips, but I kissed the words away, biting at his lower lip and reaching for his buttons. “I’m not sure you’re able to fully consent to this.” His hands stayed planted on my hips, a perfect gentleman refusing to ravish me the way I thought he would.

“Shut up and fuck me.” I tugged the buttons, freeing his chest, and my hands searched his body. He was ripped, the curves of his muscles making my exploration

more enticing.

“Vera, I don’t want you to wake up and think I took advantage of you.” He resisted me, gently grabbing a wrist and forcing me to look up at him. I didn’t know whether to swoon because he was being so proper or scream because I just had to find the one man left on this planet who would respect my body.

“If you don’t fuck me now, I’m going to leave this condo and never speak to you again.” There was a tense standoff. His eyes locked on mine, and his hands clung to my hip and my wrist until I grabbed his cock through his pants. “Now or never.”

Lucas cupped both of my cheeks, kissing me, tangling his tongue around mine and forcing me down onto the bed. He pinned me down as my hands groped his back, up beneath his shirt where my fingernails could sink in a little. The weight of his body on mine made it difficult to breathe, but I didn’t hesitate to continue. His hard dick pressed against my thigh told me he wanted it pretty badly, and so did I.

“You’re sure?” he asked again, forehead pressed against mine.

I nodded, biting my lip, and he lifted up. Kneeling on the bed, one knee on either side of my hips, he ripped his shirt off and tossed it, then undid his belt and the fly of his pants. I rested my hands on his thighs and watched him as he freed himself, his cock protruding out the fly of his pants.

“Shit...” If I could have touched myself, I would have. The sight of him erect and ready for me made my pussy scream his name. “Holy shit.”

Lucas pulled at the spaghetti straps on my dress, working them down lower to my elbows until I was able to pull my arms out. He groped my breasts, squeezing them, then pinching and twisting my nipples. When he backed away, I shimmied the dress down around my hips and he pulled his pants off and kicked his shoes away. I

struggled with my dress, my coordination not quite what it normally was while I was sober. He seemed to notice. He grabbed the dress and my panties and pulled them over my hips and off me.

“Fuck, you’re even more gorgeous with your clothes off.”

I grinned and propped myself up on my elbows on the bed, drawing one leg up. Lucas wasn’t like most guys I’d experienced. It was like he waited on me to take the lead, as if he truly was a gentleman. I chuckled and asked, “Are you going to put that thing in me now? Because I want to come really fucking hard.”

He crawled across the bed, settling between my legs, but he didn’t penetrate me. Instead, he cradled me, one arm behind my head, one hand on my cheek. It was soft and gentle, like making love, not fucking. I had a strange surge of emotion. I wasn’t sure where it came from and I almost lost it. I kissed him as if he were the love of my life whom I hadn’t seen in years. I felt the tears sprouting, streaming down the sides of my face as he laid me back on the bed.

His lips never left mine as his hand trailed down to my chest, a thumb pressing on my nipple as his dick prodded at my entrance. I wasn’t ready for him to push into me, but he did it, slowly sliding in as deeply as he could. He pulled my leg up, giving himself more room to work, and began working my pussy like it needed an internal massage.

I moaned, still crying at the overwhelming intimacy of the entire situation. Even my ex hadn’t been like this—intense, slow, intoxicating. I squeezed my hand between our bodies, swirling my fingers on my clit until his thrusting began to push me closer to the edge.

“You really are beautiful,” he whispered, his cock filling me, “inside and out.” Another squeeze to my breast, and he started moving faster. His dick jackhammered into my pussy until I thought I’d split in two and my body started to convulse. I

clenched around him, feeling how thick he really was. I swore I'd have tears in my skin, judging by the way he worked me.

“Fuck... Oh, fuck, it's so amazing.” I gripped the comforter, not caring who heard my moans as he fucked me. The bed shook, the headboard slamming against the wall, and my body spasmed beneath him.

“God, I'm gonna come. I—shit,” he grunted, and seconds later, I felt him, hot and draining out of me. His thrusts slowed, and he gently glided in and out of me again. His lips took mine over, finally releasing the passion I had expected from the beginning. And when he pulled out, I felt the mess, and only then did I realize we'd just had sex without protection. The alcohol tempered my reaction, and I rolled over the minute he climbed off me.

Lucas lay there on the bed as I slithered off, angry with myself for forgetting a condom. He watched me walk to the minibar and open a bottle of vodka. I downed it straight and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. My vision was slightly blurred, but I could still walk. Chances were that I would forget some of this, anyway.

“This is a nice condo. Way nicer than mine.” I noticed how this particular condo had been remodeled. The tile backsplash along the sink was new, new fixtures, stainless steel appliances. It was as if it had been decorated to suit one person in particular rather than the bland, neutral colors of most hotels—or the condo I was staying in. “This place must cost a fortune.” The condo I was in cost over four hundred dollars a night.

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“It’s about two grand a night.”

The comment made me nearly choke. I looked at him in shock and asked, “What? Does money grow on trees where you live?”

“Something like that.” He patted the bed. “Come back.”

The alcohol was hitting harder, making my mind not be able to follow a single train of thought. I reached for another mini-bottle of alcohol. It was amber-colored but I couldn’t read the label. I cracked it open and wandered over to the bed and crawled past the puddle of cum up to the pillows. Lucas readjusted the way he was lying so we could look at each other, and he reached out and took the bottle out of my hand.

“Maybe you can slow down so we can enjoy this?”

His sweetness and the way he looked at me had me tearing up again immediately. “Why are men such fucking animals?” I sobbed and curled up into the fetal position. I hated how drinking made me overly emotional, but so did men breaking my heart. I lay there crying, embarrassed that I’d let my heart out on my sleeve like this. This was supposed to be a quick one-night stand. Not a venting session with sex.

“Shh, it’s okay. Listen, you just tell me everything. Okay? You’ll feel better.” Lucas rolled over, reaching for a tissue from the box on the nightstand, and then he rolled back and handed it to me.

“Daven is a piece of shit,” I sobbed. “I walked in on him fucking my best friend. My best friend! He’s such an asshole.”

“Ouch, that doesn’t sound like a very nice thing for your best friend to do, either.”

I didn’t open my eyes to look at him. I kept them clamped shut, sobbing as I blew my nose and threw the tissue away. I knew this meltdown had been coming. I just hadn’t expected to be with a gorgeous, wealthy man when it did. I thought I’d be sitting in my private hot tub drinking an entire bottle of vodka while screaming at the ocean waves.

“It wasn’t. She wasn’t my friend. She just pretended to be!”

“Shh...” He smoothed my hair out of my face and pushed the mini-bottle into my hand.

“You need this more than I do.”

I didn’t hesitate. The liquor went down faster than the first bottle, and I knew it would be my last drink. My eyes were getting heavy, and I knew I’d pass out soon.

I felt the bed jostle, and Lucas climbed out. He folded the covers on his side down and shut the light off. Then I felt the bed shake again. His hand searched my body, sliding across my thigh and curling around my back.

I was in no position to defend myself if he tried something with me, and for a moment, I thought maybe he would. He hauled me over to his side of the bed, rolling me until I was on top of him. I felt more jostling, and then he rolled me back, laying me on the mattress.

“I don’t want to fuck again...” My words came out slurred, and I pushed him away.

“Hey, shh. I know. Just let me hold you.”

His words registered very slowly. So slowly, in fact, that he had me repositioned facing away from him and had curled himself around me before I even had a chance to respond. What sort of man has a naked, drunken woman in his bed after having sex and doesn't take advantage of that?

I fell asleep in his arms, but part of me still felt like this was just a dream and I'd wake up with a hangover in my own place alone and still broken-hearted.

6

LUCAS

I turned my collar up against the chilly winds sweeping over the island and headed for the clubhouse. It was only a few yards from my door, but the sprinkling rain felt like tiny needles piercing my skin. Once inside, I breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that Vera hadn't come out with me. She lay sleeping soundly in my bed, probably to awaken with a hangover. I dropped her clothing off at the laundry to be cleaned and then headed toward the office.

I made my way to the front desk, pushing past a few worried-looking travelers who held similar papers in their hands to the one I'd read and tossed into the wastebasket before leaving the room. Resort management had slid a notice beneath each door in the wee hours, letting us know the island had been closed for air traffic and that we would all be grounded until the storm passed. I didn't turn on the television in the room for fear of waking Vera, so the front desk seemed the best source of answers.

Before I was able to get to the concierge, I heard her talking, answering someone's question. Her tired eyes told me she'd been at this since the first notice had been sent, and she looked ready to collapse. It was only nine a.m.

"Please take a step back from the counter. The decision was not mine to make, nor

was it that of hotel management. The FAA grounded all commercial transportation to the mainland until Bryan passes. We are not in the direct path and will only receive strong winds and light showers, but the winds are too strong to take flight and likely will be for at least forty-eight hours.” She held a stack of papers in her hands, plucking them off one at a time and handing them to anyone she could reach. I held my hand out as she continued, and she placed a paper in it.

“Commercial flights are all canceled indefinitely as of this notice. We will extend each reservation as long as need be, compliments of Firefly. Now please back away and allow more guests to approach so they can collect the updated notice.”

I followed her instructions, sinking down into a wicker chair lined with pillows the shape of seashells. The notice was a printout of the official FAA closure warning and a letter of apology from the resort’s CEO.

I was frustrated, but I understood this was not the resort’s fault. If they were closing airports 200 miles away from the mainland, it meant the mainland was getting smacked. Likely, even if a plane could take off here, it wouldn’t be able to land anywhere south of Myrtle Beach, and even then, the longer a traveler waited to get aboard a flight, the farther north they’d have to fly in order to land safely.

I rubbed my temple and sighed. Henry would be livid, but I knew I would have to throw some money at this situation. The only way to get back for the board meeting was the private jet, which meant a private airstrip and a huge payout to our friend Thom at the FAA—if the pilot would fly me.

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“Can I help you, Mr. Smith?” I looked up to see Eleanor smiling at me. She and I knew each other well, having had a fling a few years back when I first started my jaunts to the island. She always made sure to check on me and see that I was comfortable when I came.

“Hey, Elle, this is really crappy weather, huh?” I crumpled the paper up and stood, shoving the offending news into my pocket.

“Nothing we can do about it.”

“Yes, well, I understand. I’ll be leaving in my private jet probably tomorrow or the day after. Have a big board meeting.”

“Certainly. Is there anything I can do to make your stay more comfortable while you’re here? I can send you room service or our portable entertainment package?”

“Oh, no, no. I’m not a game player. I’ll entertain myself, but you can send some breakfast up for my guest.” My mind was already racing. If this was just the beginning of the storm, we’d likely have to ride out the rest of it in my condo. “And if you would, have someone go to Ms. Davids’s room and collect her things. Have them sent to mine. I don’t want her staying alone while the storm is going on.” Already knowing how she would respond, I pulled my wallet out and started sliding bills out.

“Lucas, I can’t have a guest’s things brought to your room without their permission.” She held her hand up as I offered her some cash.

“Eleanor, you know me well enough to know I do what I want. Now take the money

and do as I ask, please.” I thrust my hand past hers, and she looked at the bills, over one hundred dollars.

“Sir, I?—”

“Good, then we’re on the same page. Vera would like a nice selection of everything on the breakfast menu so she can choose whatever she wants. Add it to my tab and have her things brought before lunch. Also, be a dear and when her clothing is done at the laundry, send it to my room as well.”

Eleanor looked frustrated, but I walked away, my phone already in my hand. I punched in the number for the pilot, Harvey, and he picked up on the third ring.

“Yeah, Boss.”

“Hey, Harvey. We have a situation. I have that board meeting this week but I’m on Elbow. I’ll need a flight back. The FAA grounded everything. Think you can manage?”

“No problem. We’ll have to wait out about twenty-four to forty-eight hours until the worst is passed. I’m not risking my life, despite how well you pay me.” He chuckled, and I smiled.

“Thank you. I will be in touch to communicate our plans as soon as we see how the weather develops.”

“Righto, talk later.”

Harvey hung up, and I strolled to the window and stared out. I’d lived through so many hurricanes they didn’t faze me anymore, but I didn’t like the idea of Vera staying in that honeymoon condo by herself. It butted right up to the beach, and if

there were a storm surge, that building would be the first to take a hit. I'd rather she just be with me, and I hoped she understood.

I handled a few other business calls and grabbed a cup of coffee from the lounge before heading back. As I returned, I noticed it wasn't raining anymore but the wind was stronger. It nearly blew me off my feet as I opened the door. I had to put my weight behind it to get it to shut. I turned and saw Vera wrapped snugly in a resort robe, seated at the foot of the bed with a tray table loaded down with food.

"Where were you?" she asked, shoving a slice of bacon into her mouth.

"Went to the front desk for a few things. How is breakfast?" Small talk was all the talk we had. Last night was a whirlwind. She had been intoxicated to the point of not making sense when she did talk, and it was mostly her broken heart seeping out. This morning, she seemed happier.

"Good, but I can't find my clothes. I was going to go back to my condo and shower." She talked with her mouth full. It was sweet that a woman of her stature was reduced to the same basic human instinct as all of us, and she was gorgeous doing it.

"You spilled some vodka on the dress. I sent it all out for cleaning." I turned my collar down and rolled my sleeves up. My shirt was damp. If I were alone, I'd have taken it off, but I didn't want Vera to feel uncomfortable. We knew nothing about each other.

She nodded but looked upset. I watched her dig into the scrambled eggs, then the sausage links. She appeared famished, and I wondered how she kept her figure so perfect if she ate like this.

"So, the storm?" Vera pushed her food around with the fork, collecting the last bits of scrambled egg. "Is it bad? I tried to call my roommate, but the call wouldn't go

through.”

I nodded. “It looks like we’re stuck here for a few days. The storm ended up going farther eastward than they thought. It will hit Miami directly, and we will get clipped by the outer edge of the storm bands. The FAA grounded all flights indefinitely.” Sitting beside her, I continued. “I had the resort staff go to your condo to gather your things. I thought maybe you’d like to have company to ride out the storm. You can stay here. I can sleep on the pullout.”

“What?” Her chewing slowed. She stared at me dumbfounded. “You had them get my things to bring here?”

I immediately knew my mistake. She probably felt like I was trying to control her or manipulate her. “I’m sorry. I honestly thought it would be safer here and you’d not be so lonely. I admit that I enjoy your company.”

She continued to chew, studying my face as if thinking about how to respond. Her nostrils flared and she pursed her lips, but she said nothing. Instead, she pushed the half-empty plate away and slid a plate of waffles in front of herself. I made a mental note not to order her sausage, biscuits, and gravy ever again.

“I can call and cancel the order.”

“No, it’s fine.” She shrugged and cut a bite of the waffle on the plate. Her voice said it was fine, but her body language said it was not fine.

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I was used to getting what I wanted by just calling the shots. Maybe this time I messed up, but I knew I could win her over. I just had to be patient, and it looked like I had a few days with her to make that happen.

7

VERA

Isat with my suitcase packed, resting on the edge of the mattress with my phone in hand. I'd called Midge at least thirty times and there had been no answer. Cell towers must have been down, and if the storm was bad enough to do that, then what else went wrong? I sighed, frustrated. It had been two days since the storm hit, two and a half since I'd landed here to escape my frustrations.

Lucas snored, and I looked in that direction. He lay on the pull-out bed, his upper half exposed. His bronzed skin looked darker against the white sheets, and his was so warm it made me jealous. No matter how much I tanned, I couldn't get that dark. The way the sheets wrapped tightly around his lower half revealed a part of him he probably would rather I not see. Every man got morning wood, but a total stranger wasn't exactly the type of person to reveal that part of yourself to.

I snickered at the thought and looked away. He was attractive, but he was also very wealthy-enough to probably buy this island if he could afford \$2500 a night for days on end. I was jobless and maybe homeless now. I punched in my landlord's number, holding the phone to my ear. It rang straight to voicemail like every other number I'd tried. I was desperate enough to even try Daven's number.

I ended the call and locked my phone, then shoved it in my bag. The storm was past. The sun was out, and the beach was covered in downed branches and things the sea had churned up and spat out. I hadn't called the front desk to find out if the airports were open, but based on what Lucas had told me while we waited for the worst winds to die down, they'd open this morning.

I wouldn't have said it was awful being with Lucas, locked in his room while a hurricane raged, but it was awkward. We talked about surface-level things like my job and a need for a new one. He offered to help if he could, but I rejected that. I'd do things on my own or I wouldn't do them at all. We put a puzzle together while we watched reruns of Judge Judy, but we refrained from drinking. God knows, I didn't need to throw myself at him like a helpless waif or a desperate housewife.

He was a kind man, nice enough to have thought of me in this messy part of my life, and I didn't want to just leave him high and dry. He'd paid for my food, drink, and entertainment for the past two days, so I wrote him a note telling him I was leaving and left my number for him just in case he needed anything from me. Then I picked up my suitcase and slipped out.

I got a ride to the airport. Resort transportation had offered to take folks around the island. It was just a golf cart, but it saved me the two-mile walk. By the time Lucas woke and dressed, I'd be on a flight home. Hopefully. I liked him, but I knew it was too soon. He'd be replacing something that had meant a lot to me. I'd project my feelings for Daven onto Lucas, and it would make things messy when I woke up and discovered that Lucas didn't really want the real me, either. It was better that I just left quietly without fanfare or a complicated goodbye.

The cart driver waited for me to grab my things and then drove off, leaving me at the front door to the tiny airport. I wheeled my suitcase into the lobby and got in line. There were at least a hundred people here, all trying to leave the island. I noticed mothers with small children, men in suits, and a few younger-looking people—maybe

teens having a holiday before returning to school in the fall.

I glanced at the time on my phone and groaned. At this rate, I'd be home in four days, not by this afternoon like I hoped. Without contact with the mainland, I had no way of knowing what was going on, whether I even had a home to return to. Mom called me three times, but each time, I ignored it. If I picked up and talked to her, she'd only lecture me about the storm, and I had no interest in hearing her nag me about moving back home.

By the time I was next in line, my feet hurt from standing there and my phone battery was at forty percent. They only had two people working the counter, and both of them looked frazzled. There were three days left on my stay, so worst-case scenario, I'd still be able to go back to the resort, but I just wanted to go home now. There would be lingering rain showers and high winds for a few days. I needed to check on my things and start the hunt for a new job.

"Next," the haggard woman behind the counter called. Her blue shirt had a coffee stain on it a few inches below her chin. The ascot tied around her neck was crooked, and several stray hairs flew away from her temples as if escaping her mood. I walked forward, slapping my passport and wallet on the counter.

"I need a flight to Miami." I wished there were a chair to sit in and felt bad that neither of these women had even so much as a stool. They'd been here longer than me and would be here long after I was gone.

"Sorry, ma'am. No flights to Miami, Daytona, Orlando, or West Palm. You'll have to go north if you want to leave." She typed at her computer, spouting what was clearly a message she'd given this morning a dozen times or more.

"Nothing in Florida at all?"

“No, ma’am.” She turned and stared at me, fingers hovering over the keys as if ready to type in my wishes.

“What about Georgia?”

“Storm has canceled everything from Valdosta northward up the eastern seaboard. I can get you New York, Tuscaloosa, Kansas City, Chicago, Tulsa, Houston?—”

“No. I need Florida. I live in Miami. I can’t just fly to another city thousands of miles away. It’s only two hundred miles from here. There has to be something in Florida. What about Parris island?” I stared at her as she typed. South Carolina was only an eight-hour drive if I rented a car. I could do that easily today, be home before sunrise.

“No, ma’am, nothing there either. I have Columbus, CVG?—”

“No, thank you,” I snapped. I could feel my blood pressure rising. I never got riled by things like this, but then I wasn’t normally on the bad side of a horrible breakup, either. “Check again because I have to go home now.” I couldn’t return to Lucas’s room, and if I stayed in my condo, there was a likelihood that he’d see me around the resort. I wasn’t trying to avoid him. I just knew I needed space.

“No, ma’am.” Her fingers clicked away, but I swore she wasn’t doing anything but typing hate mail and sending it to my email. “We have nothing. I can book you north or west, but not Florida. Or I can call you a car to drive you back to your resort.” She glared at me. Her puckered lips looked like a cat’s ass. I wanted to smack her.

“Listen. I just got dumped by a man who I thought would propose to me. Took this goddamn trip by myself when he was supposed to be here with me, only to get slammed by a hurricane, and now I can’t reach my roommate. I may not even have a home to return to. You get on that damn computer of yours and find me a fucking flight or I’ll?—”

“Whoa.” I heard his voice then instantly felt his hand around my waist. “I apologize, Helen. Vera has had a bad bit of luck. I’ll handle this, okay?” Lucas whisked me away, arm forcefully enveloping my waist, suitcase in hand. “What on earth?”

“Let go of me.” I wriggled free and snatched my suitcase from him. Tears burned in my eyes but I refused to release them. I had made a fool of myself and he had seen it.

“I got your note. I wish you’d have just waited for me.” He stopped so I did too, turning to face him. My cheeks burned. I said nothing. “Flights to Miami are impossible until they clean up the runways, okay? But I have a private jet coming to get me. He’s probably servicing the thing now and refueling. We take off in thirty minutes. Would you like to ride with me?”

My chest was so tight I could barely breathe. I was furious that life had dealt me so many harsh blows, one right after another, that I had totally overlooked this amazing creature standing in front of me. I didn’t deserve his kindness at all. I wanted to run away from him so he wouldn’t see how awful I was. I should never have raised my voice at that woman. I shrugged.

“We will land just outside the city at a private airstrip, then I can send a car to take you wherever you like. You won’t have to wait until tomorrow like you would have. I was prepared to leave my card on file to take care of you.” He glanced at his watch. “I have a board meeting this afternoon that I can’t miss. If you want to go with me, we need to head that way now.”

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I chewed my lip. Taking one more favor from him wouldn't kill me. And he was a really sweet man. "Fine," I relented, letting some of the tension out of my neck and shoulders. "But you have to let me repay you somehow."

"Come on," he coaxed, placing a hand in the small of my back as we started walking.

It was about fucking time fate started treating me right. I'd had a really bad run of things, and Lucas was a godsend. I just didn't want to get used to it. Life wasn't kind to me, and I had to fight to get what I needed or wanted. I couldn't relax and let him woo me into a numb complacency. He was human like all other men, which meant he had flaws too. I just hadn't seen them.

I'd take his ride home, but then it was just me against the world again. It was better that way. Besides, my heart wasn't ready to accept anything from anyone. It would be a long time before it was.

8

LUCAS

Even though she was annoyed, calling someone every two minutes over the jet's satellite internet, she was still adorable. The sundress she wore complimented her creamy skin, a soft, baby-blue material that fit her well. I expected her to wear fancy sandals and a matched jewelry set, but she only wore flip-flops. She hadn't even done her makeup.

I'd never had to hide from paparazzi because despite my wealth, I had no fame. But

Vera had probably gotten used to the cameras following her around and used tactics like no makeup and flip-flops to discourage anyone from looking twice at her gorgeous face. I'd seen her on billboards and magazine covers. Her name might not have been household yet, but her face was well-known.

She caught me staring at her from across the cabin, a long, narrow strip of cabin with a couch along one side and captain's chairs down the other. I sat on the end of the couch with one leg crossed over the other. She had chosen the captain's chair closest to the door. I hadn't even shown her the rest of the jet, the full bathroom and master suite in back for trips abroad. She'd been content to park herself by the door and plop her luggage at her feet, and I had let her.

"I'm sorry. I'm not being a very social guest." Her bottom lip pouted out and she frowned.

"You're being you, and it's okay. I'm not expecting anything from you. I offered you the ride because you seemed upset, and that made me feel upset for you." I patted the sofa next to me and raised my eyebrows. "You're having a hard time reaching someone?"

She stood and slunk over to me, her shoulders drooping like an unwatered flower. Even then, I still found her stunning. Her platinum hair had been curled and hung loosely around her face. I wanted to run my fingers through it.

"Yeah, anyone. I've called everyone I know and the lines are just dead. I think maybe a cell tower is down or something." She plopped on the couch and crossed her arms over her chest. "What if my entire apartment building is destroyed? Where will I live? I mean, Daven dumped me and then fired me the same day. I have enough savings to survive for a few months, but not if I have to pay a new deposit and first month's rent. And how do I do that without a job?" She covered her face in frustration, and my heart went out to her.

“I told you I can call around, pull a few strings. Money talks, Vera. I have no problem letting my money talk for you.”

“No.” Her hands flew away from her face, and she turned to face me, drawing her leg up onto the couch so she could look right in my eyes. “No, Lucas. I need to do this on my own. I want to be my own person, support myself. I don’t want handouts. I even turned away money my mother tried to offer me to get set up here. I lived in a shitty hotel for a month before I could afford an apartment, and even then, I had to wait for a friend to agree to be my roommate.

“I made it before and I will make it again. I just want to make it clear that I’m not asking for your money, and I’m not taking it. I like you, and I don’t want you to think I’m a gold digger.”

I smiled at her ferocity. The way she wore her independence like a badge reminded me of myself when I was that age. It was because I had that very same fight in me that I was successful. I’d never want to take that from her.

“I understand. I’m just letting you know that if the worst were to happen, I would help you out. I know a few people, and I have an extra room in my home.” I took her hand and weaved my fingers through hers. “These are sort of extreme circumstances, don’t you think? I mean, when you moved here from wherever your mom lives, you weren’t facing a recent job loss and a hurricane.”

I felt her fingers curl around mine, a new sensation, being as for the past two days, she’d barely looked at me. I got the feeling she had hoped our sexual encounter would be a one-night stand and that she’d leave the island a new woman. But I play for keeps, and I wasn’t about to let her walk away until I was certain she was not the one for me. Unfortunately for her plans, I was liking her more and more with every passing hour.

“I don’t think it will come to that. Thank you. I just needed a ride home.”

I stared at her pouty lips. They were almost edible. I felt my body craving her again, and I knew we had privacy—no flight team, just the pilots and the two of us for this short trip. Once I got an idea in my head, it was only a matter of time before I got what I wanted. I hadn’t invited her on the flight to fuck her, but now that she was here, it was all I could think about.

“I should try calling again.” She pulled her hand away from mine and unlocked her phone, punching numbers into the keypad. I took it away, locking it and tossing it into the seat across the cabin. “What did you do that for?”

“Look, no one is going to pick up. The storm knocked out power or cell service, or both.” I angled my body to face her and took her hands again, this time looking straight into her eyes. “I know you’re stressed out and afraid, but let me help you take your mind off that.”

The air seemed to thicken around us. I watched her eyes dart around my face, her tongue drawing over her bottom lip. I didn’t want to startle her, so I moved slowly, releasing one of her hands and gently sliding my palm along her cheek, pushing the hair back. She bit her lip. Her eyes seemed to plead with me, something I couldn’t understand. I didn’t want to do this if she wasn’t certain it was what she wanted, but fuck, did I want it.

“Can I kiss you now?” I was already leaning toward her, and she wasn’t pulling away. She nodded, letting me press my lips to hers gently. She shifted slightly, making room for my knee as I moved closer. The leather couch squeaked as the cushions rubbed against one another. “Now, do you feel better?”

She nodded again, her face still only inches from mine. Her breathing was thready, erratic, like she was preparing to speak but unable to. I could feel my body heading to

the point of no return. I wanted her. “Can I do more?” I asked her. This time, she wasn’t throwing herself at me in a brazenly intoxicated state. She was timid, like this was the first time she’d done anything.

“I’m not that girl, Lucas.” She turned her head away and down, but she didn’t pull away, so I brushed her hair back so I could see her face, curling it around her ear and using my thumb and finger to pinch her chin and force her to look at me.

“And I’m not that guy, Vera. But when I see what I want, I get it. And I’ve never seen anyone I wanted more than I want you right now. And if it’s okay, I’d like to show you that I’m not that guy... the one who sleeps with women and uses them, leaves them to cry. I know your heart is tender and you just got it broken, but I promise you, I’m not that guy.”

“We have to use protection.” She bit her lip again, eyes still fluttering around my face as if searching for acceptance.

“Of course.”

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I leaned in to kiss her, but she stood and walked to her suitcase. She dropped to her knees and opened it, pulling out a condom and then returning to me. I expected her to sit on the couch as she was, but she straddled me, settling down with a knee on either side of my hip. “So show me, then, that I’m wrong. That all men are not pigs.”

Vera kissed me hard, tongues and teeth clashing with passion as she reached for my belt. I slid my hands up her thighs beneath the dress, feeling her smooth legs. Her panties were lace. My fingers detected that the moment I touched them. And it wasn’t just the waistband, it was the whole damn garment. It made my cock scream to be in her, pressure building in my groin.

“God, you are so beautiful.” I squeezed her hips, sliding my thumbs beneath her panties, and she rose, allowing me to slide them down. As she stepped out of them, I noticed they matched her dress perfectly. I also noticed that she’d showered and groomed herself, and her shaven pussy looked like the most delicious treat I’d seen all week.

I couldn’t help myself. I lifted the skirt up and dived in, plunging my tongue through the moisture across her clit. She groaned and gripped my shoulders, then lifted her left leg and rested her foot—now bare—on the couch next to me. With more room to enjoy her, I devoured her more passionately. She was moist, but when I started sucking her and pushed two fingers into her, her pussy made so much wetness that it started smearing all over her inner thighs.

“Fuck...” She grunted, her fingernails digging into my shoulder caps. I felt her pussy clench around my fingers. “More,” she groaned. “I’ll come... give me more.” I put another finger in her, three thick, and fucked that delicious pussy as my tongue

worked her clit. Her moans grew louder, loud enough I knew the pilots could hear, but they wouldn't for a single second interrupt us.

“God, just give me more...” she panted. “The whole thing. Do it.”

I couldn't believe she was begging me to fist her. I thought I'd blow right there in my pants. She was as wild as she was hot. I tucked my thumb and pinky into her gently, then pushed with a steady, strong pressure. She screamed, clutching one shoulder and a fistful of my hair as it sank into her. I sucked harder at her clit as the convulsions started. Her pussy clamped down on my fist so that even if I wanted to, I couldn't pull it out.

“Fuck... oh, fuck,” she whimpered, and I could have sworn she was crying. I pumped my fist into her until she calmed down, then pulled it out and licked her cum from my palm.

Vera sat on the couch, giddy and weak. She had a stupid grin on her face and tear lines streaked across her cheeks. I stood, finishing what she'd started with my belt. My hand was a bit messy, so I snatched up her panties and used them to wipe my hand clean, then knelt between her legs, freeing my cock from my boxers and trousers.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she sat up, looking around frantically. I knew she was looking for the condom. She'd dropped it into my lap when she started to feel good. I picked it up from the sofa cushion and waved it in the air, and she sighed and lay down. In a matter of seconds, I had the package torn open and the rubber rolled onto my dick. It was too small, not fitting all the way down as it should, but it would work.

“Think my cock can compete with that?” I winked at her as I positioned myself, ready to penetrate her.

“Just fuck me.” She snickered, lifting her skirt up to expose her gorgeous lady parts.

I thrust in, feeling the slickness of her moisture guiding me into her depths. She didn’t respond as vocally as she had the other night, but then she hadn’t had my fist in her right before I fucked her, either. The more I pushed, the more she got into it. She worked my shirt out of my pants and had her hands up my back, clawing at me. Then her legs wrapped around my waist and she squeezed. I felt her clench around my cock, and I knew she wanted to come again.

“Fuck, I wish I could feel your skin.” I lay across her, capturing her lips. She kissed me hard, licking her own moisture off my stubble. I wanted to feel every inch of her, her tits, her stomach, the rough patch inside her pussy that rubbed me so perfectly last time.

“Next time,” she promised, grabbing my ass and pulling. “Now go deeper, I want to come again.”

Just hearing her say “next time” made my body go wild. I fucked her so hard the sofa banged into the side of the plane. I was certain the pilots thought we were entering turbulence. I felt her squeeze her hand between our bodies and touch her clit, and within moments she was screaming again, only this time, I couldn’t restrain myself. I blew so hard I thought the condom would fall off from the pressure.

However, when I pulled out, it was there, intact and full. Vera sat up, looking dazed. She picked up her panties from the floor of the plane and dangled them off one finger. “How am I supposed to wear these?” Her grin said it all. I took them from her and reached under her skirt, finding her still-soaked pussy. I dried her with them, then pushed until they were inside her.

“There, now you don’t have to wear them.”

She chuckled, and I kissed her forehead. I was sure to get a few jibes from the pilots, but it was worth it. She was worth it. I wanted nothing more than to fly this jet somewhere secluded and keep her forever, but I knew the only way to make sure she was mine was to let her go and see if she came back on her own.

9

VERA

The black sedan Lucas ordered for me stopped a block and a half away from my apartment. There was debris in the street and the authorities had it blocked off. It was awkward, not like an Uber where you added the tip to the app before you confirmed the trip, or a taxi where you pay in cash at the end of the route. I had an awkward conversation with a man named Xavier who spoke almost no English before realizing that this was one of Lucas's employees and he didn't take tips.

He helped me out of the car with my suitcase, and I stumbled away, watching him drive off. For the first time since I moved to Miami, I felt very alone. Daven had deserted me, I had no job, and I couldn't even reach Midge on my phone. I was overwhelmed and frightened as I walked around the police barricades toward the building. I stood on the street below, looking upward and seeing it wasn't good.

Branches had been piled at every street corner, palm leaves scattered everywhere. There were even piles of wood with nails in them on some streets, and a lot of garbage bags full of who knew what. Still, I pressed on, past the store fronts with broken windows and closer to home. When I got to another set of barricades, this time, there was a police presence. I attempted to maneuver around the barricade, but an officer stopped me.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to stay back." He held a hand out to me, and I looked up at the building where I lived.

“That’s my home. I have to get in there and find out if my stuff is destroyed. My roommate, I haven’t been able to reach her.”

The man reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a card, handing it to me. “You can look up this website to see if your roommate checked in. We can’t allow anyone in this block until county inspectors come in. The buildings may be unstable.”

I stared up at the building, seeing that most of the windows were broken out of it. “Is it destroyed? Was anything salvageable?” I felt defeated. There was too much going wrong in my life to lose my home too. Where the fuck would I go?

“Ma’am, I didn’t personally go in the building. We had the fire chief escort building security or management to ensure every unit was cleared out. I can say that every southward facing window was broken, so if you had a south-facing apartment, everything inside is probably wet. You’ll have to call your super to get more information. We’ll let them know when it’s clear to move back in. Until then, you can call the number on that card and find a shelter to stay in.”

I scowled. I knew I was probably better off than most people. I’d gotten a free ride back to the mainland, and I had a suitcase with at least a few changes of clothing. “Thank you,” I mumbled, staring at that damned building. I noticed a woman stagger by, clothes soiled and torn. It could be worse for me. I could be homeless and have no clothes to wear. I slid the card in my pocket and turned to go, but paused.

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I thought to ask the officer where I could go to charge my phone, but he was already gone. I turned and dragged my suitcase back up the block. I found one place open for business, but it was dead. There were no people down the street either, as if the place had been deserted.

“You need a cup of coffee? It’s free today for volunteers.” The middle-aged man behind the counter greeted me with a stern look. I didn’t blame him for not smiling like he normally would. I wasn’t smiling either.

“Just a place to charge up? I don’t even know how to find a shelter if my phone is dead.”

“Sure thing, Miss. Every table has an outlet, you know, in case them college kids want to use their computers while they enjoy their coffee. Have a seat anywhere. I’ll bring you a glass of water.”

I sighed. Finally, something helpful. “Thank you.”

I picked a table up front looking out the window that hadn’t been broken. The street was so empty it felt like a ghost town. I pulled my charging wire and phone out of my bag and plugged it in just as the man approached the table.

“You going somewhere?” He hovered over me protectively.

“Just got home. I was on Elbow Cay during the storm and rode home with a friend.” It sounded good calling Lucas my friend. When I left the plane, I heard him joking with his pilots about something. They mentioned blood on his back and I had

snickered. I probably had drawn blood, but holy shit, he fucked me so well I couldn't help it.

“Well, you're lucky. We been outta power for four days. I got a generator out back keepin' this old place runnin'. You just stay here as long as you need. Get a nice charge on your phone. If you get hungry, I'll fix you up a sammich.”

He grinned as he walked away, and I felt thankful for his hospitality. I was glad that this neighborhood was one that would look out for others in an event like this. It was better than some neighborhoods which were likely seeing looting and violence.

I dialed Midge's number which was still not ringing through, then Daven's. I wanted to know if he'd heard from her. But when he picked up, I immediately knew it was a mistake.

“What the fuck you want?”

“Uh, Dav... I wondered if you heard from Midge.”

“Ain't nobody heard from nobody. This entire city got slammed with a hurricane while you are on some island somewhere. Why don't you just soak up the sun and ignore us? That's all you're good for, anyway.”

“Hey, that's rude.” I felt insulted that he would accuse me of not caring. I'd done nothing but dote on him and do everything he asked of me. I knew he blamed me for not taking care of his sexual needs, which is why he found my best friend and fucked her instead of me. But it was a job he sent me on—every trip I took was a job he sent me on, and now I was wondering if he'd had more than one affair simply because he could fuck whoever he wanted while I was gone. I came home a day early and found him with her. What if I never came home early? Would he still be pulling his shit?

“Go back to the beach, Vera. If Midge ain’t answering her phone it’s because she found out what a bitch you are.”

Daven hung up on me, leaving me furious again, but at least I knew where I stood with him. I would never have asked him for help if I thought there was another way. My hopes started to drop, and I thought I would end up calling the number on the card the cop gave me, and I reached in my pocket to pull it out. When I did, I also pulled out Lucas’s card.

I stared at the number embossed on the card with gold lettering. Lucas wasn’t afraid to flaunt his money if it got him what he wanted. He wasn’t attached to an over-inflated sense of self-worth like Daven, though, and I liked that about him. I laid both cards on the table in front of me and stared at them both.

I wanted to be independent and do my own thing, but there was a limit to what I could handle. A Red Cross hurricane shelter would be a place to stay, but there was no guarantee that my building would be cleared to move back in, and if I were in a shelter, where would I put all my things when I cleaned out the apartment? Of course, it would only be a short stay if the apartment was cleared, but it would still be days or weeks before the windows got fixed.

I sighed. I had left home with one mission, to be my own woman. I refused my mother’s help every time she offered it, and if I took it now, I’d be a failure. But if I took Lucas’s help, wouldn’t that be the same thing?

I knew nothing about him. He was a perfect stranger—a stranger I really liked. I just didn’t think it was appropriate to move in with a man I’d known for less than a week.

The rationalization continued in my head until my phone rang. My mother’s caller ID showed up on my screen and I ignored the call. She would think the cell towers were still down, buying me time to get my story straight. If I had nowhere to go, she would

demand that I return home. I had no choice. It was either call Lucas or be homeless.

10

LUCAS

The new carpet in the hallway looked nice. Tina had done a fantastic job with the color selection, as always. It was only last week that I saw the faded, worn blue on these floors, and the crew worked their magic while I was away on Elbow. Henry walked two steps ahead of me past the windows that separated us from the offices on either side. Only a few were occupied today, as the city was still reeling from the fallout from Hurricane Bryan.

He opened the conference room door and entered. I followed, adjusting my tie. I would much rather have preferred board shorts and a Polo, but the way society had been set up to prefer suits and ties for “professional” activities made it a hard sell for Henry. He was okay with my wearing whatever I wanted to work, so long as I wore the suit for the board. Most of them were stodgy old men who nurtured tradition and disdained forward progress.

Tina stood pouring coffee from a carafe into board members’ cups, a silhouette to the backdrop of the noonday sun’s blinding rays pouring into the room from the windows. My first stop was to the control panel on the northern wall to use the dimmer, shading us from the heat of what would be one of the hottest days on record. Seven board members sat around the oblong table chatting, papers spread out before them, likely Henry’s agenda for the meeting.

“Well, it’s nice to see you back, Mr. Smith. How was your trip?” Tina poured coffee into a cup at an empty seat and smiled at me. She wore her short, dark hair pinned back at the temples and wildly curly.

“It was okay, not as nice as normal with the storm, but I enjoyed myself. It was relaxing.”

“And your investment?” She held the carafe upright in front of herself, resting it on the palm of her opposite hand. “Is Firefly doing well?”

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I nodded and strolled to my seat, pulling it out but remaining standing. No one paid us any attention. They were all too absorbed in their conversations to care about a trivial, surface-level chat.

“You were right, Tina. They were ecstatic about the idea of us investing in the property, and I’ll return in the down season to discuss details. Looks like we might add several new condos and perhaps a waterpark.” I winked at her. She’d had the idea to invest in the resort months ago, but we only made the leap to offer our support once Henry signed off on it.

“Fantastic.” Tina took a few steps as if to move on to the next empty cup and I touched her arm. “Yes?”

“Listen, I... uh, I might be getting a call today at any time. Her name is Vera, and she might need some help with lodging. You know Bryan destroyed several high-rises. It’s all over the news.”

“Oh, I know. It’s so sad. There are neighborhoods that can’t even return to their homes. They thought it was a category-two storm and it ended up being far worse. I’m surprised Tri-Tech is still standing. We have so many windows.”

I raised a finger. “Bullet-proof glass.”

“Yes, well, anyway... Vera. What shall I do if she calls?” Tina looked poised to receive my commands. I was so grateful to have her as my assistant. She was punctual, honest, and committed—three qualities I very much appreciated.

“If she calls, you bring me the phone. I don’t care what time it is or what I’m doing.”

“Got it.” She nodded and smiled, then moved on, continuing to fill cups. I sat and studied the papers on the table in front of me. Henry had done an excellent job of putting together an itinerary for the meeting. The items on the list were vital for the company to assess as we entered the fourth quarter, so getting them out while we still had a bit of quarter three to go made sense.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” Henry clapped his hands and started his speech about duty and honor. He liked to remind everyone that what we did at Tri-Tech was far more than just creating security software.

I took pride in the fact that our products made a safer world for everyone. Our anti-hacking code had reduced airline hijackings substantially over the past several years during government testing. Military planes had never been safer. We were already in beta tests for commercial airlines now, and it was only a matter of time before we were able to employ the same technology in trains, buses, and all manner of public transport. After that, perhaps self-driving cars.

Each board member listened intently to Henry, but I had heard it all. I had the ability to sit back and watch their faces. Some of them were surprised by the updates to our progress, while others seemed skeptical. Henry didn’t seem to notice a damn thing. He had trained himself to keep a poker face even when the board fully disagreed and vocalized that dissent.

The sun began to warm the room despite the dimming on the windows, and I loosened my tie farther. I was about to stand and walk to the thermostat to adjust it when Tina peeked in the room, waving a phone at me. I stood to stroll to her instead. “Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, I need to take this call. I’ve been expecting it.” They excused me graciously. They didn’t need to know it was a personal thing. I was CEO of a Fortune 500 company. I could do as I damn well pleased.

After I shut the door, Tina thrust the phone into my hand with widened eyes and mouth agape. “You didn’t say it was Vera Laine Davids.” She blinked incredulously at me and shook her head. “You are full of surprises, Mr. Smith.”

“Thanks, Tina.” I held my hand over the microphone of the handset. “I didn’t tell you because I don’t want anyone to make a big deal of anything. We met on Elbow and she needed a ride home. It’s possible her place got destroyed. I am just helping out.”

“Well, it’s about time you found a nice woman to settle down with, but isn’t she quite a bit younger than you? Or maybe it’s just the makeup. You know they make models all look like twenty-year-olds now. It’s a shame, really, because real women don’t look like that. We age and get wrinkles and love handles.”

“Tina, if you don’t mind?” I held the phone up and gestured away from her.

“Oh, goodness. Yes, don’t keep Ms. Davids waiting.” Tina grinned and sauntered off, and I walked away from the board room windows to have my call in some semblance of privacy. I ducked into the CFO’s office, shutting the door so no one who passed by would hear me talking.

“Vera, so glad you called. What’s going on?” I knew what was going on. I’d already called the city and found out that her building, along with several dozen more, were closed until inspections and possible renovations could be made. It was the reason I had prepared Tina for the inevitable call. I was just thankful that none of Vera’s other contacts had answered her calls or been able to help, because she’d certainly called others to gain assistance.

“Lucas, uh... Mr. Smith. Fuck, I don’t know what to call you.” She sounded exasperated.

“Just call me Luke.” Her politeness drew a smile to my lips. I really liked this woman

a lot.

“Uh, so, my building is shut. I can’t get in until they do inspections. I saw the windows to my unit all broken out, so even when they allow people to start reentering the building, everything I own will be wet or destroyed.”

“So, you need a place to stay for a while?” It gave me the greatest pleasure to be in a place to help her, not only because that was my nature, but also because I believed our connection was genuine and I wanted to see where it went.

“Uh, if that’s okay? I don’t want to put you out or anything, and I’m really not one to take handouts, but I can’t really go home. I can’t imagine living in a hurricane shelter, and I still can’t reach my roommate to find out what she’s doing.”

“Vera, honestly, I told you it was no problem. I have more money than I know what to do with. I own a house the size of Texas, and it’s lonely sometimes. I’d love to have you for as long as you need, longer if you’d like.” I found a pad of sticky notes and a pen on the desk and prepared myself to write. “Where are you? I’ll send a car to you and I’ll have my housekeeper make the arrangements for you. You must be starving too. What do you like to eat?”

“Really, Luke. I can just Uber there if you tell me the address.”

“It’s a gated community, so you wouldn’t have access, and it’s really no trouble.”

I heard some movement in the background. Then I heard her saying something that was muffled. “I’m at 287, South 91st Street. A little bistro a few blocks from my apartment.”

“Good.” I scribbled the address on the paper and put the pen back, ripping the sticky note free. “I’ll send a car right away. I’m not sure who will drive, either Hector or

Emmanuel. Neither one speaks very good English, but I assure you they are both perfect gentlemen, and you'll be perfectly safe. When you get to the house, Ella will greet you. Her English is a bit broken as well, but you'll get along fine with her. Just do me a favor and try to relax a bit. I have a few things to take care of at work, but you'll be in good hands."

"I really can't thank you enough, Lucas."

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“Luke.” I smiled. “I’ll see you after a few hours.”

We said our goodbyes, and I hung up and headed straight for Tina’s desk. She would do the busy work of making the arrangements while I finished the boring meeting. It would still be boring, but I had something to look forward to now. I couldn’t wait to get home and help Vera settle in.

11

VERA

The car pulled through the gates after the driver typed in the security code. He drove slowly down the wide street, passing massive homes with sprawling laws, landscaped with towering palms and hybrid, tropical plants. The Southwestern architecture was reminiscent of my time in Albuquerque, a few squat troubadours interspersed with the Spanish mission-style homes. I marveled at each and every one of them. It felt like the driver took it slow just so I could gawk.

The car pulled into a driveway at the very end of a cul-de-sac, the largest home on the street. The driveway was lined with rock gardens, out of which sprouted giant elephant-ear philodendrons and more native palmettos. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Despite the hurricane and several palms that were missing leaves, it looked like his property hadn’t been touched. I almost felt like I was in the wrong place. Lucas was too laid-back to live in a place like this.

“Here, Miss.” The driver had hardly spoken to me except to confirm my name, which was challenging because, as Lucas had warned me, he hardly spoke English at all.

“I think we’re in the wrong place. Is this really Lucas Smith’s house?” I craned my neck to look out the window at the spindly palm tree overhead.

“This right house. I help you.” Before I could protest, he was out the door and around to the passenger side. He opened the door for me, then went to the trunk and retrieved my luggage. I hadn’t had a chance to even stop by my place and collect any clothing, so all I had were the few sundresses and bikinis I’d packed, along with the dirty sweatpants and other comfort clothes I had for traveling to the island. I didn’t know what I’d do for clothes, but I had no choice.

I stepped out of the car, and the driver was there immediately, handing me my bag. “You go.” He gestured toward the door and smiled, and I nodded. I hoped the housekeeper’s English was better than this guy’s. I didn’t even know his name.

Following his orders, I headed for the front door, unsure whether I should knock, or ring the bell, or just walk in. This was apparently my home for a short time, but I had never been here, so it felt odd. My quandary was settled for me, however, as soon as I stepped on the porch. The door was whisked open by a gorgeous Latina with dark brown eyes, full ruby lips, wide hips, and long, curly hair.

“Oh, Ms. Vera, so glad you could make it.” She stepped aside, drawing her arm inward and bowing. “Come in, come in.”

I breathed a sigh of relief that I could at least understand her and walked past her. The inside of the house was more breathtaking than the outside. I could see straight through the open concept living-dining area to the back wall of the home where a crew of men in construction gear were actively removing boards from the floor-to-ceiling plate-glass windows. My jaw dropped at the sight. Lucas’s entire home was furnished in hues of white and black. A leather sofa curved around an open fire pit, a stainless-steel vent hood hanging above it.

“Here, here, let me take things.” The housekeeper, whose name I’d already forgotten, took my suitcase from my hand and continued in her improper English. “You go to living room. I take your bag upstairs. I be right back.” Her smile was gorgeous. I could tell she was very happy working for Lucas. She gestured with her hands, swatting at me, and I let go of the suitcase and clutched my phone and purse to my stomach as I wandered deeper into the home.

I stood by the back windows watching the violent ocean waves crashing on the beach just over a row of short hedges. The water was still stirred up by the powerful winds trailing behind the storm. I didn’t know how long I stood there, but soon the housekeeper was back and I was being ushered into the kitchen area to eat. She placed a bowl of some sort of soup in front of me, and I would have been rude not to eat, so I spooned a bite into my mouth and groaned at how delicious it was. She grinned and clapped, then turned her attention to other things.

When I was finished eating, I pushed the dish away and the housekeeper took it. As she did, I said, “I’m sorry, I forgot your name.”

“I’m Ella. Now you come with me. I show you room.” She took my hand and walked faster than I thought someone of her stature could walk. I kept up with her just fine, my long legs out-matching hers. She led me up the winding staircase to the second floor where the view was even more fantastic. I watched the waves out the window from the landing while she opened the door to a bedroom then sent me in. “Go, go,” she ordered, “Mr. Lucas be home soon. Freshen up.”

I stumbled into the room, seeing more stunning architecture and décor. Lucas had a unique taste—mostly modern with touches of the Pueblo art I’d had the pleasure of viewing on trips to Arizona and New Mexico. I noticed an alarm clock on the nightstand, some men’s clothing stacked on a hope chest at the foot of his bed, and a novel on the dresser. This wasn’t a guest room. This was Lucas’s room. My suitcase sat on the bed. I turned abruptly.

“This isn’t right.” I heard a door open and shut downstairs and craned my neck over her shoulder. “Uh, I think this is Lucas’s room.”

Ella looked concerned. “No, this your room. Mr. Lucas say this your room.” Her hands flicked at me, urging me to enter the room, but I planted my feet. I glanced at the closet, a pair of shoes on the floor just by the door.

“Something tells me you’re mistaken.”

“What you say?” She scrunched her face up and shook her head. “I do what Mr. Lucas say. This your room.”

Confused, a little overwhelmed, and frustrated, I resigned myself to the fact that I would have to wait until Lucas got home to settle this. I smiled and thanked her, and she left the room, but I didn’t move except to turn and study the room a bit more fully. A plain, white, cotton comforter lay across the bed, the headboard made of black leather. The bed was nestled between two windows, a third on the opposite wall. A television hung on the wall in the far corner, and to my right was another door, presumably the bathroom.

Lucas had expensive taste, and I felt like if I touched anything, I’d tarnish it somehow. Not that I was poor, by any means. I had grown up with money, but once I ventured out on my own, I had gained a new appreciation for how much things cost, and I valued things a lot more fully now. The painting on the wall would have cost at least three modeling shoots’ worth of income for me. It wasn’t something that escaped my attention.

The door opened, and I turned, expecting Ella, but saw Lucas. He wore a suit, tie untied and draped around his neck, the collar of his shirt open. The stubble on his face spoke of how long it had been since he’d shaved, a few days, maybe, but it seemed fuller since I’d seen him this morning.

“Hey, Vera. Ella told me you were here. I hope you’ve found everything to your liking.” His eyes took me in then landed on the bed where my suitcase lay. “You haven’t unpacked? Oh, and we’ll have to go shopping to get you a few things.” He strolled in, walking straight to my bag and unzipping it. “I can help if you’re tired.”

I didn’t want to be rude, but he had to know this was not okay. “Uh, Luke.” I cleared my throat and joined him, standing by the bed. He pulled a stack of my clothes out of my bag, and I picked them up, putting them back in. “I think there has been a mix-up.”

Lucas picked them back up and looked at me with confusion. “No mix-up.” He set them back on the bed and grabbed another stack of clothes.

“Yes, well this looks like your room.” I bit my lip. I really hoped he didn’t find me rude. He had offered such a generous gift of hospitality, and I knew better than to upset him.

“That’s because it is.” He grinned and set the second stack of clothes next to the first. Then he turned and took my shoulders. “The guest room had a window break during the storm, and the crews are still repairing it. It will be a few days before it’s fixed up. I thought you could sleep with me because... well... because of what happened on the island. If you’re not comfortable, I can sleep on the couch.”

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His touch was so gentle, his eyes so calming. How could I resist him? And how could I move into a man's house—who lived like a king in the lap of luxury—and make him sleep on the couch?

“This has to be like a twelve-bedroom house.”

“Four bedrooms, actually, but I had the wall taken down between two of them and I turned it into a home theater. It looks just like a movie theater.” He winked at me. “Really, I don't mind sleeping on the couch.”

“No. That's nonsense.” His touch on my arms reassured me. He hadn't done anything to pressure me or make me feel like he was unsafe. “You're not sleeping on an uncomfortable couch. I'll be fine.”

I wasn't positive I'd be fine, but I was certain I didn't want to make him feel like I was being ungrateful. I renewed my smile and glanced around the room. “So, where will I put my clothes? And you're right about shopping. I will need a few things.”

Lucas let me go and pointed at the far end of the dresser. “I had Ella clear out that half. All for you, for as long as you want it.”

I felt awkward when he said that, as if I had chosen to move in with him and not been forced against my own better judgment to take charity from someone. None of this was how I saw my life going. I was supposed to be happily engaged to Daven, not moving in with a man I just met. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Now, I have to head to my home office to finish up a few things.

I'll be ready for dinner at six. We can sit by the pool after that, if you'd like."

I was taken by surprise when he leaned in and kissed me. I wasn't expecting it. His lips were firm and delicious, captivating my full attention and making my entire body swoon for him. And then he was gone, and I was left in shock. If he wasn't so perfect, I might have been offended, but his attitude, the way he carried himself, the way he cared about me—it screamed "Marry this man now."

I couldn't help the stupid grin on my face. I touched my lips to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

12

LUCAS

I typed the email and hit Send, hoping to hear from the recipient no later than this afternoon, though given the circumstances, it was likely it would be days. Vera had been with me now for four days, and while she was adjusting just fine, I knew she wanted her things. We had a trip to the store to buy her a few things she'd need, but she refused to let me pay for anything, stating that she had some savings to fall back on. I doubted it was enough, but I didn't push the issue. I loved that she was fiercely independent.

A knock at my door pulled me out of my thoughts, and I looked up to see Henry entering. He stopped in multiple times a day to discuss work or just shoot the breeze, never using the phone or intercom if he could help it. I never knew why he showed up, but I never felt bothered by it.

He walked in and sat down across from me without speaking, though his eyebrows were raised in an "I am going to lay down the law" sort of expression. I paused my work to speak to him, relaxing back in my chair.

“What brings you by, Henry?”

“Well, Lucas, I just got off the phone with Barbra Carey.” He picked at his teeth with his tongue, a rude habit he had.

“Yeah? And what did she want?” Barbra was a board member, and a very vocal one at that. She had expressed her distaste for my work ethic multiple times. I’d have rather she just been cut from the board, but she had excellent ideas at times, and besides, she kept me on my toes.

“She wasn’t happy you ditched the meeting for that phone call.”

“Well, is she ever happy about anything?” I turned my chair, looking out over the city, the ocean as the backdrop. My corner office wasn’t just a perk. It was the throne room of this establishment and I the king. “Barbra needs to remember where we came from and who brought us here.”

“Yes, I agree. And I have no qualms about your skipping out on meetings where you’re not needed, but she has a valid point.” I turned back to face him as he continued. “You haven’t sat through an entire board meeting in months. The board thinks you aren’t taking things seriously.”

I chuckled. “I take this company more seriously than anyone. I just hire the smartest people to work hard for me so I can play hard. That’s all.”

The red light on my phone lit up, indicating that my line was ringing, but Tina always screened calls for me to ensure I wasn’t bothered. I looked at Henry with a serious face. “I’ll make sure I’m at the next meeting, okay? This company wouldn’t have gotten where it is without me being me. I built it from the ground up, and I’ve never neglected anything that truly needed my attention. You know that as well as I do.”

Henry shifted in his seat, looking more at ease. “We just have to keep the board happy. Since we went public, we both risk losing our positions.”

“But not our patents or shares. Remember that. They can do nothing without us. We still own everything.” My phone chirped, and Tina’s voice came across the intercom.

“Sir, an Edward Pinson for you.”

I pressed the intercom button and said, “Thanks, Tina.” Then I held up a finger to Henry. “One sec, Henry.” I lifted the receiver and held it to my ear. “Mr. Pinson, I’ve been waiting for your call. I sent a few emails.”

“Yes, I’m sorry.” The man sounded tired, his rumble voice barely audible. “I apologize for keeping you waiting, Mr. Smith. I wasn’t aware that one of our tenants had connections to you.”

“Not to worry. I just need an update on the building. Ms. Davids is eager to hear about her possessions and her home. How soon can she move back in?”

Henry’s eyes pried at me. I could tell he was going to ask a million questions when I was off the phone. I hadn’t mentioned any names to him, but I had told him I had met someone on the island, and Tina had name-dropped at lunch yesterday when asking how things were going. He hadn’t questioned me then, but we hadn’t been alone.

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“Sir, I’m sorry to tell you that the building must come down. The storm left structural damage that authorities say can’t be easily fixed. We have to have it demolished and rebuilt. It will take months.”

Part of me wanted to smile, seeing how Vera would be forced to stay with me longer. I quite enjoyed her company. Part of me, however, felt bad for her. Everything she had in life was in that place, and after her breakup and subsequent job loss, she was destitute.

“I see. Well, I will send an email with instructions, but I’d like all of her things brought to my house. Can you handle that?” I avoided Henry’s furtive gaze and turned my chair to look out the window again.

“Of course. I’ll wait for your email. It will take a few days. We have a lot of units to go through.”

“No problem. She’s staying with me, so she has all she needs. I’ll wait to hear from you. Thank you.” I hung up and took a deep breath, preparing for the lecture.

“Who was that?” Henry asked. I could hear him shifting. When I turned back, he was leaning over my desk.

“Uh, that was the landlord at Ms. Davids’s building.” I offered nothing more than what he asked and already knew. I should have sent him out of the room for the call.

“And by Ms. Davids, you mean Vera Laine Davids? The one Tina asked you about yesterday?” His eyebrows peaked.

I rolled my eyes at him. He always did this—annoyed me by prying into my personal life. Yes, we were friends, but sometimes, he took it too far. I deserved my privacy.

“Yes, Vera Laine Davids. I met her on the island and her home was destroyed. She’s staying with me.”

“You mean, living with you?” He scowled. “You are so irresponsible sometimes, Luke. Isn’t she like twenty years old? You’re old enough to be her dad.”

I chuckled. “No, she’s not. And I’m not that old. And yes, she’s living with me—for now.”

Henry’s brow looked like a plowed pasture, the furrows so deep you could get lost in them. “You just met her on Elbow and she’s moving in with you? You were there what, four days ago?”

“With all due respect, Henry, this is not your business, and I know what I’m doing. Thank you. Now, if there is nothing else, I’ll get back to work.”

Henry didn’t budge. His hands remained firmly planted on my desk, his body leaning toward me precariously. His scowl turned to concern, and he huffed. “I don’t have to remind you that women like to come after you for your money, do I? I mean, Rochelle was a disaster. You brought her right into this office on day two and paraded her around like she was the queen bee. Tiffany took your charge card and maxed it out on the third date. Remember that? What about Sarah Snyder? Or did you forget that she claimed to be pregnant with your child, only to pressure you into marriage, then claimed she lost the baby?”

“I didn’t marry her, and I had a prenup ready to go. Besides, none of those women meant anything to me. I am just a confident guy. I paraded Rochelle around because she was gorgeous. I wanted to make you jealous. I knew she was a fling. Tiffany had

my permission to shop. What good is money if you can't spend it? When she and I parted ways, it was amicable. And you're right that Sarah was a gold digger, but I think I knew that before it got to that point. Her scheme was just the catalyst for our breakup."

I stood and shoved my hands in my pockets. "You worry too much, Henry. I know that you live your life very guarded. I'm confident in my choices. I have nothing to lose. Let me make my own decisions and trust that I know what I'm doing. Okay?"

Henry shook his head at me and said, "Alright, but don't come complaining to me when she breaks your heart and leaves you."

He left me alone, and I was certain he hoped his last words made me feel afraid of her, but I wasn't. Everything I was doing for Vera was out of the kindness of my own heart, and I was giving it freely, asking nothing in return. If she wanted to stay, I would be the happiest man alive. If not, I'd move on like nothing ever happened.

I just hoped it wouldn't come to that.

13

VERA

I held the door open as the movers carried box after carefully packed box of my things into the house, along with Midge's. She was in the other room, watching how they organized things to make sure everything was placed carefully. Our sofa and my bed were ruined, along with a few other items like the end tables, coffee table, and a few dressers. Most large items had been left to be collected with the demolition of the building. What had been brought was mostly Midge's, and Lucas instructed the drivers to deliver them to her new apartment.

“Thanks, guys,” I called as they left the front door for the last time. Midge and I would sort through things, and she’d pile what was hers into the pickup truck she had borrowed to take to her new home. The drivers waved and climbed into their truck, and I retreated into the living room to see Midge digging through an open box.

There were twenty-seven boxes in all, plus several laundry hampers full of things. A few potted plants had been neatly wrapped in cellophane—I couldn’t keep them now, so Midge would have to take them. And despite my tendency to live in a way that was minimalist, there were a total of ten trash bags full of other odds and ends, bedding, more clothes, shoes, and towels.

I collapsed onto the couch next to Midge and sighed. “This is going to take forever. A whole apartment’s worth of my life just packaged up and tossed into a stranger’s living room.”

She chuckled. “It could be worse. Your mom could be here.” Her elbow to my ribs was kinder than her words, and kinder still than my mother, who had called a dozen times to tell me I should move home.

“Ugh, thanks for the reminder.”

Midge leaned into the box of things, mostly kitchen items, and sorted through them. “This one is mostly yours, but I did find my whisk and a few coffee mugs. These guys did a great job of packing things.” She pushed her items across the floor and closed the box. I picked it up and carried it across the room to set it apart from the rest so we’d know when we were finished.

“I may as well just toss all of this and start over.” Midge was never one for difficult tasks. It was likely the reason she had become a model to begin with. Her beauty spoke for itself, and posing in front of a camera wasn’t hard work at all. “I’m not cut out for this.”

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“Nonsense. You’re going to help me or I get all your fancy jewelry when I find it.” I threw a pillow out of one of the laundry baskets at her, and she caught it and threw it back.

“The hell you do.” That lit a fire under her, and she pulled another box off the stack and sat back down to open it. When I joined her, carrying a box of my own, she clicked her tongue at me. “You know, this guy is pretty loaded. You sure you know what you’re doing?” She reached into the box and pulled out her iron, setting it beside the other items that were hers.

“Yeah, I do.” I hadn't even opened my box and I was tired. I was with her for a split second—the idea that throwing it all out and starting over was very appealing. Until I realized that the entirety of my life was in these boxes and without some of these essential things, I’d be out thousands of dollars when I did get a new place. As it was, I’d have to buy a new bed.

“You sure? Because I’ve had a couple of sleazeball boyfriends. You need to be careful. He has money and power, and that turns a man into a monster. Just promise me that if you try leaving and he stops you, you will call me and I can come and take you away while he’s gone?”

I smiled. It was sweet of her to worry about me. I’d have moved in with her at her new place except it was a studio and she could handle it on her own. She deserved the next step in her life as much as I did. “Thank you for caring. I swear, if it’s too much, I will call you.”

“You remember that guy Shaun? He wanted me to do breast implants and offered to

pay for them. Then he told me if I did them he'd make me a Sports Illustrated swimsuit cover girl. He might have had the money for the implants, but he had no connection to Sports Illustrated. He was making porn, and I about blew my career."

"You got free boobs, though," I said, poking her in the chest playfully. I laughed hysterically, and she scowled at me in her normal fashion.

"Funny." She dug into the box again and continued talking, half buried in kitchen items. "My point was you never know people sometimes. Just be careful."

"It won't be long. I've got a lead on an apartment, and I have a few job interviews coming up. My savings will cover everything for two months. I had enough for three, but now I'll have to cover rent and deposit and pay for a new bed. After that, hopefully, income from a new job will replace that, and I can be back on my feet."

I tore open the box and stared into it. It was mostly cosmetics and hair accessories, combined with beauty tools—hair dryer, flat iron, curling irons, hot rollers. All of them belonged to Midge. "This one's yours." I pushed it at her, and she looked into it briefly, then tossed her toaster and whisk into it.

"Thanks. So, you don't want to keep the sugar daddy around a while?" Midge folded the flaps of the box shut and picked it up, carrying it over and setting it by the door.

My cheeks burned. I avoided eye contact with her as I pulled another box off the stack and sat down with it. He was not my sugar daddy. Lucas was anything but that. I did like him, and I felt horrible for using him to have a place to stay. I hoped he didn't think for a second that I wanted him to be my sugar daddy.

"What?" Midge plopped back in front of her open box and continued riffling through it.

“He’s not that. You know? It’s complicated.” I tore open the box and noticed it was office supplies, probably from my desk in my bedroom. I looked through a few things and decided it was mine, then closed the flaps again. I just didn’t have the emotional energy to stand up now, to carry it to the finished stack.

“Well, that’s sort of what he is. You have no relationship with him. You fucked him. He’s giving you everything. Classic definition of sugar daddy, if you ask me.”

“Midge, stop saying that.” I covered my face with my hands and hid from her. I knew what it looked like. To anyone in the outside world, they’d think either he was throwing money at me to manipulate me, or I was throwing sex at him to get his money. I didn’t believe either of those things were true. Lucas was too kind of a man to do that to me.

I really liked him a lot, though, and I didn’t want him to think I was using him for his money. I hadn’t asked him for anything except to make good on his offer to let me stay here. I had no intention of asking him for anything if I could help it. And besides, we hadn’t had sex since I moved my things in here. If I were going to keep him as a sugar daddy, sooner or later, he’d start expecting that. I had no intention of putting out just to keep a place to live.

“I’m sorry, Vera. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just call it like I see it. If you don’t want people to think that, then maybe you should move out sooner rather than later.” She stopped sorting through her box and turned to me. We hadn’t even touched the mountain of work and we were already having this discussion. I’d hoped to at least make it to dinner.

I dropped my hands and laid back on the sofa. “I am screwing my whole life up. I can’t believe Daven was such a jerk. Now look at me. I’m at it again, throwing myself at the first guy who comes along. I thought it would be a one-nighter at the resort, and he turned out to be Mr. Perfect. I have no home. The hurricane made sure

of that. I have no job. Daven made sure of that. What am I supposed to do?"

"Okay. There is one way to tell whether this is actually something that might legitimately work out, or if you are working with an egotistical maniac who wants you for sex. Have you had sex?" She stared me down like I was in a police investigation room.

"I mean, we had sex on the island, and then again on the plane ride." I shrugged. "He brought me home on his private jet so I didn't have to wait until commercial airlines opened back up."

"Fuck's sake, girl." Midge rubbed her temples. "And since you've been back in Miami, have you slept with him?"

"Define 'slept with him'."

She grimaced. "Fucked. Have you fucked him since you got back?" Her intent gaze wasn't letting up. I squirmed uncomfortably.

"We're sleeping in the same bed, but we have not had intercourse. Though he does kiss me when he gets home and when he leaves." She wilted, shaking her head and groaning. "What? I feel bad that he's being so nice and taking such good care of me. I'm supposed to refuse his kindness? What if he kicks me out? Where will I go?"

Midge pushed her box away and scooted around the sectional to sit next to me. She lifted the box off my lap and set it on the floor, then pulled me into her arms. "Vera, you have a sugar daddy. It's only a matter of time before sex is what he wants instead of just kisses. He's letting you adjust to the idea. The fact that he wanted sex on that plane in exchange for the ride..."

I opened my mouth to protest, but Lucas walked in the front door and dropped his

briefcase and jacket on the table in the short entryway. “Ladies! I see all the things have arrived.”

I straightened and pulled away from Midge. “Yes, thank you.”

“Midge, it’s nice to meet you. You can stay for dinner. I’m just going to go up and change, and I’ll come back and we can eat. I can help with the sorting if you’d like afterward.” Lucas walked over to me and leaned over the back of the couch, kissing my forehead as he was accustomed to doing.

“Thanks, I think I might take you up on that.” Midge leaned away from me, and as Lucas walked away, she scowled at me.

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“Great. Give me fifteen minutes.” He jogged up the steps and out of earshot, and Midge shook her head again. She looked like a fucking bobble head.

“What!” I snapped, not meaning to.

“Girl, you’ve got it bad. You’re leading him on bigtime. You need to check out of hotel de rich man and put some space there... But fuck, is he fine.”

I snickered at her. “You should see him naked.” We both laughed, and my phone rang. I reached into my pocket and pulled it out to see it was my mother again. Third time today. “It’s my mom. I’m sorry.” I stood and walked away from the pile of boxes toward the back door that overlooked the pool, and a bit farther out, the beach. “What, Mom?”

“Well, that’s no way to greet your mother.” She was in a foul mood already, and it matched mine.

“I’m sorry. How are you?”

“I called to find out how you are, dear. Has your friend helped you find a place? You said his name was Lucas?” She was using her emotionally manipulative tone, the one I’d grown so used to that I knew how to use it against her.

“Yes, Lucas Smith. Tri-Tech? He’s a good man, Mom. He’s helping me.” I knew the name would mean nothing to her, but the company name would strike fear in her heart. Her worst fear for me was that I would end up with a man exactly like my father. Honestly, I worried about it too. No girl wants to marry a man who'd use her

and discard her for a younger version when he's done.

"Oh, dear... oh, sweet girl. You need to come home. You need to let me buy you a plane ticket. What have you gotten yourself into?"

"Mom, dinner is ready. Okay? I have to run. I'll call you tomorrow. I'm safe, okay? I know what I'm doing."

"Vera—"

I hung up before she could say another word. Between Midge and my mother, I was beginning to think the worst of the only person who had helped me in the past week during the worst time of my life. I didn't want to think of him that way. I didn't want this goddamn fairy tale to end. I needed more time to just absorb the goodness before I was thrust back into reality where life sucked and men were pigs.

I put on my brave face and headed to the dining room to join Lucas and Midge for dinner. She'd see. He wasn't a sugar daddy. He was a really great man who was quickly becoming a great friend.

14

LUCAS

I had to chase Vera out the door to the awaiting car so she wouldn't be late. I didn't mind it one bit. I enjoyed having someone to care for. It made life a lot less boring. Besides, following her gave me the best view of that amazing ass, and the yellow pencil dress she wore accented her curves well. I had to tell my cock to back off because everything this woman did drove me mad with arousal, but I didn't want her to think for a moment that it was all I was after.

“Sir,” Hector mumbled, opening the door for us. We both slid into the back seat of the car and he shut the door after us. When he climbed in, he asked me in Spanish where to go, and I offered the address. Vera looked surprised that I knew how to speak another language.

“That’s hot.” She grinned.

“What?” I feigned confusion just to keep her talking. I liked that she liked it.

“You speak Spanish?”

“I speak several languages, but yes, Spanish is one of them.” I angled my body to face her and propped my elbow on the back of the seat, resting my head on my palm.

“Do you? Speak other languages, I mean.”

“Nah, just enough to order a drink at a restaurant or to ask where the bathroom is when I travel.” She chuckled and turned toward me too. Her expression changed, growing more serious. “Can we talk?”

“Sure, what is it?” I could see in her eyes that she was pained in whatever it was she was thinking, but I didn’t think I’d done anything wrong. I was confident she just needed someone to talk to. She’d been through a lot, and I wanted to be there for her.

“Uh, well.” She gave a deep sigh. “I wanted to ask you, now that the windows in the guest bedroom are finished, if we could have separate rooms.” She sucked in a breath and started talking faster, like she was trying to explain away her feelings so she didn’t upset me. “I mean, you’ve been so amazing and you’ve helped me out so much. Thank you, I mean, that’s so huge. But I just feel like since we’re not really in a relationship, it might be more comfortable for both of us if I had my own room.”

I didn’t wince at the comment about our not being in a relationship, but I was

disappointed by that. I had hoped that by now, she'd have gotten the idea that I really liked her and wanted her around. But I had to respect her. Still, my heart felt withdrawn, and I changed the subject.

“So, you got this interview on your own? That’s amazing. I’m sure you’re going to nail it. Did you send headshots to them?” I probably could have been more subtle about the shift, and I realized it when she grimaced and her eyes dropped. She didn’t answer me, and I wondered what she was thinking. I waited a few moments and added, “You’re going to be great, Vera. Your work will speak for itself.”

“Were you listening to me?” When she looked back at me, I could read the annoyance in her eyes. She didn’t look angry, but I could tell I had upset her. She scooted away from me a little, and my hand dropped to the leather seat, warm from her body.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I heard you.” I collected my thoughts carefully. I hadn’t been the greatest with the ladies in the past, not for lack of trying, but that wasn’t the reason I was still single. I had high standards—ridiculously high—so if a woman approached me and wasn’t off-put by my awkwardness, she likely failed my litmus test.

“I’d like to have a separate room if I’m going to stay any longer.” Her soft expression returned, and I took her hand and cradled it.

“Vera, I like you, and I think you like me too. Do you see us going somewhere? What I’m trying to say is, when you look at your future, do you see us working out? Having something?” I fiddled with her fingers, touching my thumb to each fingertip and then lacing our hands together. I knew how unconventional it was, the way she ended up at my house, but she hadn’t voiced any actual concern with it until now. The last thing I wanted was to make her upset or uncomfortable.

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She bit her lip nervously. “If I’m being painfully honest with you, I don’t know. Lucas, you’re an amazing man, really. You’ve been so kind and patient. You went out of your way to help me. The sex is incredible.” She blushed as she said that and looked down for a moment as she regained her composure. The car went over a bump, startling her, and her eyes jerked back up to meet mine.

“I agree,” I whispered, tightening my grasp on her hand.

“It’s just that I got out of a really serious relationship only a few weeks ago. We would have been engaged—or so I thought. I really like you so much. I do.” She bit her lip. “I just need to take this slower. Okay?” Her eyes pleaded with me, and I had to relent. I didn’t want to pressure her, but I didn’t want her to make this choice, either.

“As you wish.” I kissed her hand just as Hector called to us.

“Here, sir.” The car stopped, and Hector climbed out, leaving us alone for a moment.

“You’re going to do well today, Vera. We’ll work the rest out tonight.” I squeezed her hand again, but she didn’t look any happier than before I’d agreed to her request. I slid out the door when Hector opened it and held my hand out to help her out. Vera climbed out and straightened her dress. She lingered next to me for a moment, as if waiting for something.

The mixed signals she gave confused me, but I offered her a kiss on the forehead nonetheless. “Go get ’em.” She turned to walk away, and I smacked her butt, drawing a chuckle from her. She glanced over her shoulder with a wicked grin and

disappeared into the building smiling madly.

I shook my head. I didn't know what to think of her sometimes. Hector held the door for me, and I glanced up at the marquee above the door before climbing into the car. In a few clicks on my phone screen, I had the website for the agency pulled up. I'd never heard of them, but if Vera was interested, it had my vote of confidence. She needed some good things in her life now, and I was going to make them happen for her as much as possible.

Hector got back in his seat and pulled the car out into traffic, and I dialed the number and waited as it rang through. I had to go through a series of automated menus to get to a real human, but when I did, it was the secretary to the CEO.

"Diamond and Fink, you've reached Mr. Fink's office. What can I do for you?" The woman's voice was curt. She probably dealt with a lot of garbage calls. I didn't blame her for taking a tone.

"Hello, my name is Lucas Allen Smith, CEO of Tri-Tech. I would like to speak to Mr. Fink right away, please."

The woman muttered something and cleared her throat. I could hear her typing furiously. "Uh, Mr. Smith, I'm so pleased for you to call us. What may I tell Mr. Fink is the nature of your call?" She clearly knew who I was. Not all people did, so I was impressed already.

"You can tell him that he will want to hear from me. I might be looking to invest in his agency."

More typing accompanied her saying, "Certainly, Mr. Smith. I'll just put you on hold for one second."

The line clicked over and beeped. I waited no more than a minute and Fink was on the line.

“Mr. Smith, this is Brandon Fink. To what do I owe the pleasure?” His tone was much more pleasant. Funny how dropping the company name always did that to folks. They knew what we’d done for the tech industry simply by the brand we’d built.

“Well, Mr. Fink, I hear Vera Davids has come knocking on your door. That shameful termination of contract can’t be allowed to follow her. Do you understand what I mean?”

The man sighed and cleared his throat. I wasn’t sure what he’d heard about the breakup and how she lost the job, but I knew modeling was a cutthroat business. Vera deserved her shot, even if her ex was an asshole.

“Mr. Smith, you can imagine my shock. I, uh, well, Ms. Davids is slated for an interview, but given the recent termination of contract, I’m not certain the board would be open to?—”

“Would the board be open to twenty million? An investment to ensure you surge to the top of the crowd and stay there. Think about it for a moment.”

“Mr. Smith, I assure you?—”

“Fifty million? You name the price and I’ll sign the check. Vera was wronged, and she needs assurance that the business has her back.” I waited as I heard the dollar signs registering in his head. I’d thrown around money before, never quite to this extent, but I wasn’t hurting for anything and Vera was. All my hard work and diligence to build my empire had to amount to something.

“The board will be pleased to accept your generous donation.”

“You mean, anonymous donation. Vera cannot know. Ever.” I looked up at Hector, who smiled back at me and then refocused on the road. “Are we clear?”

“Yes, yes. Thank you.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Fink. I’ll have my assistant send over the paperwork today, and your money will be transferred as soon as you approve.” I hung up without another word.

I would win Vera’s heart if it was the last thing I did

15

VERA

I got the job. I couldn’t believe that at my very first interview, I scored the job with excellent benefits and a terrific pay rate. It was my most desired firm, too, and I had walked in and blown them away. There was a skip in my step that hadn’t been there in months. I couldn’t stop smiling all night as Midge, Lucas, his partner Henry, and I all ate dinner and sat by the pool.

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Midge and I had swum for a while, but I was tired, and though everyone had drinks, I passed on them, knowing I had a shoot for new headshots first thing in the morning. I knew how puffy my face got after a night of drinking, so I opted not to. Instead, I sipped cranberry seltzer and splashed around a bit until Midge pulled me in closer, where the guys, seated on their lounge chairs talking, couldn't hear us.

“So, are you moving out now? You have a job. You cutting him off?” She was obviously talking about Lucas and her stupid assumption that he was my sugar daddy. I wanted to argue with her and protest it, but she was convinced. I wasn't, though. I knew if that was the case, he would never have agreed to separate bedrooms.

“When it's time. I don't have money coming in yet. Just a job. If you're so worried about this, why can't I just stay with you?” I tried to swim away, but she followed me.

“You know Daven will just fire me like he did you if I help you. I can't take that right now. I lost almost everything too.” I took the stairs out the north end of the pool, and she followed. A quick glance at the guys talking and I noticed Henry was standing, probably to leave. We'd had a good night celebrating my new job, and it was nice meeting him, but I was ready to sleep too.

Midge and I left wet footprints around the end of the pool and picked up our towels. Henry walked up to us and shook my hand. “It was really nice meeting you, Vera. Congrats on the new contract. Good luck!”

“Thanks, Henry. I look forward to seeing you again sometime.”

He grinned, checked Midge out, then walked away. She snickered and turned to watch him walk away. I smacked her and hissed, “He’s married.”

“Look, girl, eye candy comes in all sizes and varieties, and that man is sweet.” She winked at me as we strolled over to where Lucas still sat.

“Ready to go in?” he asked, turning to rest his feet on the cement.

“I think so.” I nudged Midge. “Midge is just leaving too. I’m kind of tired.” I hoped she took the point. I grabbed my towel and began drying off. She glowered at me and said her goodbyes, heading in to change before Ubering her annoying way out of my life. I was over her badgering about Lucas.

“Everything okay between you two?” Lucas grabbed the corner of my towel and dabbed my face just below my right eye. I smiled and rubbed at the same spot. I probably had mascara streaked on my cheek.

“Yeah, she just gets annoying sometimes. It’ll be fine.” I shrugged it off and turned toward the house. “I know we have a bit of work to get me moved over to the guest room, and I’m exhausted. Can we go up now and do that?” Starting toward the house, I glanced over my shoulder at the despondent gaze Lucas cast in my direction.

“Yeah, sure.” I could tell he was discouraged and I knew it was my fault. I hadn’t meant to upset or sadden him. I just carried this constant weight around with me that I was using him or that he was being too charitable. We had great sex on the island and on his plane, but we fell into this rhythm like an old married couple without dating or even getting to know each other that much. It was all too much, too fast.

He followed me up the stairs to the bedroom and shut the door behind us when we entered. I grabbed my suitcase and laid it out on the bed, the easiest way to transport all my clothes from one room to the other. But he grabbed my hand and stopped me

from unzipping it.

“No, please.”

I thought he was protesting my moving out of his room. I had prepared myself for this. I had a million and one reasons it had to happen. I still had no other place to go, but I was even prepared to get a hotel for a few weeks while I found my own place if necessary.

“Luke, I need to?—”

“I just wanted to say that you’re my guest here, and you’ve already made yourself comfortable in this room. Let me take the guest bed. Okay?” He smiled and pushed the hair out of my eyes, slowly curling my blonde strands around my ear. “It is just the polite thing to do.”

My heart flooded with warmth. I wanted to kiss him, but I wanted to have self-respect too. He was so fucking amazing. How could I not fall helplessly in love with him? But my heart was still too hurt, too in love with Daven.

“Uh, thank you?” I phrased it as a question because I couldn’t believe he was serious.

“I’m still going to use the closet and shower in here. We’ll just sleep separately like you asked. Is that okay?”

He was asking me for permission to do that in his own home? I coughed and cleared my throat. “Uh, yeah, that’s okay.” I perched on the side of the bed, towel wrapped around my wet, bikini-clad body until he grabbed his shorts to sleep in and left, but not before he kissed my forehead and said goodnight.

When he was gone, I marveled at what sort of man he was. I thought I should pinch

myself and make sure this wasn't some fairy tale dream I'd wake up from and have to tell my mother I was really homeless. How had it been my luck to wind up in this billionaire's house with him doting on me?

I showered quickly then dressed and climbed into bed. It felt lonely without someone there with me. I'd lived with Daven for a while and gotten used to his sleeping in the same bed with me every night. Since our breakup, I'd only spent one night alone, but I slept on the couch at my apartment. It was the night before I flew to Elbow Cay and met Lucas.

I tossed and turned for a while unable to sleep, and when I realized if I didn't sleep soon, my face would have dark circles, I broke down. My pride wasn't too fragile to admit I'd made a mistake. I pulled my sleepy self up from my bed and trudged down the hall to the guest room. I figured Lucas was sleeping already, so I knocked softly, but he called to me and it surprised me.

"Come in." I opened the door slowly and saw all the lights on, Lucas leaning against the headboard of the guest bed, reading. He pulled his glasses off and laid his book and the glasses on the nightstand. "Is something wrong?"

"I can't sleep." I put my bottom lip out. I was pathetic. I was the one who had wanted the separation, and here I was, ready to ask him to come back.

"Would you like a glass of warm milk? Maybe a sleep aid?" He turned and draped his feet over the side of the bed, ready to go to action.

"Can you come back?" I huffed out a sigh. "I am so used to someone sleeping with me, and I don't think I can sleep if there isn't someone there. I'm too nervous about tomorrow." I made that last part up so I didn't look as pathetic.

Lucas smiled, but it was a concerned smile he gave me.

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“I’m sorry you’re having trouble sleeping, Vera. I’d be happy to come back.” He rose and turned off the lights, leaving his glasses and book lying on the table, and took my hand. I allowed him to lead me to the master bedroom where he climbed into bed and gave me my space, but by then, my stupid emotions were welling up.

“Luke, can you hold me?” I slid beneath the covers and curled up facing him. He looked apprehensive and cautious but did as I asked. As he scooted closer to me, I stretched my bottom leg out and curled my top leg over his body, my arms folded and tucked between us. He held me to his chest and I breathed him in. He smelled like a faint hint of his cologne and pool chlorine.

“Is this better?” he asked, smoothing his hand up and down my back. I nodded but felt something new stirring. I shouldn’t have asked him to come back. I should have taken a sleep aid or drunk whiskey—anything. This was headed down a dangerous path and I was feeling my body stir.

“Uh, yes.”

“You don’t sound sure.” He kissed my forehead, and it pushed me further into the abyss of arousal.

“I’m sure.” I bit my lip. Smelling his cologne, lying against his bare chest, the feeling of his heart beating against my body drove me wild. I closed my eyes tight and tried to push away my lust, but my body still wouldn’t shut down. I squirmed, wanting to be comfortable, but I noticed his body was wide awake too—and hard, and pressed against my thigh.

“I, uh,” he muttered as my leg rubbed against him in my vain attempt to be comfortable.

I turned my face up to look at him and our eyes met. The train had left the station and there was no making it return. I craned my neck until our lips touched softly. He wasn’t pushy, not like last time. Last time, I’d told him we wouldn’t use a condom “next time”, but this was next time and we were most certainly using a condom. I kissed him harder, reaching down to push my hand inside his shorts. The elastic band pinned my wrist to his body, but I managed to find his swelling dick and stroke it.

“I thought you were wanting to take it slow.” He nibbled on my ear and his words tickled my neck.

“I thought you were upset that I asked you to stay in the other room.” I rolled my weight into him, and he got the point and rolled to his back. I had to remove my hand from his pants, but he removed them anyway. It gave me time to grab a condom out of the nightstand drawer where I had stashed my collection. When I rolled back to him, he was stroking himself and watching me.

“You’re going to have to be a lot more naked than that.” He took the sleeve and slid it beneath the pillow. I yanked my shirt off hastily and then slid my shorts and panties off too. My body felt supercharged. I hadn’t been expecting to feel this way with him tonight, but I didn’t want it to stop. The longer I spent with him, the more I realized how much I liked him—and how awful Daven had treated me. This man in front of me was a fucking legend and I was the queen of self-sabotage.

I rose to all fours and took hold of his cock, holding it upright as I licked him. He closed his eyes and twitched each time my tongue drew a circle around his girth. His hand reached up around my thigh and slid into my crack. He found my moisture and played in it, pushing his fingers through my slit but unable to penetrate.

“Mmm,” he groaned as I stroked and sucked him. When I relaxed my throat and let him sink deep into me, he grabbed my ass and squeezed. He liked it a lot. So I did it again, over and over, taking him deep into my throat. “Shit... slow, now... Go slow for me, baby.” He coaxed me by pushing my hair back. When I angled my head so I could see his face, he pulled his fingers from my moisture and put them in his mouth.

I pulled his cock out of my mouth and lifted myself up, turning to ask, “Sixty-nine?”

He snickered and shook his head. “I want something different.”

Luke guided me to straddle him, and I draped myself over his chest and kissed him. He tasted like my essence, and I liked it. Salty and sweet, the flavor only lasted a short time before I had kissed it off his tongue. He smeared my wetness across my pussy, making the mess worse than it was before, but I enjoyed it. When he started pushing the silky mess across my ass, I knew what he wanted.

“Yeah?” I asked him, and he nodded. He held his dick up so I could position myself, and then I began to sink onto him. It burned, stretching me and making me clench my teeth. It hurt, but I knew once he was in me, it would be better than normal sex.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just fuck me.” I moaned as I sank. At once, he thrust up as I settled down, and his entire length pushed into me as deep as he could go. He grunted in pleasure and grabbed my hips, beginning to thrust. “Ahh...” My pain slowly turned to pleasure, and it was overwhelming.

“Fuck, you’re hot. God, your ass. You feel amazing.” He pumped up as I rode him, and I knew he would make me come. I tried to massage my clit, but his hand beat me to it. He pushed two fingers into me, his hand squeezed between our colliding bodies, and with his thumb, he massaged me. It took exactly three seconds of this before I

was putty in his hands.

“Luke... oh, fuck. Oh, God.” I came so hard, he had a hard time thrusting into me, and when he released, I felt it hot and hard inside me. I hated using condoms. Skin on skin was so much better, and this was the perfect idea. “Shit... Oh, my God.” I groaned as he slid in and out of me.

“Your ass feels better than your pussy. We should do this more often,” he whispered as I started to relax. He pushed into me one last time and then pulled out—no mess, except my own cum. I collapsed to the bed, exhausted and ready to sleep. I had been an idiot for turning him out of his own room. And I’d be an idiot if I stayed here very long at all. The sex was so amazing, I was going to wish I’d never met him when I had to leave him and break both of our hearts.

16

LUCAS

Hector’s eyes flicked to the rearview mirror more than a dozen times as we drove from my home in South Beach toward the office. The first few times, I thought he was watching me to be confident that I was content. He was thoughtful like that, and I appreciated his friendship. But when I noticed at the stoplight that his eyes lingered there, I began to think something was the matter.

“Everything okay, Hector?”

“Creo que nos están siguiendo.” Hector spoke in his native tongue, as he sometimes did with me when we were alone.

“Being followed?” I asked him, opting to stick to English, as my Spanish wasn’t nearly as good as his. I turned over my shoulder and looked at the line of cars waiting

behind us at the light. I didn't see anything amiss, but then I hadn't been watching the whole way. "Which car?" I studied the cars, trying to place any of the faces in them. I didn't recognize anyone.

"El sedán negro dos autos atrás."

Two cars back, I couldn't see due to the car directly behind us, but I decided to keep a watch on it as we continued toward the office. Hector flowed with traffic, and he was right. The black sedan was definitely taking every turn we did. The driver didn't even bother to use their blinker as they navigated the turns. When I was convinced the car was, in fact, tailing us, I turned and faced forward again. We were almost to the office and I was a bit unnerved.

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With the business we were in, we made some enemies, but never anything that made me worry about my safety. Though, with the rollout of our new cybersecurity initiatives for public transportation, we'd caught heat from the FAA and certain airline representatives. Still, none of that was as serious as having someone follow me.

I tried not to let it bother me much. Hector turned into the parking garage, where he pulled to a stop near the elevators. I thanked him for giving me a ride and climbed out of the back seat, phone in hand. When the black sedan that had been trailing us pulled into the garage, I was ready. I snapped a photo with my phone's camera and saved it. The driver passed my car and exited the garage on the other side of the building, out onto the street, and vanished.

Hector climbed out and stood next to me. "You had photo?"

"Yeah, I got it. I'm going to see if my security guys can find out who this clown is." I pocketed my phone and patted Hector on the shoulder. "Have a good day, man. I'll see you this afternoon."

Hector smiled broadly and clutched his cap in his hands. My staff was easy to please and wonderful to work with. Hector was one of my favorites, willing to please and eager to do so. I left him standing by the car as I entered the elevator and rode it up to the offices, letting the question of who was following me tumble around in my head. I didn't have service in the elevator, but as soon as I stepped off the thing, I sent the picture to Frank, my head of security.

"Good morning, Mr. Smith." Tina's cheery voice greeted me before she joined me on

my walk toward my office. Her pointy heels clicked on the floor of the foyer until we stepped onto the new carpet. “You have a board meeting in twenty minutes, followed by a call with Señor Bertruccio from Portugal about the security patch. After that, you?—”

I waved her off with a flick of my wrist and she silenced herself. “Get me Frank on the line, will you? I have something to discuss with him. And thank you, Tina, for making sure you are on the ball with my itinerary. I’m good on this morning’s details. Let’s chat after the board meeting, before the conference call with Portugal.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll get Frank for you.” She turned and headed back to her desk, and I continued to my office. Before I even sat down, my line was ringing through. The phone chirped until I pressed the intercom button. “Sir, Frank on line one.”

“Thanks, Tina.” I loved how efficient she was. Time was money, and she knew how I didn’t like to waste either of those things.

I sat and picked the receiver up. “Frank?” I waited for his grunt acknowledging that he’d heard my voice, then I continued. “That photo I just sent you, can you clean that up a bit, maybe toss that plate number at your detective friend? That car was following me on the way to work this morning and I want to know who it is.”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll get on that immediately, and I’ll get back with you as soon as I hear something.”

I knew I could count on him. “Thanks, Frank.”

I hung up and put the quandary out of my mind for the moment. It would only distract me from the focus of today’s board meeting. Henry was likely already waiting in the conference room, and I promised him I’d be at this meeting, so I collected my files and headed that way. I found him reclining at the table, scrolling his phone as he

waited. He perked up when I entered.

The view of the sky out the stretch of windows revealed a gloomy day. We were expecting a few thunderstorms this morning that would give way to sunny skies later today. It made the room less cheery, but also less blinding with so many windows. Henry wore his usual suit, but his coat was draped over the chair next to him.

“Luke, buddy, this meeting is going to knock the socks off the board. Our investors are pleased. We have major growth projected for the fourth quarter because of the deal with Portugal.”

“Yeah, I have to talk to Bertruccio later. I think we’re going to make this one a slam dunk.” I dropped my files on the table and headed straight for the Keurig to brew a cup of coffee.

“I still can’t believe the damn code you wrote in college when you were nothing more than a hacker is paying off so well.” Henry joined me at the coffee station and selected his own K-cup, holding it in his hand while I used the machine. I poured my cream and sugar into my cup as the coffee started to stream from the spout. I loved the smell of fresh-brewed coffee.

“I can’t believe you can’t believe it. I mean, we were hacking circles around everyone back then. You know that. The professor had to ask us for help so many times.”

“Yeah, I know.” Henry chuckled. “But most people never thought we had it in us. Hackers don’t amount to anything but thieves or maybe CIA agents.”

I rolled my eyes at him and waited for the last few drops of coffee to fall into my mug before I lifted it to my lips. Henry immediately lifted the lever and took out my pod to replace it with his. I turned and leaned on the counter, staring at the raindrops that began to speckle the window.

He was right. No one had expected us to do as well as we had, and it came down to a major hack I'd done on some government software—by their order, of course. They'd selected me from a list of potential candidates. Most of my rivals went to CalTech or MIT, but I had bypassed those flashy names and chosen Georgia Tech, mostly because it was close to home.

I left Henry to make his coffee and sat down at the table, ignoring the files I brought. My mind was elsewhere yet again. Prepping for the board meeting wasn't necessary because the topic was something I knew inside and out. I reminisced for a moment about my college days and how long ago that seemed. Then I thought of Vera and how she was roughly the same age I was when I finished college. That seemed like a lifetime ago to me, but she didn't seem that young.

Henry had cautioned me about dating a woman so much younger than me, and I disagreed. I felt two souls should be free to fall in love no matter how far apart in age they were, so long as they were both consenting adults. Love is love, and age is just a number.

I stared out the window and wondered what Vera was doing right at this moment. Her photo shoot was supposed to have been outdoors, but maybe they moved it inside or they would reschedule for this afternoon. I almost reached for my phone to text her and ask what she was doing but the board members started to file in. One after another, they found their places at the table and started small talk, the hottest topic being the weather.

I got a text from Frank that said, Private investigator... more details later. I scowled. Who would have hired a private eye to do a workup on me?

"You ready to start?" Henry gripped my shoulder. I felt him standing behind me. I had to focus on the meeting first, and then I could call Frank. Whoever was looking into me wasn't going to be happy when I started looking into them.

VERA

“Alright, now chin up, look toward the ceiling over there.” The cameraman pointed behind his left shoulder and then aimed the camera at me. I did exactly as he requested, praying he’d let me take off these damn heels soon. The heat of the lights—no fans to cool me off—was making me so sick to my stomach that I might hurl any second.

“Excellent, a few more.” The camera shutter clicked furiously, and I tossed my hair. I hadn’t done a shoot for *Vogue* in months, but they needed someone to do a perfume spread. It required several shots of me with the bottle in hand or dressed in the right color. I thought it would be nice when we were finished.

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The setting they put me in was elegant, a French settee with red velvet cushions and gold gilt framing. A large, deep-pile throw rug beneath the settee was soft, burying my feet in its tendrils, but the best part was the massive painting—a real Degas, long hidden in a museum somewhere but rented and brought out for this shoot.

“Superb job, Vera. We’re done for today.”

I relaxed, my eyes flicking to where my new manager usually stood watching. We’d done several shoots over the past few weeks, one of them getting rained out and rescheduled, but this was the first one he hadn’t attended. Unlike Daven, he paid me only peanuts and liked to micromanage my shoots. I was relieved that he hadn’t come. I felt very ill today and didn’t want to deal with his bossiness too.

Immediately kicking off the offending shoes, I picked them up and carried them to my dressing room. There were a dozen or more staff members floating around, the head of marketing forVogue, and a few people who helped the photographer, but I knew none of them. That was a part I disliked too, that while working for Daven, I had made a few friends. Here, however, shoots were solo, and each client was new—untilVogue.

I shut the door behind me and strolled to my desk where I dropped my earrings—borrowed from Tiffany of London—and shoes. My phone indicated that my mother had tried calling me seven times. I scowled at my phone and unzipped the red-sequined dress. The open back and deep V in the front made me feel like I was already undressed or hadn’t worn anything at all, anyway. I slid the straps off my shoulders and lowered the flimsy thing so I could step out of it, then draped it across the clothing rack.

My feet hurt, and my back too. My day was over, and I wanted to go home, make a cup of soup, and curl up with a good movie. But my phone buzzed and lit up. Mom was calling me again. I knew she'd only continue to call until I answered, so I picked it up and took a deep breath to prepare myself before I put the phone to my ear.

"Hey, Mom." My bra was buried in my bag beneath my clothes, and I pinched my phone between my shoulder and ear as I dug it out.

"Vera, dear, I've been calling all afternoon. Why haven't you answered?"

"Mom, I'm working. I had a shoot for Vogue today. Okay?" I attempted to get my bra in place and quickly realized that it would take two hands and no phone at my ear. So, I turned my phone on speaker and laid it on the counter.

"Oh. Well, good for you. I'm sorry." My mom, apologizing? I could have pinched myself to make sure this wasn't a dream.

"What's up?" I hooked the bra and reached for my jeans, tugging them on as she continued.

"Well, I just got some shocking news and I think maybe you need to sit down."

My heart sank. "Is it Dad?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that, dear."

My mom was such a drama queen. I pulled my T-shirt out of the bag and pulled it on over my head. She probably called to tell me her dog peed on her favorite plant out back or something. Everything was a bigger deal to her than needed to be.

"Well, what is it?" I sat, not because Mom told me I should be, but because I had to

put my socks and shoes on, which I did while she began her rant.

“Vera, dear, that man you’re living with is purely the devil.” I rolled my eyes. “Do you know he’s working with governments in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean? He has business dealings with terrorists, dear.”

“Mom, seriously? What, did you have him investigated?” She’d done it before, not to any man I dated, but to a woman my father was seeing. She was ridiculous and I was upset.

“I am worried about you, Vera. You need to come home. I can’t have you dating someone who does business with horrible people.”

“Mom, he creates cybersecurity systems for governments as part of his job. It’s literally his job.” I picked up my phone and turned off speaker phone and put it to my ear again. “Why are you stalking him?”

“I’m not stalking, dear. I’m protecting you. And this guy is bad news. I’m telling you, you need to come home. I’m having Javier prepare your old bedroom. We remodeled it so it isn’t as kiddish. You’ll like it. I have fresh hyacinths every morning. I know how much you love those. And if you want we can?—”

“Mom, I’m not coming home. I’m successful here. Alright? So, please stop telling me what to do.” I hung up and buried my face in my hands. She was relentless and I was over it.

I finished dressing and took an Uber back to Lucas’s house. The gate code was always a bit tricky because the driver wasn’t allowed to know it, so I had to have him wait for me to hop out and enter it, then climb back into the car. Moments later, I’d be delivered to the house and forget the slight embarrassment anyway. This time, I tipped the guy extra for being kind to me after a frustrating afternoon.

As soon as I walked in the door, I dropped my bag and headed for the computer. I was waiting on an email from a rental agency that helped people looking for housing find the perfect apartment. They'd promised to help place me right away, and they even found several complexes that worked within my budget. The storm had made it more difficult to find something, but I was hopeful. I sat down at the computer and logged into my email and found that they had replied.

The email revealed that they had one apartment that would be available in as little as two weeks, and for someone as qualified as me, they would almost guarantee the place would be mine if I wanted it. I was elated, a huge smile stretching across my face as I read the email. I couldn't wait to tell Midge. It was only a studio, and it wasn't in a very good neighborhood, but it would be mine and I'd be on my own again.

"What are you doing?" Lucas asked as he walked in the door.

He dropped his briefcase by the door next to my bag and walked over to me. His kiss on my forehead came with eyes that scanned the computer screen and thus my email. The way he studied what I was doing made me shrink inside myself a little. The happiness I'd just felt was overshadowed by his joy to see me as much as my browser was overshadowed by him. I clicked the X and closed the window, but it didn't stop me from feeling conflicted. He'd been so nice to me, and I was about to let him down. I knew it would.

"I got an email from a rental agency. They found an apartment that is up for rent in a few weeks. I think I might take it." I tried not to act too happy, but I really was. Moving out of my mom's house had been a huge step for me. It was natural to take the next step toward true independence by getting an apartment without a roommate.

"Oh," he said, the emotion in his voice tangible. "So, you're really moving out?" Lucas straightened and loosened his tie. He always looked handsome in a tie. It

distracted me from the crushing guilt I felt, but only for a split second.

“I—” I frowned. “Yeah, I really am.”

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“Okay, well if that’s what you really want.” He kissed my forehead and lingered for a moment. “Ella will have dinner soon. You can get washed up if you need to. I’m going to put my trunks on and sit by the pool afterward.”

As he walked away, I felt the wind sucked out of my lungs. I appreciated his help and care so much, but things were just moving way too fast. I still had Daven on my mind almost daily. I wasn’t ready to jump into this, and it had been thrust upon me. If only we could slow down, maybe get to know each other a bit better while my heart healed. But I could tell Lucas had no relational frustrations or hang-ups to get over. He was ready to dive into something beautiful with the right person. I just wondered if I was actually that person or if he got caught up in the whirlwind of great sex and would later regret it. I hated hurting him. I actually liked him a lot, and I felt like we had bonded. I cared about him, but I just wasn’t ready.

My mom was wrong. He wasn’t a dangerous or horrible person. He was amazing. It was just happening too fast, even for me—rebound girl. I sighed and turned off the computer, then slunk to the dining room to wait for Ella to serve supper. I didn’t know how to show Lucas that I still wanted him, just not this fast, and part of me feared that when I moved out, he’d just move on. Maybe I was doing the wrong thing, but Midge’s jokes about my “sugar daddy” were unbearable. I needed this more than anyone knew. My independence wasn’t about proving something to my mother. It was about proving something to myself.

Vera pushed her food around her plate with her fork, barely eating. Ella had made fried tomatillos and they were delicious. We'd had them once since Vera came to stay, and she loved them that time, so I wasn't sure what was wrong. I ate in silence, watching her sulk. My questions were returned with curt answers in a somber tone, and she didn't make eye contact, so I didn't push her. For all I knew, she'd had a horrible day at work and didn't want to talk about it.

As I sipped my wine, I studied her. She was as beautiful as ever, though her skin was more sun-kissed than normal. Her hair, usually framing her face softly, hid beneath a thick black headband that also covered her ears. Her eyes looked a bit puffy, whether from lack of sleep or maybe dehydration, I didn't know. I didn't ask, either. I just ate my dinner and enjoyed the fact that she was still here. It saddened me that she wanted to move out, but I had to respect it. I didn't own her.

"Luke?" Her eyes turned upward to meet my gaze. I swallowed my bite of food and replied to her.

"Yeah, Vera?"

"You paid Mr. Fink to get me that job, didn't you?"

I shrugged and looked down at my plate. "Guilty as charged." The way she'd said it made me feel like she was upset with me for meddling, and maybe she should be. I should have just trusted that she could get the job on her own merit, but the man had all but told me they wouldn't be hiring her. "Why? Are you unhappy with me?"

"Uh, no. I just wanted to say thanks. After the scandal with Daven, I didn't figure I'd get another job in the industry." I looked up at her. "Thank you."

I smiled and shook my head. "It's what I do, Vera. Besides, they needed an investor and it paid off. You are exactly what that firm needed, and look—in six months, your

face will be on the cover of *Vogue* and that bastard who broke your heart will be furious that he let you go.”

Vera smiled, but it looked forced. I could tell she was still a bit sad, and I wanted to fix it, but money only fixed some things. Not everything could be remedied by me, and I had to accept that. She was, however, the most perfect thing that had come into my life in years, and I wanted to make sure she felt that way.

“Are you okay?”

She looked down at the plate again. “Just not feeling well. I think I might lie down early.”

I was surprised to hear she’d retire early. I’d hoped to swim a bit, but I could see she wasn’t feeling it. I didn’t want to swim alone, however, so maybe I’d just work on the Bertruccio code for a while. The developers needed specifics from the client in order to continue working on the product backlog, and with our fifteen-minute scrum scheduled for tomorrow morning, it was imperative that I flesh things out.

“I’ll just sit in the guestroom and work for a while, then. You want me to bring you anything when I come to bed?” I was elated when she agreed that we could share the same bed even after she’d kicked me out. I didn’t mind sleeping in the other bed—it was comfortable—but I hated sleeping there knowing she was in my bed. I wanted to be with her.

“No, I’m okay. Thank you. Goodnight,” she muttered as she rose and left the dining room. I looked at her plate, barely touched. The entire dinner had been cold and awkward, not at all like normal. I knew I had allowed my disappointment to show through when she told me about the apartment, but I didn’t think it would upset her that much.

Frustrated with myself for letting her down, I retired to the guest room, taking my briefcase with me. I pulled out my laptop and settled on the bed. The code wasn't as difficult as some of the others we as a company had produced, but the client had a few particulars I needed to make sure were communicated. The work took me only a few minutes rather than the hour I thought it would, but before I finished, my phone rang.

"Frank? What do you have for me?" It had been a week since Frank told me he'd look into things. His buddy at the Miami-Dade sheriff's office was a great resource.

"Alright, so like I told you, the guy was a private investigator. He was hired by Ms. Lorna Davids from Honolulu, Hawaii. She hired him two weeks ago to look into you. I was able to determine that she paid him quite a large sum to follow you, though he admits to only doing that the one time. He looked into Tri-Tech financials and reported to her only truthful things. You shouldn't have anything to worry about. This wasn't a government spy or anything. Looks like Ms. Davids is watching out for her daughter."

"Hmm." I couldn't believe Vera's mother hired a PI to investigate me. "Did he say why she hired him?"

"He said only that he was doing his job, and telling me what he was doing broke his company's confidentiality."

"You threw money at that, I assume?"

"Yeah, twenty grand, but he talked." Frank was just like me and he knew how to get things done.

"Did you get her number?" I picked up a pen and opened my palm, phone held between my shoulder and ear. I had nothing to write on, but the pen in the top drawer

of the nightstand and my hand would suffice for now.

“I did.” Frank relayed the number to me, and I scribbled it on my palm. When he hung up, I debated calling her immediately or waiting, but something this important couldn’t wait. She had crossed certain boundaries that I couldn’t allow, and I was sure if Vera found out, she’d be upset too. Maybe she already had and that was why she was sullen at dinner.

There was no hesitation as I dialed the number and waited on Ms. Davids to answer. It rang through the first time, so I called again, refusing to leave a voicemail. When she did pick up, it sounded like she was out of breath—maybe I had interrupted her workout or something.

“Yes.”

“Lorna Davids?”

“Yes, just—what do you want?” I could tell she was a real peach, probably why Vera hated taking calls from her so much.

“Ms. Davids, my name is Lucas Allen Smith.” The line was quiet. I could almost hear her heart pounding as I let the reality of who had called her sink in. There was a bit of background noise, a dog barking and a vacuum. I thought maybe she’d hung up, but the yapping continued. “Ms. Davids, I called to find out why you had a man follow me.”

“Well, I have no clue who you are or why you think I had someone following you. You must have the wrong number.” The noise behind her got quieter and she sounded more controlled.

“Ms. Davids, I have my means of investigation too. I know you hired a private investigator to look into me. I know who it was, how much you paid, what you required of him, and what he told you. I just want to know why you feel the need to look into me.” I thought I knew why, anyway. If I had a daughter and she started dating, I’d have a man follow those boys around too.

Another long silence was followed by a heavy, breathy sigh. “Nothing is too much for my daughter. Vera is the most important thing in my life, and I won’t allow her to be manipulated and controlled by an evil man. What do you have planned for her, anyway? Do you think just because she is beautiful that you can control her and sell her to what, the highest bidder?”

I laughed. Not a chuckle or a snicker, but a full, outright, raucous laughter that probably highly offended her and pissed her off, and I didn't care. "Is that what you really think of me?" I calmed myself, but I couldn't erase the stupid grin on my face that I was sure she could hear as I spoke. "I have no intention of controlling your daughter. She is intelligent and strong, and she does as she pleases. She is here under my roof because I helped her when the hurricane took everything she had and smashed it to pieces."

"Well, I?—"

"You are wrong. I'm not a horrible person. I'm just a wealthy man who happened to care for someone I just met. Is that a crime?"

I chose my words carefully, not wanting her to have a reason to lash out at her daughter. Vera didn't deserve to bear the brunt of her frustration when it was me who had caused it.

"Well, since my daughter has yet to invite me to come and find these things out myself, I can only use my resources to do so." She cleared her throat. "I would like to come stay for a while and find out exactly who it is my daughter has taken a fancy to."

This woman... I couldn't believe the one-eighty she did. "I'm sure you'll have to speak to your daughter about that. I can't give you permission to invade her life."

"Well... I suppose I will have to use my own means, then. Good day, Mr. Smith. Please do not call me again."

She hung up, and I was left laughing at the ridiculousness of it all. I had done nothing but take care of Vera since the moment I met her and her mother thought I was a crook. I closed my laptop and decided I'd had enough for one night. I wanted to

climb in bed next to Vera and hold her. I didn't know how many more nights I'd have like this, and I wanted to enjoy it while it lasted.

19

VERA

The landlord opened the door—barely. He had to throw his shoulder into the swollen wood to knock it open, and it creaked the entire way. He was proud of his property, but my insides were cringing with every sight I took in. I followed him into the tiny space and Midge followed me. We'd gotten lost on the way to the place and witnessed either a drug deal or a mugging—I wasn't sure which. The streets were littered with trash. They were my first clues that I would hate this place.

“You'll see through there that the bathroom has a claw-foot tub and shower. The pipes squeak a bit, but it's normal in a building this age.” The landlord pointed the way as I ventured further into what I could only call a death trap. The look on Midge's face could only be described as horrified.

Bare wires hung from the ceiling where a fan or chandelier used to hang. Cracks sprawled across the old plaster, piles of it on the floor beneath them indicating they were still spreading. The carpet was threadbare in places and stained, evidence that it hadn't been changed in decades. The kitchen boasted an old sixties-style refrigerator that let out a hum and a stove that looked like it came straight out of the Great Depression.

“This place is twelve-hundred dollars a month?” Midge gawked at the mess and turned on me like a viper. I shrugged and tried not to let my disgust become too obvious to the man who stood to my left. I padded over to the bathroom and opened the door.

“Yes, well that’s the going rate here in town.” The man’s voice faded as I leaned into the small space.

The bathroom was damp, smelling like mold and old socks. The mirror was chipped and fogged. Broken bits of tile scattered around the floor were a hazard for bare toes, and the “claw-foot” tub was a relic that should have remained in a dump somewhere, chips in the ceramic and rust stains to boot. The toilet tank hissed as water constantly trickled through the lines into it. I was appalled.

“Thank you, Mr. Kline, for showing us the place.” I tried to remain positive as I turned around. The older man was balding, his eyes dim with age. His belly bulged a little and he stooped over as he walked. Even his body had seen better days.

“Can we talk about this privately?” Midge asked him, hooking her arm through mine.

“Oh, I don’t see why not.” He winked at us and retreated outside the door and shut it, and Midge attacked me like a large predator.

“Vera, you can’t be serious. This place is horrid. You are not moving in here.” She grabbed me by both elbows and shook me. She was right. It was perfectly horrid, and no one should live here, least of all an up-and-coming supermodel.

“It’s the only one available. The agency said nothing was coming up for several months and the waitlist is like a mile long with everyone who has been displaced after hurricane Bryan.” I sighed. I didn’t want to admit to her what I actually felt. To do so would be to admit defeat, to say I wasn’t as independent as I wanted to be. It meant going back to Lucas and telling him I was either spoiled or entitled.

“Okay, well I’m not letting you live here. This is gross. You could be electrocuted.” She pointed to the bare wires overhead where a light should be.

“Midge—”

“No, you just march right back home to Mr. Sugar Daddy and snuggle up. I mean, I’d rather have a sugar daddy and be loud and proud about it than to live like this. You saw that drug deal going down. Vera, roughing it is one thing. Living in filth is another. You’re used to living in the lap of luxury. You’re not going back to this.” She let go of me and walked to the window, pulling up the mini blinds. Bars braced the outside of the glass as if put there to protect those inside from what might try to venture in from the fire escape. “Aw, hell no.”

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:28 am

She turned to me, shaking her head, and my heart shrank back. She'd done it again, calling Lucas my sugar daddy. It pricked me until I bled—and what I bled was not pretty, indignant self-reliance, fury over being thrown in the garbage by Daven, and determination to prove everyone and everything wrong. I was independent and I would prove it to everyone. I didn't need my mother or Lucas or Daven.

“Look, this is my decision.” I marched over to the door and swung it open. “Mr. Kline, I'll take it.” I blurted the words out faster than Midge could protest, and at the same time, I opened my purse to pull out the deposit money. “Eight-hundred-dollar deposit, right?”

The old man smiled and nodded, stepping into the room and holding out his hand. “I can draw up the papers right now and you'll have the keys before you walk out.”

I beamed, looking around the tiny studio apartment with pride. Midge scowled at me, but she didn't say a word. She knew better. This was my moment to shine, and I wasn't letting anyone steal it from me.

We followed the landlord to his office on the bottom floor courtesy of the stairs because the elevator hadn't been functional in three years. My legs were tired, and I was thankful the apartment was on the third floor, not the eighth. I chose to think of the added legwork as a great way to keep my legs looking in excellent shape. Midge complained that she'd never come to visit, and I chuckled at her.

After signing the papers and getting the keys, I sent Luke a quick text in celebration.

Vera 3:12 PM: Got the place! So excited. Tonight we celebrate!

Then I followed Midge out front to wait for our Uber. Even the distant rumbles of thunder couldn't bring me down now. The place wasn't fancy, but it was mine, and I couldn't wait to make it my own. I just hoped Lucas wasn't as appalled as Midge. If so, I knew I'd have a fight on my hands.

20

LUCAS

We sat on the back patio in the warm afternoon breeze. The sun had crested over the house, leaving us in shade for our lunchtime break from packing. Vera's things were boxed and ready to go across town to her new apartment. I had strong ambivalence churning in my stomach. I didn't want her to leave, and I believe that if she did, the distance between us might mean her pulling away from me. It wasn't insecurity, just a gut feeling that she would be busy and distracted and life would lead her away.

On the other hand, I was so proud of her for owning her independence. I hadn't seen her this happy since we'd met nearly six weeks ago. There was a glow about her that I couldn't place, but it looked good on her, and so did that yellow tank top and the white shorts she wore. I was really going to miss seeing her every day.

"So, tell me about the place. Is it nice?" I took a bite of my sandwich, a tangy panini Ella had grilled up for me. The outside was crisp with cheese grilled right into the crust, while the inside dripped with juice from the tomato and pesto. I'd have to tell her I had a new favorite.

"Well, it's well within my budget." Vera smiled brightly as she ate a potato chip and pushed the hair out of her eyes. "And it's really retro."

I wondered what she meant by "retro" but I didn't ask. To me, retro meant a home that had been decorated to look straight out of the sixties or seventies, but then I was

more than a decade older than her. In order to not make myself look older than I was, I nodded and continued listening as she went on.

“And it’s small, so the summer cooling bills will be low. They have added security, and it’s only a block from the nearest metro station.” Vera sipped her lemonade and watched my face. I knew she wanted my reaction, and I tried to give her the most positive one I could. The ambivalence of her leaving me was still in full, wild swing.

“Well, that’s really great. Have you told your mother?”

Her face dropped and she set the lemonade down. “Not yet. I just got over the fact that she had you followed around. I’m so sorry that happened. She is so overbearing and controlling.”

“Nah, she’s just protective. I understand it. I want to protect you too.”

The breeze blew Vera’s hair into her face, hiding her blush, and she curled it around her ear as she took a bite of her sandwich. We fell into a lull in the conversation, eating and enjoying each other’s silence. My mind wandered to Lorna and her prying. She had to have been either severely mistreated or hurt by a man to have such an overbearing hand in Vera’s life. I pitied her even though I should have been annoyed that she had me checked out.

Vera rubbed her forehead, squinting her eyes. She didn’t look well. Her features flushed, pink tinting her cheeks that wasn’t from embarrassment.

“Are you okay?” I reached for her hand, but she bolted out of the seat and ran to the bush, arching over it as her body heaved. My knee-jerk reaction had me at her side, holding her hair back and talking soothingly to her. “Hey, it’s okay. Yeah, just let it out.”

She threw up her entire lunch and the glass of lemonade too. When she was done, she stayed there, hovering over the bush while I collected a napkin from the table to wipe her mouth with. It had to have been either the heat or something she ate, but she looked green as she straightened.

“You good?” I asked, cradling her lower back as she blew her nose and nodded.

“I think the acid in the lemonade just didn’t agree with me. It’s sort of hot. I’m probably just dehydrated.” She wiped her nose and walked back to the table where she collected her half-eaten food and the empty glass. “If it’s okay, I’m just going to take this to the kitchen. It’s too hot out here.”

I nodded and followed her lead. If she couldn’t eat, I wouldn’t torture her by eating in front of her. We threw our trash out and set the dishes in the sink, then returned to the living room where the stack of boxes sat. The moving truck would come and take most of this stuff to her place in an hour or so, but she had several things she didn’t want the movers to handle.

“Want me to help you with these things? Might be easier than an Uber.” I stood beside her, staring at the pile of bags and boxes.

“Don’t you have to work?” Her gaze turned on me and she cocked her head.

“Yeah, well, they can wait. I own the place.” I winked at her and picked up her duffel bag. “Let me help you out.”

“Alright, thank you.” Her smile was priceless, and I wanted to keep it on her face as long as I could, even if it meant her making a graceful exit from my life.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:28 am

We loaded my car up and had everything ready, but instead of calling one of the guys to drive for me, I opted to drive her there myself. It felt like I was cheating her by using my hired driver to “help” her move. It had been a long time since I drove a car, but she was worth it. I headed across town to the address she punched into my GPS unit.

The farther we got from my place, the rougher the neighborhoods got until we were smack dab in the middle of one of the toughest places in South Beach. She was right. There was a metro entrance right next to her building, a parking garage to boot, but the entrance was covered in graffiti and the garage was abandoned.

I didn’t make a peep as I pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex. Bars covered every window, which made me very uneasy. I saw what she meant by “extra security” because nothing about this place looked secure. “You’re sure this is the place?” I asked her, craning my neck out the window of my parked car to see the high-rise.

“Yep,” she bubbled, “home sweet home.” She was out of the car, snatching up items to carry before I could protest. My body protested, though. Just the sight of the building made me want to run, but I had to give her the benefit of the doubt. I followed her, two boxes in hand, past the elevator to the stairwell where we had to climb two flights by foot rather than the invention created to help alleviate this issue.

“Elevator?”

“Out. Just means more exercise.” She winked at me as she led me upward. She walked right past the seemingly homeless man lying on the first landing with a

syringe on the floor next to him. I wondered whether he was sleeping or dead.

“Vera, I?—”

“Here’s my floor!” She burst through the door and held it for me with her foot. I walked through and followed her farther down the hall. She unlocked a door and walked in, and the instant I saw the interior of this place, I cringed. “Isn’t it great?” she asked with enthusiasm.

“Uh...” I set the boxes on the floor and noticed the wires dangling in the center of the room. “Studio?” I looked around for a bedroom door, but there was only one door, which I assumed was the toilet.

“Yes, I have to buy a Murphy bed or a pull-out sofa. No big deal. I can find one.” She set her things down on the ground and dusted her hands. “We should get the rest.” She was out the door before I could say a word, and I had to follow her.

We carried the rest of the things we’d brought up to the apartment, and when the last item was in place, I finally had the chance to share my concerns. “Vera, this place is... interesting.”

She met my gaze and her smile faded a bit. “It’s mine, though, and I am on my own. I don’t have to use up your money or eat your food. You know?” She turned away from me, though I saw her disappointment with my reaction.

“I never thought you were using my money or eating my food. You were a most welcome guest in my home. I didn’t even want you to leave. I liked you there.”

Vera opened a box and stood staring into it. Her posture revealed that she felt hurt or sad. I hated myself for letting her feel that way, but my concern now was less about her leaving me and more about her safety.

“Okay, look. I really care about you, and I think there is a way I can feel better about all of this.”

She turned to look at me as I continued.

“First of all, promise me that you will still come for dinner, go out with me, try to see what this thing is that we have going?”

She nodded. “Of course. I never thought of telling you I didn’t want to see you anymore.”

I felt relief when she said that, but I had to give her my second condition. “And second, you have to let me lean on the landlord.” I pointed up at the exposed wires. “This isn’t safe. And that plaster could have asbestos in it. It needs to be checked. This isn’t okay.”

She sighed but nodded her agreement. “Fine.”

I took her by the arms and made her look at me. “Then promise me you’ll come for dinner tomorrow night.”

“I will.”

I kissed her forehead and we said our goodbyes, but my first stop would be the management office. They had some work to do or I was going to call the city to have this place condemned.

I tried. I really tried, but the overwhelming nausea had me back at that toilet seven times in less than an hour. I'd hidden just how ill I felt from Lucas because I knew if he knew I felt this way, he'd never have left me alone. I didn't want him to worry, but even more than that, I wanted my privacy. This, however, was miserable and I no longer wanted to be alone. Mom was too far away, and Lucas would just demand I return to his house, so Midge was my only option.

I had no furniture yet, the movers having been delayed. So, I took a blanket out of one of my boxes that Lucas had brought for me and spread it out on the ground, using the duffel bag as a pillow so I could lie down. I dialed Midge's number and it rang through to voicemail. I left a message for her to call me, but the urge to vomit again hit, so I raced to the porcelain goddess and prayed this sickness—whatever it was—would pass so I could just unpack and settle in.

While I was dry heaving, my phone—lying on the blanket where I'd just been—rang. Of course, I missed the call because my body hated that damn lemonade. I no more than finished dry heaving and stood than it came back. I had nothing left to throw up but the stomach cramps continued for several minutes. When I finally felt better and I lay back down, I called Midge again, this time getting an answer immediately.

"Girl, what's going on?" It sounded like she was chewing, which threatened my gag reflex given my current state, so I snapped at her.

"Please, stop eating." I gagged, pulling the phone away from my mouth and trying to calm myself. When I regained my composure, I was pleased to hear no more chewing sounds through the receiver. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sick. I don't want to be alone. Can you come over and help me unpack?"

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“Really? You have the flu or something? Girl, I can’t be getting sick. I fly to Paris next week, you know. I have a huge shoot for Dior.” Midge was the closest thing I had to a best friend following the Daven incident, and I almost cried that she might leave me here like this with no help.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I lay there with my stomach churning, wishing I had peptic syrup or something to calm my roiling gut. My body felt like the excessive vomiting had made every muscle tense and painful. When I looked in the mirror last, it appeared I had even burst blood vessels in my eye from throwing up so violently.

“God, you sound pathetic.” Midge started to ask questions about my symptoms, which I answered in monotone, things like what I’d eaten, who I’d been around, who was sick, but my mind went a different direction.

During the stress of the past few weeks, I hadn’t really paid attention to my cycle, but I knew it was late. I started to panic a little, and when she was asking if I had a fever, I blurted out: “What if I’m pregnant?”

She paused for a moment. I could tell she was holding her breath. Then she answered, “No, you’re careful. You use protection, right?”

“Yes, every single time. I swear it. But...” I bit my lip. It was true I made Daven and Lucas both use protection every single time, except the night I hooked up with Lucas in the first place. I didn’t remember much about that night. I was so drunk I didn’t even remember if we actually had sex or if I dreamed it. I had no way to know if he

used a condom.

“But what, Vera? Please tell me you used a condom every time.” Midge’s tone took on a mothering sound. We weren’t exceptionally close because I had always leaned on my best friend for everything, but with Daven’s double-crossing and that backstabber, Midge was all I had left.

“I swear, I usually am. That first night with Lucas, though... I don’t know. I was drunk.” Really drunk. In fact, I had drunk so much I didn’t remember much of anything from that night.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes with a test. Fuck’s sake, Vera.” Midge hung up and left me alone.

She was right. Exactly twenty minutes later, she appeared at my door with a white paper bag from the pharmacy, stapled shut with the receipt. My hand trembled as I took it from her.

“You realize this will totally fuck your career, right? Like you’re only given so many years with an amazing body, and once you start having kids, that’s done.”

“Thanks for being so reassuring.” I scowled at her and locked the door behind her. “Why do you think I’ve always been so careful?” For the moment, my stomach felt better, though I had no idea when the attack would return. I tore open the paper bag and stared at the small test box, tossing the bag on the ground. “How does this work?”

“How am I supposed to know? I’ve never been pregnant.” Midge tossed her purse onto the pile of my things and walked around with her face screwed up in disgust. “I can’t believe you’re actually going to live here, Vera. I knew you wouldn’t be able to afford a luxury apartment, but this place is really bad, girl.”

“I know. Please don’t lecture me right now, okay? I have enough on my mind.” I ripped open the little box and pulled the instructions out, collapsing on the blanket. Midge sat next to me, careful not to touch the carpet. I read the pamphlet twice before having the nerve to pull the test stick out. It was sealed in a foil packet which was difficult to tear.

I handed it to Midge, and she tore it, then handed it back. “Good luck,” she said as I stood and walked into the bathroom. It was cold, or at least it felt cold to me. I stared at myself in the mirror with horror for at least five minutes before I could even unzip my pants. My mind raced with terrifying thoughts of losing my entire career because of a one-night stand that turned into this awkward relationship which I had no idea what to even label.

My hand shook as I peed on the tiny foam pad at the end of the stick. It said to lay it on a level surface and wait three minutes, so I finished my business and left the stick lying on the bathroom sink. Midge sat scrolling her phone as I collapsed by her to wait. Her videos distracted me for a moment, but the anxious energy I had coursing through my veins made it impossible to pay attention to them for long. All I could do was panic about losing my career over this.

“You worried?” she asked, locking her phone. She rested her head against the wall we leaned on.

“Terrified. I’m not ready for kids. I don’t even know if I want kids.” I chewed my fingernail and tried to keep the tears from flowing. “What do I do?”

“You wait and see. The test is probably going to turn out negative. Your hormones are just screwed up from stress. You lived through a hurricane at the same time your boyfriend dumped you and you lost your job. I think that amount of stress would do it to anyone.” She patted my knee and said, “It’s three minutes. Go look.”

Reluctantly, I stood and walked into the bathroom. I saw the two pink lines before I even got all the way in the door, and my heart sank. I picked up the test and made sure I wasn't seeing things. There were definitely two pink lines there. My heart sank and tears flooded my eyes as I carried the test back and sank to the floor by Midge, sliding down the wall until my ass landed on the blanket.

"Well?" she asked. Her stern tone had that mothering feel again, and the look on her face told me I was about to hear a lecture of epic proportions.

I thrust the test in her direction and she took it. I didn't have to say anything else. I had to have been so drunk I never paid attention to whether he used a condom that first night. It was the only explanation. Daven and I hadn't done anything after my last period. I knew it was Lucas.

"Aw, shit. Sugar daddy is now baby daddy." Midge handed me the test back, clicked her tongue at me, and shook her head. "Honey, you're done for. You know what this means, right?"

"Stop," I wailed, covering my face. I let the test drop to my lap and cried so hard I thought I'd start vomiting again. I covered my mouth with my hand, as if that would stop any vomit from escaping, and sobbed.

"Hey, it's okay. Seriously, you're going to be fine. If he doesn't want it, he has enough money to help with that." I knew she was trying to be comforting, but she didn't know me. I could never do that. "And if he does want it, he has enough money to support you."

"Midge, please." I laid my head on her shoulder and wept. "This is the worst day of my life." I tried not to be dramatic, but things were getting worse in spite of my recent upswing of luck. "I'm going to lose my figure. I won't have any jobs. I'll end up homeless. Lucas will think I am a money grubber or a gold digger. He won't talk

to me ever again. And Mom—oh, God. Mom will freak out. What if she makes me move back in with her?”

“Whoa, Vera. One thing at a time. You have a shoot tomorrow, and your face is going to look awful, so sit up straight and stop crying.” She pried me off her shoulder like a good friend would and patted my cheeks until I snapped out of it. “Your mom can deal. This is real life. You don’t have to keep it.”

“Yes, I do. I swore to myself when I was a lot younger that I would never make my children feel like I didn’t want them. My father was a horrible person and just left me alone. I won’t just throw a baby away because I don’t have the time. I will not be like him.”

“Well, it’s a little different,” she said. “But I understand. Okay, then you have one option. Man up. You made the bed, now sleep in it. Vera, I got your back, okay?” She squeezed me, but somehow, her reassurance just didn’t reassure me. This wasn’t just an uncomfortable bed to lie in. This was a life-altering situation I wasn’t sure I could handle alone.

But here I was.

Alone.

22

LUCAS

Three days had passed, and I was miserable. Having Vera in my house had changed the entire atmosphere of the place. She made me happy to come home in the evenings because I knew someone would be there to greet me. We had dinner together where once I'd eaten alone every night. But most of all, it was the nighttime when I missed her most. Her warmth beside me in bed had made me decide that having a permanent partner was something I desperately wanted.

I picked up my phone to call her but thought better of it. When she had declined my dinner invite the other night in favor of resting after a long day of work, I 'd taken the hint that she wanted space. I was stupid to have thought that inviting her to stay with me after knowing her for three days was a good idea. Henry was right. No good relationship started that way. She wasn't mine. She never had been. I had been dreaming.

"Why such long faces?" Ella set a bowl of tomato soup in front of me along with a plate of grilled cheese. They looked heavenly, and her concern was comforting.

I looked up at her and smiled. "It's 'Why the long face?'" I corrected her. "And I just miss her, Ella."

Ella pushed the soup toward me. “Eat. It make you feel better.” Her polite smile and nod were her way of reassuring me. I could have asked her to eat with me. We weren’t exactly close, but she was friendly enough. Still, it wasn’t Ella’s presence I missed.

“Thank you, Ella. I’m just not feeling very hungry this evening.” The food didn’t even smell good, though it was one of my favorites.

“You like this food. You like swim. You like reading book. You go do thing you like and you find life go back normal now.” Her broken English and thick Spanish accent were so comfortable I hardly noticed them anymore. She as a permanent fixture in this home—I just wanted Vera to be another permanent, but much more intimate, fixture.

“Thank you. You’re right. I need to do those things I enjoy.” I nodded at her, and she offered a cautious and concerned smile before she shuffled away. Vera was the only thing I could think about, but I dipped the grilled cheese sandwich into the soup and took a bite anyway.

The more I thought about Vera, the more I wanted to make sure that even if she didn’t choose to continue seeing me, she was happy and well-cared for. I stewed over that damn apartment and how bad a state of disrepair it was in. I couldn’t let that slide. No one should live in a home like that, especially not someone as kind and loving as Vera.

So I finished eating as quickly as I could, then I set my dishes aside. I pulled out my phone and did a little research. It only took me a few moments to locate the number of the management office for the apartment she lived in. The superintendent of the building had not been in on the day I stopped there to let them know of the issues, and I had promised to give them a call when I had the chance.

I dialed the number, and it only took a few minutes to get through their automated system. A younger woman answered with a cheery voice. She sounded like she was eating something. It was that time of day, after all.

“Yeah, hi, this is Mr. Lucas Smith. I stopped in the other day to talk about some issues with an apartment where my friend is staying. The superintendent was not there. Does he happen to be in now?”

“Oh, hi, Mr. Smith. Yes, the super is in today. Would you hold for a moment, and I can transfer you?”

“Yes, thank you.” I listened to the cheesy elevator music they had for people on hold and chewed the inside of my cheek. I wondered how many other apartments in that same building were as in bad a shape as the one where Vera lived now.

The super picked up the line and said, “Yeah, what can I do for you?”

“Mr. Kline, my name is Lucas Allen Smith. I stopped by the other day to visit a friend who just moved into your building. I am concerned about the state of the apartment she is renting and I wanted to discuss with you the repairs that are needed to the building.”

I waited for a response but the line was quiet. “Mr. Kline, there are bare wires hanging from the ceiling and cracks in the plaster. This is not only not safe. It could be dangerously toxic. Has the plaster been tested for asbestos?”

“Look, buddy. Your friend, Ms. Davids, has signed the rental agreement and is bound by its terms. She saw the place before moving in and agreed to rent it. If you have a problem with that, you’ll just have to talk to her.”

“But Mr. Kline, I?—”

The man hung up on me and the line went dead. I was furious. I punched in the number to the main desk again, hoping to reach the same woman and talk some sense into her, but the line rang through. They must have had caller ID or something so they could screen calls. I paced the kitchen, staring out the window at the pool. Vera would be so much better off with me at my place than in that damn apartment, being stubborn and refusing my help. I just didn't know how to convince her of that.

I had spoken with her mother previously, and I knew how much her mother cared. If I couldn't get through to her, then maybe her mother could. It was a long shot, and it was risky too. I knew Lorna didn't like me much, but certainly, a mother would want their child in a safe place, even if that safe place was with someone they were less than amicable with.

I searched my call history for Lorna's number and called her, waiting as the phone rang seven times before she answered it.

"Mr. Smith, I believe we handled all of our business the other day. What possessed you to call this time?" Lorna's tone was harsh and impatient.

"Well, we both have a common interest." I sat back at the table, bouncing my knee. I knew she could get through to her daughter.

"What's that?"

Ella came in to carry away the empty dishes and smiled at me politely. I continued my conversation as if she weren't even there. "Well, it's your daughter's safety."

“I’m listening.”

“She moved into her own apartment. She didn’t even tell you because it’s literally a death trap. It’s in this horrible neighborhood. There are live wires hanging from the ceiling, bars on the windows, cracks in the walls. But the worst part is that the landlord won’t fix a damn thing. If you talk to her, you can get through to her. She needs to come back to my place and stay where it’s safe.”

When my speech was finished, I hoped she’d agree. I waited with bated breath, fingers crossed the pendulum would swing in my direction.

“Well, you are right on one count, sir. My daughter doesn’t need to be living in that condition. If I had known, I’d have sent for her sooner. Thank you for communicating this dire situation she’s in. I will handle it from here.”

“So, you’ll tell her to come back to my place?”

“No. I’ll do no such thing.” She huffed out a sigh. “What don’t you understand about this? You are no good for Vera. Men like you are horrible. Women should never have to suffer the likes of some wealthy businessman who throws his money around to get what he wants. You are done manipulating her. She will come home to Hawaii to live with me, and you’ll never see her again. Not if I have anything to do with it.”

She hung up, and I was gutted. I didn’t know why I thought that might work. She really did hate me for no reason. I raked my hand through my hair and growled out my frustration. I had to convince Vera that her apartment wasn’t safe, and I had to do it before Lorna showed up.

VERA

I'd been busy all week trying to get my place in order. I still didn't have a bed, so I was sleeping on an air mattress in the corner of the room, but my dresser had arrived and I'd put away my clothing and organized my kitchen too. It was finally starting to feel like home. Even the morning sickness was getting easier to deal with. I found a home remedy of peppermint oil and candies, and that made the nausea at least tolerable. I no longer heaved my entire meal into the trashcan every time I ate, so it was working.

I sat on the air mattress watching videos on my phone, snacking on crackers, when someone knocked at my door. The only people who knew where I lived were Midge and Lucas, and both of them would have called before they came over. I hadn't actually talked to Lucas in a few days, which was a bit sad, but maybe he was busy.

I slid off the bed and strolled to the door. Through the peephole I could see it was my landlord, and I wondered what he could possibly want. It wasn't time for me to pay rent yet. It had only been a week and a few days. I hadn't called him or requested any assistance, so maybe I forgot to fill out paperwork or something essential.

I fluffed my hair and swung the door open, only to see him scowl. "Hi, Mr. Kline, how are you?"

"I'm not happy, Ms. Davids." Older men could go one of two ways. Either they were the sweet man who offered compliments and wise advice, or they were the grumpy old guy who screamed "get off my lawn" at little children. His look told me he was the latter.

"Oh, no. Did something happen?" I wondered at the cause of his unease, though I had

no clue what it had to do with me. I chewed my lip nervously.

“Yes, something happened.” This wasn’t a personal call. He did not enter my flat. He just stood there glaring at me. “One of your friends keeps calling the office demanding that I fix things in your apartment. Now, I made it perfectly clear that you were getting this place as-is. The rental agreement said as much, and we orally agreed on that when you signed the papers too. You can feel free to make improvements if you want, but don’t have your friends calling me all hours of the night to complain. Got it?”

My mind raced. I hadn’t had anyone calling him to request repairs. Midge and Lucas had both voiced their concerns, but they were the only two in my life who knew where I was. My mother didn’t even know yet.

“If you don’t mind me asking, who was it?” I had my suspicions.

“That fancy rich tech guy. You tell him to stop calling me and harassing me or I’m calling the police.” Mr. Kline started to walk away then turned and said, “You make sure this stuff stops because if it doesn’t, you’re out. I’ll have one of your neighbors complain of loud noise and I’ll have no choice but to evict you.” He walked toward the stairs, and I shut the door, now furious.

I’d never called Lucas’s number so fast. He had no right interfering. I told him he could mention something to the landlord if he wanted, but to pressure the man or try to coerce him was ridiculous.

“Hey, Vera, I’m so glad you called. How are you doing? You feeling better now?” Lucas was happy. It made me feel bad for being so upset with him for a split second until I remembered just how angry I was.

“Luke, we need to talk.” The line was silent, crackling with the anger I felt. “My

landlord just threatened to evict me because you keep calling him and berating him for my living conditions.”

“Vera, I stopped by the day I was there, and I called him once. I wasn’t berating him. I asked him to consider the conditions and make repairs. That’s all.”

I paced the floor, feeling my body getting worked up. I knew if I wasn’t careful, I’d get too emotional and start throwing up. Strange, how it wasn’t just foods or smells that triggered my sickness, but emotions too.

“You understand? You can’t throw your money at problems in my life and fix them. And you can’t manipulate me into coming back to your house because you do nice things for me. That isn’t how a real relationship works. You are not my father. You’re not my boyfriend. You’re not anything to me.”

As soon as I said the words, I felt the sting they left on his heart as if I had slapped myself across the face. I wanted to immediately apologize, but my lip was trembling. I could feel the dry heaves coming again.

“You don’t mean that.” His voice was calm. Too calm. I was enraged that he didn’t even get angry enough to fight with me over this. I deserved his respect and he should be giving it to me.

“I do mean that.”

“Vera, I’m going to hang up now, and I’m going to call you tomorrow when you’re calmer. I’m sorry I upset you. I never meant to hurt you or make you feel like I was meddling. I love?—”

I hung up.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:28 am

I punched that End Call button so fast I almost dropped my phone. There was no way I was going to listen to him say that. Not today, not like this. Tears flooded my eyes, and I thought of everything my mother said about him. She warned me that he was trying to control me with his money, and I hadn't listened. I still didn't believe it was true, but this behavior was unacceptable.

I collapsed onto my airbed and cried, curling up into a ball. He had no right to try to parent me or play big brother. I knew that maybe he thought it was just being a protective friend, but we hadn't even discussed what we were to each other. Why did he think he should demand things of my landlord?

I felt alone, so alone I decided to call my mother and tell her everything. I should have called Midge, but I didn't. I was stupid. I rang Mom and sobbed my entire past six weeks out on her shoulder.

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry it came to this. I really wanted to protect you from everything. You know that man had the nerve to call me and try to get me to convince you to return to his house? The gall!"

"He did what, Mom?" My crying was slowly ending, and I listened to her tell me how he called her. I didn't think it overbearing and controlling. I thought it was sweet. And now, I felt like a horrible person for telling him off. "I have to go, Mom."

"Oh, dear. I'm buying you a plane ticket, okay? You just leave all that trash in the apartment and I'll buy you new things when you come home."

"Mom, I'm not moving home. Miami is my home now."

“Vera, you see how bad things are. Please just listen to me.”

“Goodbye, Mom.”

I ended the call with her too, wishing I’d have just given Luke the chance to explain. It would have to wait. He was right. I needed to calm down before we talked. I hadn’t meant a word I said. I’d just taken my frustration and emotion out on him. I needed to apologize.

Tomorrow...

24

LUCAS

“Frank, I’m just telling you to get it done. Got it?” I didn’t wait for his response. I just hung up. The physical security of the building wasn’t ever an issue for the most part, but after having been followed across town by that PI, I had Frank working on a full-process audit to make sure everyone was following protocol and all our physical properties were secure.

I’d been so irritable, however, that I was snapping at everyone. Tina tried to bring me a coffee this morning, and when she set it down on my desk I accidentally knocked it over, spilling it off the end of my desk onto the carpet. She scrambled to clean it up, but not before I bit her head off. Gracious as always, she scurried out to get a fresh cup, leaving me feeling like an asshole.

I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my face. Vera hadn’t called or messaged in days. It was eating away at me. Frustrations just kept mounting, and I felt like the bad punchline of a joke no one had the decency to fill me in on. This didn’t happen to me. I didn’t get emotionally attached to someone in a way that left me wrestling with my

ability to control myself if they left. I didn't let this sort of thing happen.

"Sir, your coffee?" Tina popped her head into my office and smiled. "Sorry about that last one. Totally my fault." Her quick steps had her at my desk in three strides, and the new cup of coffee, complete with a broad smile on her face, made me feel worse.

"Look, I'm sorry for flying off the handle at you, Tina. I have no clue what's going on. I am just really irritable." I took the coffee and sipped it, then set it to the side where it wouldn't be in my way.

"We all have rough days, Lucas. You should have a day off." She hovered by my desk for a moment. "Do you need to talk about it?"

I wasn't really in the business of talking about my feelings with my staff, but the offer was kind. I smiled. "No, thank you, but I appreciate it."

Tina wasn't gone five minutes before Henry stormed in. He sat across from me watching me finish typing an email. His presence distracted me, causing me to have to think twice as hard about what I was writing. It irritated me that he hadn't even knocked on my door. When I was finished, I snapped at him too, the pattern of my morning replaying itself.

"What."

"Wow, what a great greeting."

"Well, it's not like you knocked. Why don't you ever knock?" I shook my head at him and leaned back in my chair. I should have kept my door locked at all times. It would make it more difficult for him to interrupt my train of thought.

"Frank called me this morning to let me know you were out of sorts. I saw Tina in the

breakroom making you a second coffee moments after she made the first. She told me what happened. What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. I'm just in a bad mood. Is that okay?" I took a drink of my coffee a bit faster than I should have and burned my tongue. "Goddammit!" I set the cup down a little too hard, sloshing coffee out the hole in the lid, then stood up abruptly, snatching a tissue to wipe up the mess.

"Well, if you say so." Henry's wry comment irritated me. If I was in a bad mood, it was my personal business, not his. He had no right to judge me.

I tossed the soiled tissue into the trash and sat back down, taking a harsh tone with him. "Look, is there some other reason you just barged into my office?"

"It's the girl, right? She broke up with you?" He sighed, and I could tell he was trying to be compassionate.

I raked my hand through my hair, which was getting long enough that I needed a haircut, but my regular Tuesday morning appointment had gone unobserved for the past two weeks. It wasn't by any means looking horrible, but that told me just how much this situation with Vera had gotten under my skin.

“I don’t really know.”

“How can you not know?” He scoffed, chuckling a moment, then sobered when I glared at him. “I mean, what happened?”

“She moved out. She just found a place and started moving on with her life. Apparently, I wasn’t part of that future, and now she is barely communicative.” I wanted to drink more of my coffee, but my tongue hurt so I just stared at the paper cup.

“She’s been busy?” Henry leaned forward. His posture told me he was about to get pushy with me. “Or she told you she’s called it off?”

“What does it matter if she doesn’t respond to me?” I stood, turning my back to him, and walked to the windows, watching out over the view of the ocean. The beach was covered in bikini-clad women, their towels stretched out next to umbrellas while children played volleyball and threw frisbees near the boardwalk.

“Well, it matters because you care. And you care a lot, by the looks of it. Did she actually tell you she wanted to break up?” Henry came and stood next to me, hands in pockets, watching the scene below play out.

“No, she didn’t. She said she still wanted to date me, but it was going too fast. I don’t know how we can go from her living with me to her not even responding to me and that’s ‘taking it slower’. She accepted my dinner invitation but didn’t even have the decency to tell me that she was not going to show up.”

“Okay, so you’re upset by that, and you’ve taken it out on your employees?” Henry nudged me with his elbows. “Sounds a lot like your dad.”

I gritted my teeth and rolled my eyes. I deserved that, though I fully expected that line to come from my wife one day during a heated argument, not from my business partner.

“I tried to tell you it was all a bit too fast. Besides, women of her generation do things differently.”

“How so?” I turned and picked up my coffee, deciding to brave the hot beverage even with the burn on my tongue.

“Women our age want men to pay for the date, pick them up at their house, open the car door for them. That sort of stuff. You know?” He shrugged. “Women of Vera’s generation only want the man to show up. They pay their half. They drive themselves. They even want to split the rent. It’s weird.”

His words got my wheels turning. He was right. Things had changed in the dating scene, and I had still been expecting it to be like back in the day, when I was in college. An idea started to blossom in my mind. If Vera was acting this way because of the way her generation preferred things, then I would try to do things her way.

“Thanks for the pep talk.”

Henry nodded and walked to the door. “Apologize to Frank. He’s a little butt hurt, and I don’t want to deal with him.” Henry chuckled and left my office, and I sat down to make reservations for Vera and me for dinner. I had to give it another shot. She obviously meant a lot to me, and I wasn’t about to give up until I’d given it my all.

VERA

The camera flashes weren't really necessary. The sun overhead lit the beach perfectly. Mr. Fink had worked with the client to have large tents arranged for a dressing area and makeup. We spent only ten minutes at a time in the direct sunlight. The shoot was a double—Hanah Wright joined me. We were posing for a Coppertone ad, but they didn't want the greasy glow of suntan lotion on our skin, so we spent more time under the tent's shade than in front of the cameras.

Hanah stood next to me as we waited for the photographer's team to arrange the setting for the next shot. She was a rail of a woman, tall and lanky, but gorgeous. She carried herself with an air of class that a lot of models didn't. If I had to guess, she was older than me by more than a few years, but it wasn't her looks that told me that. She was elegant, mature, and tactful. I appreciated that about her.

We watched the shifting of props and sipped ice-cold water. I was in my mind a lot, worried about how my body would change as time passed. It made me seem scatterbrained, and when Hanah asked me questions, I always had to ask her to repeat them. I saw the way she handled herself, remaining patient with me even when I frustrated her, and I felt bad for frustrating her.

"Is everything okay?" She set her water bottle on the table behind us and pushed her hair out of her face. My personal problems were not about to become public record—not yet, anyway—so I simply shrugged.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Well, you don't seem okay. You're constantly distracted. And if you frown any more, you're going to end up with frown lines."

I inwardly scowled at myself. Most models were ultra-careful about how they held

their faces on an almost minute-by-minute basis. We all knew that wrinkles and frown lines happened because of using facial muscles a lot. I was never as careful as others because I knew my body wouldn't always be my meal ticket. Eventually, my modeling career would be over and I'd have to support myself by other means. However, the way she was staring at me told me I wasn't getting out of this conversation without an explanation.

“Do you ever wonder what you'll do when your body no longer pleases the camera? I mean when age hits you and they can't line up any more jobs for you?” I hugged my arms over my stomach. More than once in the past few weeks, I'd wondered if other models had gotten pregnant and how they had handled the change in their bodies, if the pregnancy had ended their careers.

Hanah stared out across the ocean waves. The barricades set up down the beach were lined with people watching the shoot. They had cameras out as if from that far of a distance they could get a decent image of us. When her gaze turned back toward me, she looked thoughtful.

“I have thought about that time, actually. I don't think it will be much of a shift for me. I plan to continue building the relationships I have in the modeling world with companies I model for. I only take shoots for companies who are invested in causes I believe in. At the end of the day, I will use my notoriety as a model to continue to build a platform to speak out against social injustices and have a voice to make real change in the world.”

She turned to me. “Why? Are you worried about that?”

I avoided eye contact with her. The changing hormones in my body made me a bit more emotional than I was used to, but unlike some women who cried at the drop of a hat while pregnant, I found I got angry easily—which then turned to tears. My anger was over how dumb I had been to get so drunk that I lost myself and had unprotected

sex, all because I was hurt by my ex-boyfriend.

“I’ve just been thinking about my future. I don’t have a plan like yours, so I’m not sure what I’ll do when I can’t do this anymore.” I tamped down the frustration I felt with Daven and forced a smile.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:28 am

“There” —she pointed at my face— “there is that look again. What’s actually bothering you?”

I frowned. I could tell the photographers were about done getting our next shot ready and I didn’t want to feel angry when I walked out there into the sun. I was angry with Daven, but this wasn’t his fault. I had been the one to drink too much and not use protection. I had to accept the consequences of my own actions.

“I’m pregnant.” I blurted it out, cringing as soon as the words left my mouth. I didn’t even look at her. A complete stranger, she was the first person I told other than Midge, and I regretted the slip as soon as I saw her face.

“Wow, have you told Fink yet?” Hanah was never expressive with her face except to smile. So, to see her with a look of shock meant I’d really surprised her. She glanced over her shoulder and then looked me square in the eyes. “How far along?”

“No, I haven’t.” I looked around nervously to make sure my agent wasn’t listening. “I’m like seven weeks, maybe. I haven’t seen the doctor yet. I’m worried about how my body will change and what it will do to my career.” I picked at my fingernails nervously, cleaning sand from beneath them. I felt vulnerable and exposed. If Hanah told Fink, it was as good as signing my pink slip.

“Well, I can’t help you with that one. If you’re going to keep it, you need to tell him soon.” She picked up her water bottle and took a long drink. I had no idea what to say to her. Luckily, a reprieve came in the form of the photographer calling her over for the next shot. I remained under the shade of the tent, stewing on my predicament.

When I found out I was pregnant, I was devastated. But the more time that passed, the more I realized maybe I wouldn't mind being a mother. The problem was that I had to tell the father. That was something I was sure was going to go over about as well as a fart in an elevator.

I sank onto one of the director's chairs situated in front of a giant fan. The air blew across my moist skin, dampened with sweat from the hot day. From the minute Lucas offered to fly me home, I'd felt like I was using him. As nice as he was, I didn't want to lead him on. I should have turned away his charity and gone home. The trouble with that thinking was that I was already pregnant at that time and I hadn't even known it.

Now, with a job I'd scored because of him, and after having spent several weeks in his home, eating his food, using his cars—there was no way to untangle this mess without just being real. Midge had called him my sugar daddy, which made me want to be away from him even more than before, but that only left a hole in my heart. Lucas had filled that spot so well, so naturally. Circumstances beyond my control had thrust him into that position that Daven had occupied, and now I didn't know what I wanted.

"Everything okay?" Mr. Fink offered me a cold bottle of water and I took it.

"Relationship problems." I slouched into the seat farther.

"Been there, done that. Just takes time, kid." He slapped my shoulder and gave it a squeeze, then traipsed out across the sand in his dress shoes and suit. The man had to be sweating like a pig, but he never dressed in casual clothes for a shoot, not even at the beach.

I should have told Lucas the second I found out, but I hadn't, and the more time that passed, the more anxious I got about doing so. My heart wrestled with the yo-yo of

wanting him, but not knowing if I was ready for that. Did I want him because of the hole left behind following my breakup with Daven? Or did I want him because he was genuinely a man I could connect with and see myself with long-term?

The photographer waved me over, and I set the bottle of water down without even having taken a drink of it. Duty called. Maybe if my career of modeling got ruined by the changes I would experience in my body, I could make a career out of acting. I was definitely getting good at pretending I was happy when inside, I felt like the hurricane of the century was trashing everything.

26

LUCAS

I pointed across the empty deck at the strand of bulbs that was only half-lit. “There, can you fix that?” The waiter looked where my finger pointed and smiled.

“Of course, Mr. Smith.” He hurried off to make that last fix to the décor, and everything else was complete.

I stood surveying the scene. I rented out the entire deck of La Reserva, a Brazilian restaurant on the coast with incredible seafood. The expansive deck overlooked a private beach. Palm trees grew up around the perimeter of the deck, shading the dining area on sunny afternoons, but this evening they were strung with lights that chased each other in circular patterns. Large, glowing ornaments hung from palm fronds, and individual globe lights sat as the centerpiece of each black-clad table.

Money couldn’t buy everything, but it did buy this spectacular dining experience for me and Vera, and I was thankful she had agreed to come. I stood by our table waiting for her to arrive. I’d told her to wear something nice, though I hadn’t specified exactly how nice. I wore a suit, not the tux the evening should have required. In my

pocket was a ring—not an engagement ring, but a promise ring. A promise to care for her so long as she would let me.

I intended to apologize for overstepping my boundaries with her apartment and making her feel like she wasn't able to care for herself. I also wanted to ask her to come back. I knew her apartment wasn't safe, and I believed that given enough time, she'd make that decision on her own too. It didn't hurt to nudge her in that direction, though.

"Sir, Ms. Davids is here." The waiter who fixed the lights approached me, moist towel in hand. He held it out to me, and I used it to wipe my brow.

"Who is showing her back?" Extending the towel back in his direction, I felt my nerves rising. This evening had to go perfectly. I wanted Vera to feel so swept off her feet that she forgot about being independent. I loved her self-confidence and independence. I just wanted her to make room within that to depend on me at times.

"Sir, Mr. Thoms himself is showing Ms. Davids back." The younger waiter bowed and scurried off, and I straightened my tie. When Vera walked in, I was mesmerized. She wore a form-fitting black dress. The neckline was high across her collarbone, but when she turned to thank Julien for escorting her, I saw the back was completely open, from the button at the nape of her neck to the small of her back where a hint of her black lace panties peeked out from beneath the rayon dress.

"Vera, you look absolutely fantastic." I took her gently by the arms and offered a soft kiss on her cheek. My usual light peck on her forehead wouldn't suffice for this moment.

"Thank you, Luke. You did all this?" She gestured around the deck, empty of other patrons but full of lights and ambience.

I nodded and walked around behind her, pulling her seat out as Julien—my college best friend and former golfing partner—walked away. “Yes, well I wanted us to have privacy to enjoy our meal.”

When she was seated, I took my place. The wait staff had been ordered to bring us our meal in several courses. We settled into a natural conversation about her jobs and how things were going. She asked me about Ella and how the house was going with the minor repairs needed after the hurricane. It had been difficult to source supplies for a few weeks after the devastation, but I’d managed to ship them in from Washington state.

“And how are you liking the new apartment?” I leaned back as the waiter set my main course in front of me. After the salad and rolls, I was very much looking forward to the mussels in wine sauce that I’d ordered for both of us.

It must have been the wrong question because Vera seemed to shrink back when I asked it. She had been a bit sullen all night anyway, but the introduction of her living situation probably only reminded her of how I had tried to get her landlord to make needed repairs.

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“I am enjoying being independent.” She took a bit of the rice and set her fork down, opting for a drink of her water. She hadn’t touched her wine, which was unusual, but I didn’t ask why. I knew she was very conscious about how it affected her hydration and thus her physical appearance. None of that mattered to me, but I understood how that would affect her job.

I sat back, touching the box in my pocket through the thick fabric of my suit coat. Now was not the right time to present this to her, so I tried to set the mood so we could turn the conversation around to that topic. Unfortunately, when I opened my mouth to speak, she cut me off.

“I’m doing just fine in my place. It’s not perfect, but it’s mine.” She stabbed a bit of shrimp on her plate and brought it to her lips.

“It’s far from perfect. I’d say it’s bordering on unlivable.” The comment flew off my tongue before I could stop it. All I wanted to do was protect her, but she refused to understand that my motives were genuine. Given the lecture I received from her mother, I knew why. Like her mother, she probably had hang-ups about a man using her and throwing her away. “I’m sorry.”

She scowled at me, an emotion I hadn’t ever seen on her face. She never got angry with me previously—except when I meddled—or maybe she had but she’d hidden it well.

“Let’s not talk about that, please.” She picked up a mussel and slurped the meat off the shell. I looked down at my plate and knew I could never bring up the promise ring. “My mother is already demanding I return home. I don’t know how to handle

any more pressure.”

“I’m sorry that’s happening.” I no longer had an appetite. I didn’t think the night was ruined, but seeing her unhappy just spoiled my ability to eat.

“It’s not your fault. I should have made her apologize to you for following you around and having you investigated. She had no right.” Vera pushed her food around on her plate. “If we are going to make a go at this and have a real relationship, she needs to know her place... and so do you.” She looked up at me with a somber expression.

“I’m sorry. I really wasn’t trying to meddle in your life. I just wanted you to be safe. I apologize sincerely for being like your mother and just taking control where it wasn’t my place.”

Vera nodded. It was a very tense moment. I could tell she was very upset with how I’d handled things previously, but she was responding in such a mature way about it that I couldn’t help but fall in love with her even more deeply.

“We just need healthy boundaries, okay? I know I’m quite a bit younger than you and that maybe you don’t understand that, or maybe it’s some weird thing where you feel like because you’re older, you’re wiser.” She sighed. “I just want to make my own decisions. I respect that you have opinions about them, and as my boyfriend, I want to know your opinions, but you can’t make decisions for me.” She put her fork down and wiped her mouth.

“I understand and I respect that, and I am of the strong opinion that you should just move back in with me. That place is really not safe, Vera. I’m concerned about your wellbeing, and I’m also concerned that your mother might make you move back home.” I shook my head. “I couldn’t stand that. You’d be so far away.”

“I’m not moving home,” she said curtly. “I am home.” I could tell her patience was thin, but I didn’t understand why. “This is all just happening a little fast for me, and I deeply appreciate your attempt to console me and apologize, but I need a bit more time. Okay?” She folded her napkin and laid it on the table, then stood. “I’ve had a wonderful evening with you, and I really hope that we can do this again soon, but right now, I’m feeling overwhelmed and I want to go home.”

I rose and took her hand, coming to stand by her. “I really care about you. Okay? But I’m not going to say another word about the apartment. You know how I feel.” I cupped her cheek and leaned in, offering a soft kiss on her lips. “Please, call me when you’re home safe, or at least send me a message so I don’t worry.”

Vera nodded and pulled away from my grasp. Without another word, she turned and walked away. It left me standing there frustrated and upset with her. Things were already going at a snail’s pace. I had no interest in going slower. I knew what I wanted. I wanted her in my life for good, and being patient about this was killing me.

I stood there glaring at the empty deck feeling like I’d wasted my entire night. We were no closer to moving forward now than we had been before dinner. If she didn’t decide one way or the other soon, I would. And I didn’t want it to come to that, but I couldn’t just wait around while she played this game—whatever game it was.

27

VERA

Isat on my new futon, scrolling my phone. The delivery men had come and put it together for me only yesterday. After nearly three weeks of being in the place, I finally had furniture. My day hadn’t been the best. Morning sickness had gotten the better of me during a photo shoot, and I had to have my makeup redone three times. I made the excuse of food poisoning, but I knew it was only a matter of time before I

had to tell Mr. Fink the truth. I was thankful Hanah wasn't at today's shoot to make me feel guilty.

For now, relaxing on my own furniture in my own place felt like a tiny victory. I even felt happy enough that maybe if my good mood held out, I'd call my mom later and tell her things were going better. With the steady income, I felt more confident about my future. I just had to figure out what I'd do in a few months when I started showing. I searched the job boards, but I didn't see anything I was qualified for.

Instead of being discouraged, I distracted myself with social media, commenting on other people's posts and sharing the few selfies I took while on the island. I noticed Daven had blocked me on everything. It wasn't shocking, but it was hurtful. Still, I refused to be upset.

Until a droplet of water landed on my phone screen.

Confused, I wiped the droplet away and looked up. Another drop landed in my eye, and I stood up, taking a few steps away as I wiped my face with the back of my hand. Water dripped from the exposed wires dangling from the ceiling where a light fixture should go. I screeched and dried my phone, looking around frantically for what might be causing the leak.

I had no idea why water would be dripping from a wire at all, let alone my ceiling. I had my landlord's number written on a sheet of paper held to the fridge by a magnet, so I hurried over to the kitchenette area and dialed his number. It rang several times before going to voicemail.

"Uh, Mr. Kline, I have a situation. There is water dripping into my apartment from some wires... Uh, it's getting worse, and I can't fix this issue. Can you please come to my apartment? It's 312. This is Vera Davids." I ended the call after leaving the message, but I noticed the large, damp circle on my new futon spreading.

This wasn't supposed to be happening. I was supposed to be relaxing and enjoying my new futon. Frustrated, I ran a hand through my hair and tried to decide what to do. If I just threw a towel there, the water would soak the towel and still ruin the futon. I pulled the futon away from the leak, but the dripping only continued. It was dripping faster than I first thought. Moving the futon would protect it from damage, but not the carpet beneath it, which I had delivered at the same time. It was too large to move.

I ran to the cupboard and pulled out a pan, returning to place it beneath the source of the dripping. The water pinged in the pan as large droplets hit the metal. I chewed on a nail, wondering what would be causing the leak. Maybe a pipe had burst in the upstairs apartment, or maybe they let their bathtub overflow. I shuddered to think it was anything else.

After several minutes of watching the leak getting worse, I dialed the landlord's number again and waited, only to receive his machine again. I knew another message was pointless. If he hadn't picked up on the first call, he was likely not in the office or just ignoring me. I tried to sit on the edge of the air mattress and stay calm, but my hands were shaking. The longer I sat there, the worse the leak seemed to be. The droplets came faster until it was a steady stream.

But when the air conditioning unit shut down, I knew something was really wrong. All I could think about was how Lucas told me that the place wasn't safe. I had even told him that as a friend, I appreciated his opinion, but I had rolled my eyes at him, thinking he was worrying too much. And now I was about to eat my words. I looked at the ceiling one last time. I wasn't too proud to admit I had been wrong, but I was disappointed that the one thing in my life I thought I could do on my own was backfiring on me yet again.

I dialed Lucas's number and waited for him to answer.

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“Vera, I’m so glad you called.” Lucas sounded cheery. He probably thought I was calling to talk about life or maybe our next date. “How did the shoot go yesterday?” I thought my anger over the ceiling issue would burst out of my mouth before I got it contained, but when he asked me about my recent shoot, I almost started to cry.

“I, uh...” I swallowed hard. “Something is wrong with my air conditioning and there is water running out of the ceiling where the light fixture should be.” I braced myself, thinking he was about to say “I told you so”, but he didn’t. His reaction surprised me.

“Wow, that doesn’t sound good. Do you need the name of a good plumber?”

I figured it was about the hardest thing he had to say in his life. If I knew him the way I thought I did, he was choosing his words carefully to support me. It made me wish I had never left his house. He actually cared so much. He should have been lecturing me and telling me off.

“Luke, please... I need you.” I heard the whimper in my voice and hated myself for feeling weak like this, but he was the only person I knew who could help me.

“I thought you’d never ask. Pack your things as much as possible. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Okay?”

I waited until the call ended before I let the first tear out. I was furious with myself for failing, but more so, I was furious with Mr. Kline for the state of this apartment. Which only made me furious with myself for not demanding that he fix things before I moved in to begin with. I sat there on the edge of the airbed feeling sorry for myself for far too long. When Lucas knocked on the door, I hadn’t packed a thing.

I shuffled over to the door and opened it up, half expecting to see Mr. Kline instead of Lucas, but no such luck. That man really didn't care at all about his tenants. I welcomed Lucas in and wiped my eyes. He looked up at the ceiling and shook his head, glaring at the mess.

"That landlord is going to hear about this." He clicked his tongue and put an arm around my waist as he looked down at me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I was happy he would fight this battle for me. I didn't think Kline would take me seriously, anyway. "I just want to go home."

It felt strange calling his house home, but he smiled about it. When he kissed me, it felt different. It wasn't the soft forehead kiss that said he thought about me or missed me. It was warmer, like he was claiming me for himself. I sort of liked it. I was so thankful he was there to comfort me, and even though I felt defeated, like I'd failed at being my own person, I wasn't upset about it.

"Let's pack up, okay?" Lucas let me go, and I nodded.

We spent the better part of half an hour shoving as much stuff as we could into bags and the few boxes I still had in the place. Not everything would fit in the car because Hector had driven Lucas to my place. Lucas promised to send for the rest of my stuff in the next few days with a strongly worded letter to the landlord. I wasn't going to protest his doing that, either. I learned my lesson. Lucas knew more than I did, and he cared a lot. It was time I just let him be what he wanted to be to me. Lord knew, I needed it.

By the time I got Vera out of that disaster of an apartment, it was after dark. We were both exhausted. I hadn't said a single word to her about being right about the apartment. I could tell by the way her shoulders drooped and she hardly made eye contact that she knew it. The unspoken exchanges between us as we packed things into bags and boxes had been enough. I had a mind to buy the building and renovate it just to provide proper living conditions to the tenants.

We left most of her things in the car since it was late, carrying in only a few bags that Vera said were essential. Hector offered to bring everything in, but I had a feeling Vera wanted privacy, so I politely declined his help. He left, taking Ella with him, and the house was empty.

Vera trudged up the stairs carrying her duffel bag, and I followed behind. I wasn't sure how to start the conversation or if I even should. She had to have been feeling quite down about the fact that she had attempted to strike out on her own and wound up in a bad situation, so I said nothing, but I did try to interpret her needs and be there to help her as she needed me.

She struggled to get the doorknob, her hands full of items she carried, so I reached around her and opened it for her. She smiled and entered the bedroom and dropped her load on the ground. She stared at it blankly without speaking, and I set my armful of things on the end of the dresser. I heard her snuffle, so I walked to the nightstand and plucked a single tissue from the box there and handed it to her. She brought it to her face and wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"Are you tired?" I asked, seeing the way her eyes blinked open and shut slowly. The dark circles beneath her eyes indicated that she hadn't been sleeping well or that she had been crying a lot. She didn't move or look at me. She licked her lips slowly, and I noticed the way they were chapped. I left her standing there and walked into the bathroom, taking the cup I left sitting on the bathroom vanity and filling it with water.

I returned with the water and put it in her hand, and she sipped it. Her gaze had a melancholy look to it. She turned slowly to look at me as she handed the glass back. Something was wrong, and I felt like it was more than just the apartment. I set the glass down and took her hand, pulling her into my chest. She didn't protest, so I held her and tried to decide what to do next. I was tired. It was obvious she was tired too.

“Hey, let's just leave this stuff here. You look tired. We can unpack in the morning.” The fact that she'd come straight to the master bedroom and not the guest room told me this was where she either wanted to be or thought that I expected her to be. So I asked, “Do you want me to stay in the guest room?”

She peered up at me and took my hand, leading me to the bed. “Just hold me,” she mumbled as she kicked her shoes off and crawled beneath the covers.

“You're not putting on pajamas?” I asked, tucking the comforter up around her shoulders. She shrugged and turned on her side. It broke my heart that she was feeling this bad. She never went to bed without washing off her makeup, but it appeared she didn't even care about that.

I stripped off, leaving my clothes on the floor next to the bed and wearing only my boxers. Then I shut the lights off and climbed into bed behind her. She pulled my arm across her body and held it against her chest. I felt the rhythmic beating of her heart and the soft kisses she placed on my fingers. Having her back in my arms was incredible. The circumstances under which she returned weren't so great, and the fact that she was really hurting made me wish I had been wrong about that apartment.

She sighed, and I held her tighter. Her hair smelled nice. I had missed that. Her steady breathing lulled me into a state of relaxation. I thought about how empty the house had felt only yesterday, how I had trouble sleeping and eating. How I'd taken my frustration out on Tina and Frank, and even Henry. It was strange how something as simple as her presence changed my entire mood. I never wanted to feel that way

again, and I never wanted her to leave again.

“What are you thinking?” I was surprised she asked me that, though I could understand that she probably had some apprehension about things moving forward.

“I was thinking how much I missed you and how you must feel about this whole situation.”

Vera turned to her back and stared up at me. The light from the bathroom streamed into the bedroom and illuminated her face. “How I feel?”

“Yes, about the apartment not being what you thought. I’m sorry things worked out this way.” I pushed a few strands of hair out of her eyes.

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“I feel sad.” She looked away, and I cupped her cheek.

“It’s okay. I’m not going to rub it in. I feel as sad as you do. I hate that you’re hurting and I’d do anything to comfort you.” My hand lingered on her cheek, and she took me by the wrist and pulled my hand away. She rested it on her stomach, and I kissed her forehead softly.

“Comfort me?” she asked, except I could tell she was not asking me to clarify, but to comfort her.

“May I?” I asked, kissing her lips. I let my thumb trace over the curve of her breast, and she nodded. “Like this?” I asked, kissing her again. I moved my hand higher, cupping her breast and squeezing it. She nodded again and draped her arm over my shoulder, resting her hand on the back of my head.

My body began to respond the moment she showed interest. Her kisses became firmer. Her lips parted to allow me entrance. I tucked my hand beneath her T-shirt and unhooked her bra’s front clasp. It had only been a few weeks, but I had forgotten how smooth and supple her breasts were. I pinched and twisted a nipple until it formed a hardened peak.

“I missed you,” she whispered as I pushed one side of her yoga pants down over hip. I rose up and folded the blanket back, then tugged her pants and panties off at the same time. As I turned and tossed them, she pulled her shirt up over her head, taking the bra with it. She lay on the mattress, naked and gorgeous, and I tugged my boxers off.

“I missed you too.” I lay down behind her, lifting her leg up over my body. She lay on her back, me on my side. “I never want you to leave me again.” I lined my dick up and found her entrance, then thrust in. She wriggled until I was able to push deep into her, and I leaned down and kissed her.

Her body built moisture as I slid in and out of her. I missed this, the feeling of her strong muscles wrapped around my cock squeezing me. But more than that, I missed her here in this bed next to me. I fondled her breasts and let my hand slip lower to her shaven mound.

“I never want to leave you again,” she said in a hushed voice. I touched her clit lightly, and when I added pressure, massaging her in a steady, slow, counterclockwise motion, she gasped.

“You never have to,” I told her firmly. She pulled me down for another kiss, this time a fierce one, hungry and demanding. I returned her passion with that of my own, twirling my tongue around with hers until we were both panting. She groaned and grabbed my wrist, but I didn’t pull my fingers away from her clit. The faster I massaged it, the more fevered her breathing became. I sped my thrusts too, building toward climax for both of us.

“God, Luke, I’m going to come.” Her grip on my wrist tightened, and I rubbed her faster.

“Good, because I’m going to come too.” I wanted to slow, to pace myself and enjoy this for a while, but she pleaded with me.

“Please, make me come. I’m so close. Don’t stop.”

I reached the point of no return, so I gave it everything I had, smearing my fingers through her wetness and stimulating her clit. My release came, and I flooded her, and

only then did she snap. Her chin jutted out as her head arched back. Tiny, guttural sounds reverberated from her lips. She clenched the edge of the bed and groaned, and her pussy clamped down around my cock so hard I had a difficult time pushing into her.

“God... oh, God,” she moaned, and I watched her twitch and spasm.

“Good girl,” I told her, fondling her breast again as she shook the bed with her convulsions.

The shift from her sadness to this was all I needed. I had comforted her, at least for now, and that was what I'd set out to do. She lay there panting, her temples moist with perspiration, and I pulled out, letting our sex puddle between her legs. She rolled to her side and backed against my chest.

I lay there holding her as she fell asleep, but it dawned on me that she hadn't asked for a condom. She had all but demanded it every time we had sex, except that first night nearly ten weeks ago. My wheels turned as I pulled the covers up over us and curled back around her. The moodiness, her not feeling well... my thoughts led me to believe one thing. Perhaps she was hiding a secret so upsetting that she had no clue how to tell me.

My heart sank. She had explained how careful she had to be to not get pregnant because it would mean her career was over if she did. I rested my hand on her stomach and let my imagination run wild. If she was pregnant and hiding it from me, there was a chance she wasn't sure if she wanted it. Or maybe I was just jumping to conclusions, but it made sense. I wasn't about to say anything to her, though. It wasn't my place. But the thought of being a father had a certain pleasant ring to it.

For now, however, I was content to hold her and enjoy the fact that she was in my arms again. I'd think about the rest some other time, when she was ready to open up

to me.

29

VERA

I tried. God knows how hard it was to not feel totally exhausted and overwhelmed emotionally. My body was being inundated with messy hormones and feelings. I had noticed my stomach wasn't as flat as I was used to. I also noticed my appetite had increased and my boobs were always sore. Nothing felt right anymore, and nothing fit right, either. I had been wearing a 34C, and now every time I bent over, I fell out of my bra.

I stared at the lacy contraption they had me dressed in for this lingerie shoot, but I wasn't comfortable. No one would have noticed my tiny tummy bulge unless I pointed it out. They'd airbrush it and that would be that, but I would know. I grimaced and turned away from the mirror. My face didn't even look like my own face today. The dark circles from lack of sleep had to be covered by extra layers of makeup, but nothing could improve how my eyes drooped.

"What's going on?" Mr. Fink frowned at me. "You are draggin' ass today, kid. We need you out there on your best game." He shook his head.

"I'm feeling tired a lot." I bit my lip. The photographer had said the same thing earlier, that I wasn't myself—I had "no energy". In the modeling world, it meant my charisma was gone. I wasn't being photogenic.

"We're counting on you out there to smash this one out of the park. It's literally for one of the largest lingerie producers in the US. If you nail this, you could be a Victoria's Secret Angel." His slap on the back didn't encourage me at all. In fact, the way he insinuated that was the direction he wanted me to go made me feel ill. My

body would never look good in lingerie again, not by this industry's standards, anyway. I was certain Lucas would still love everything about me once I had stretch marks and extra skin, but models were held to a much higher standard.

“Uh, Mr. Fink, I really need to tell you something.” My insides shook as I realized that my mouth had volunteered to start this conversation without my brain's approval.

“What's that?” He opened a stick of gum and popped it in his mouth, then pocketed the foil wrapper. His chewing grated on my nerves, but I said nothing. Though I did cringe at his food sounds which turned my stomach.

“I, uh... Well,” I stuttered, unable to find the words.

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“Spit it out, kid. We have a few shots left and then we can get our payday.” He offered me a stick of gum, but I declined, holding a hand out in polite refusal.

“Well, I’m pregnant.” I held my breath, waiting for his response. I expected him to be angry, but he stared at me with furrowed brows as he smacked his gum loudly. He said nothing for a moment, just searched my face. When he did speak, I was appalled at what he said.

“You’re getting rid of it, right?” The deadpan he gave me infuriated me, but I controlled my temper.

“No, I’m not. I might not be in the best position to have a child right now, but I believe that if fate determined that I got pregnant, then I am supposed to care for this life. Life is sacred, Mr. Fink.” I pressed my hand to my bare stomach, suddenly acutely aware that I was half-naked in front of a man who was not Lucas.

Mr. Fink stared at my breasts for a moment, then looked at my stomach and back up to my face. “Makes sense.”

“What?” I shook my head. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, it makes sense. You’ve been eating like twice as much as normal. Your tits are bigger than a few weeks ago. You keep touching your stomach, and you were sick so much I thought you had bulimia or something, throwing up all the time.” He clicked his tongue. “Had my share of models who had that, and let me tell you, the lawsuits aren’t fun to mitigate.”

I rolled my eyes and turned my back on him. “I just thought you should know.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.” He maneuvered so that he was standing in front of me.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that rich dude you have watching out for you probably won’t take kindly to my cutting you loose, so we have to figure out how to make this work. Just don’t get fat.”

I could have smacked him. My fingers curled into fists as he walked away. Men could be so irritating sometimes. It wasn’t like I planned to get pregnant on purpose right after having lost everything. He had no idea what it was like to discover this life-altering news and having to deal with it on my own. I barely made it through the rest of the shots without flying off the handle at him.

As I slunk away to change and head home, I heard my phone ringing in my dressing room. I wasn’t in a rush to answer it, so I stripped out of the lingerie and found my sweats and T-shirt and got dressed. But my phone rang several more times without my hearing the sound of the voicemail indicator. Someone must have really wanted to get ahold of me, which meant it was likely just my mother, calling to lecture me.

I continued to ignore the call as I put my shoes on and used a makeup remover wipe to try to remove some of the caked-on foundation that was clogging my pores. I used at least five wipes before I found my bare skin, and the dark circles beneath my eyes too. The phone continued to buzz, and after having to keep myself calm for the past thirty minutes following Mr. Fink’s rude comments, I was about to snap. I riffled through the bag and found my phone, only to be shocked to see Daven’s face on my caller ID screen.

I swiped right and answered. “What?” I picked up the soiled wipes and tossed them,

then collected the rest of my things, slinging the bag over my shoulder as I walked toward the exit and the car. Hector would be waiting by now.

“You’re pregnant?” His accusing tone laced with vitriol just pushed the wrong button.

“Why the fuck did you call me?” I let my anger loose, a lion attacking its prey. “You have no right to butt into my life now.”

“You’re pregnant with my kid. What do you mean I have no right? Did you even intend to tell me?”

I laughed, an angry and callous laugh. “You’re ridiculous, you know?” I strolled past the photographer who was packing his lighting equipment up. I scowled, but not at him directly, and continued on toward the exit. I could see through the front door that Hector stood next to the car with his hands clasped in front of himself.

“How is it ridiculous to demand answers?” Daven had no clue what he was talking about. He knew as well as I did how careful we were. We had used protection every single time. I had no interest in having that man’s baby.

“It’s not yours. I’m with someone else, and you know we always used protection. How the fuck did you even find out? I haven’t even told anyone but?”

“Midge,” he scoffed. “And don’t give me that load of crap. It doesn’t line up. If you’re pregnant enough to be telling people, you’re pregnant enough for it to be mine.”

“Look, loser. I met someone on the island and we’ve been together ever since, three days after your trashy ass dumped me for my best friend. It’s not your kid, and I don’t ever want you to call me again. Lose my number.” I hung up on him and stepped out

the front door to the smile Hector shot me.

“Buenos tardes,” Hector said, opening the door. I tried to force a smile, but there was no point. This day had gone from bad to worse. I just wanted to get home and curl up on Lucas’s lap and let him hold me. Telling Fink about the baby had been hard enough. I had no clue how I was going to tell Lucas, but I knew I had to do it soon. I had to find a doctor and get vitamins. My body was going to start changing so fast, I would have no excuse for what was happening.

The entire way home, I stewed over how to tell him without him thinking that I was a gold-digging slut who was out for his money. The angrier I got about what happened with Mr. Fink and Daven, the more I wanted to punch someone—or cry. I did neither. By the time Hector pulled the car into the driveway, I had calmed a little. Just thinking about Lucas’s forehead kisses helped me relax.

I climbed out of the car before Hector got around to open the door and lugged my bag into the house. I dropped it by the door and called out, “Luke?” I glanced toward the kitchen, but it was empty. He wasn’t in the living room, either. I headed for the stairs, but Ella was descending. “Is Mr. Smith up there?”

Ella smiled politely. “No, he out back. He have company.” She gestured. “You go, sit with him.”

“Thanks, Ella.” I nodded at her and headed toward the patio. I was frustrated that I would not be receiving those cuddles I so desperately longed for right away, but at least I could sit with him, even if he was entertaining company.

Curiosity got the better of me, and instead of just heading right out to the patio, I stood where he couldn’t see me and peeked out the back window. I expected to see a business colleague or maybe his friend Henry. What I saw took me by surprise.

On one of the wicker patio chairs, facing Lucas, sat my mother.

30

LUCAS

Lorna was fuming. Her face was so red it appeared she had been sunburnt from sitting outdoors in summer too long. I had never witnessed someone be so upset that they changed colors like a chameleon, but there was a first time for everything. I tried to follow what she was saying, but her shouts were a bit of a jumbled mess. I couldn't tell if she was upset at me or her ex-husband, and who hurt her more?

"Mrs. Davids, I assure you, I am not about to hurt your daughter the way your ex-husband hurt you. I love her very much." I used a measured tone, keeping my posture calm and relaxed, but she came at me with both barrels and it was getting harder to keep my cool.

"You don't understand how vulnerable women are, do you? Men like you think you can buy whatever you want. You just flash your money around and think she's going to kowtow to whatever you want. Well, not if I have anything to say about it. I'm going over to her apartment later this afternoon and we're going to talk. I'm taking her home with me."

"Lorna, I?—"

"My name is Mrs. Davids, thank you. You haven't earned the right to use my first name." She stood, tucking her clutch under her arm. The way she had her hair tied back in a bun made her eye lines so severe her eyes narrowed at the corners. I could see why Vera was intimidated by her. She was, however, a gorgeous woman, which

is likely where Vera got her looks from. If I wasn't totally in love with Vera, and Lorna wasn't biting my head off, I could see myself being attracted to her, despite her being three years older than me.

"I hope you and every man like you rot in hell." She spat the words out like they were lava burning her tongue.

"Whoa, easy now. I don't think Vera would be happy to hear you speaking to me that way." I stood too, holding my hands in a defensive posture.

"That's because she has no experience with trash like you."

"Mom!" Vera burst out the back door, glaring at her mother. "Stop it! You're out of line."

Lorna's expression changed instantly. She looked surprised, her eyes wide with high, arched eyebrows. Her mouth dropped, and she looked to me, then back to her daughter. "Vera, what are you doing here?"

"I live here," Vera spat. "And what are you doing here? You didn't even tell me you were coming." Vera glared at me, as if I had something to do with this. I shook my head and again raised my hands defensively.

"Well, if I had told you I was coming, you'd have said no. I wanted to visit my daughter. And I want you to come home with me when I go." Lorna put out her bottom lip like a child pouting because she didn't get dessert. I was beginning to understand the strange dynamic and how she could manipulate Vera so easily. It made me want to step in and speak my mind, but I had to trust that Vera knew what she was doing.

"Look, Mom, I had a hard day and I just want to rest. I know you probably have no

place lined up to stay.” Vera turned to me. “Can Mom use the guest room?”

I nodded. “I have no issues with your mother staying with us.”

Lorna scowled and pursed her lips. “I have no issue sharing a room with you, dear. You can sleep under the covers and I’ll sleep on top.” She cocked her head like an old schoolmarm.

“Mom, I sleep with Luke. I really don’t have patience for this.” Vera pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed just as Ella strolled out onto the patio carrying a tray of glasses and a pitcher of lemonade.

Ella’s smile faded as she approached. She must have sensed the tension, as she sat the tray down and nodded at me. “Everything okay, Mr. Smith.” She said the words as a statement, not a question—her way of reassuring me.

“Everything is fine, Ella. Could you please show Vera’s mother to the guest room? I’m sure she’d like to freshen up before we have dinner. And you will have to set an extra plate for her at the table.”

“Yes, sir.” She gestured at Lorna. “Come, come.” She smiled and shuffled away, and Lorna’s scowl deepened.

“I’m not tired, and I don’t need to freshen up.”

“Mom, just go. I need to talk to Luke alone.” Vera stepped aside and looked away from her mother, who kissed Vera on each cheek then obediently followed Ella inside.

I breathed a sigh of relief and sank back to the patio chair. Vera marched right over and sat down next to me, burying her face in her hands. I noticed the makeup line

across her chin and realized she hadn't taken the time to wash up after the shoot. Her eyes had dark circles, and it looked like she might have been crying at one point—her mascara was smudged everywhere.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea that was going to happen." She rubbed her face and looked up at me.

"I had a gut feeling it might." I sat back, patting my lap. Vera climbed onto my lap and curled up as I held her.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, picking at the buttons on my shirt.

"Well, she mentioned a while ago that she wanted to come for a visit. I told her she'd have to ask you first." I felt Vera tense and held her tightly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. It was when she had me followed. I called her to confront her, and she made it clear that she hated my guts."

Vera turned her face into my neck and clung to me. "Today was such an awful day. I just want you to hold me and make it better."

"You want to talk about it?" She had been hiding something from me since she moved back in three days ago, and I didn't have a clue how to pry it out of her. I just knew she'd feel much better about things if she just opened up and talked to me.

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“No, that’s okay.” Vera kissed my neck. “Are you going to be weirded out having sex with me when my mom is in the next room?” She kissed my neck and bit me.

I chuckled. “I worry about you more than me. I have no confidence issues like that. She invited herself to my house. If she doesn’t want to hear my headboard bang on the wall, she should get a hotel.”

Vera snickered and kissed my neck again. “Good because after today, I am thinking I need like twelve orgasms in a row.”

“That bad, huh?” I turned and kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry to hear that. Let’s go see what Ella has on for dinner, and I’ll see about fixing that problem of yours once we tuck Mommy Dearest in for bedtime.”

Vera climbed off my lap and stood, holding her hand out to me. “I’m just warning you, if you thought that was bad, you haven’t seen anything. My mom was hurt pretty badly when Dad left. She thinks all men are pigs. Sometimes, I feel like she wanted me to grow up and become a lesbian so I wouldn’t be hurt like her.” Vera led me toward the house, and I laughed.

“Well, I’m glad you ride the stick because your body is too hot to resist.” I pinched her ass and she giggled.

When we finally made it to the dining room, Lorna was already seated, waiting on us. Ella was busy serving her a dish of lasagna. Ella’s lasagna was amazing, like everything else she cooked. I couldn’t wait to enjoy it, even if it was in the company of a woman who detested everything about me. I wasn’t sure how long she would be

sticking around for, but as long as Vera stayed here when her mother left, I'd be happy.

I just had to survive until Lorna left. Then life could go back to normal.

31

VERA

Ella set the fresh pitcher of orange juice in front of us after Mom complained the last one had too much pulp. I smiled at Ella and secretly prayed my mother wouldn't nag about anything else. I had never seen her so unhappy in my life. I knew from past experiences that she got this way when she felt out of control, but it had never been this bad.

"Thank you, Ella." Mom poured a glass of juice, and Ella nodded and walked away. I was glad because the minute she was out of earshot, Mom complained. "Ugh, this one has too much pulp too, or maybe the last one just soured me on juice for good." She set her glass down and scowled.

"Mom, if you don't like the juice, we can have milk or coffee instead." I reached into the pocket of my shorts and pulled out a peppermint. The morning sickness seemed to be worse today than it had been so far. Just looking at the plate of eggs and bacon made me feel ill. I hadn't taken a bite.

"No, that's okay." She raised her eyebrows and sighed a haughty sigh. "You just can't get good help these days." She took a bite of her eggs, which I knew were probably delicious because Ella was a fantastic cook. Mom chewed thoughtfully, and it looked like she was trying to hide her enjoyment of the food from me. "So, what do you want to do today?"

I didn't really know. I had called Mr. Fink to reschedule today's shoot because Mom had come to town unexpectedly. He obliged me, pushing it off until tomorrow, but he hadn't been happy about it. So here I sat, at the patio table under the large umbrella, as the sun beat down on us. Mom thought it was heavenly to dine outdoors first thing in the morning. I wished for air conditioning and a chance to sleep in. Pregnancy made me exhausted.

"I had no plans. I was supposed to work, but I didn't want to leave you sitting here by yourself on your first day in town. We can do whatever you want." I picked up my napkin and draped it over my lap, but my stomach still roiled. The peppermint wasn't doing its job at settling my queasiness.

"Well, I want to talk." She took another bite of her eggs and pushed her bacon away. I knew this was coming the minute Lucas told me he wouldn't be taking breakfast with us. He was in his home office working and had a few things to get done early on. I hadn't complained, but I wasn't the least bit happy that I had to entertain Mom alone.

"What about?" Heat flushed my cheeks, and I didn't know if it was because it was already over eighty degrees this early or if I was just that frustrated by my mother's insistence on showing up at my home randomly and lecturing me. I should have been used to it, developed coping skills, but it still surprised and irritated me every time.

"About that man. Vera, dear, you have to at least listen to me." She shook her head and set her fork down on her plate. "Just answer a few questions for me."

"Alright," I sighed. I didn't think I'd ever convince her that Lucas was a great man, but I had to try. My doubts had faded, and I was beginning to settle the idea in my mind that this could really work, regardless of how quickly we moved from the beginning. My only fears now revolved around telling him about the baby.

“When was the first time you had sex?”

“Mom!” The heat in my cheeks increased, now due to embarrassment.

“Well, you’re living with him, so I assume that is happening. I’m old, not stupid.” She pursed her lips and picked up her juice, having a large gulp of it. It didn’t seem to bother her this time, but I didn’t say a word.

“That’s a really personal question. I don’t want to talk about my sex life with my mother. No twenty-four-year-old woman does.” I glanced at the house, wishing Lucas would appear and rescue me from this interrogation, but there was no sign of him—or Ella either, for that matter.

“Just answer the question, dear. How long had you known him before he asked you to sleep with him?”

I didn’t get what point she was trying to make, so I ignored the question and changed the subject. “How long did you date Dad before you were married?” I knew her desire to control my future was largely based on the fact that she’d been hurt. I thought maybe if I could get to the bottom of the pain she felt, maybe she’d understand that I was a different person in a different situation.

“I had sex with your father on the first date and we moved in together about three months later. Sex was everything, every date, every chance we had to be alone.” She pursed her lips again and sighed. “It was the first date for you too, wasn’t it?”

I swallowed hard and ignored her. “Why did you move in with him?” I hadn’t realized how similar my life was to what happened to her, though I’d never asked for the full details of her relationship because I never wanted to bring up the thing that made her act like a lunatic. She was hurt, and that hurt made her loud and unpleasant.

“I moved in with him because he manipulated events and circumstances so that I had no choice but to yield to what he called his ‘care and concern’. That just turned out to be him controlling my life until I was entirely dependent upon him for everything.”

My skin prickled, the hair on the back of my neck standing at attention. Lucas had called his meddling with the apartment “care and concern”, and I had believed him. I felt my heart sink. Mom’s real concern for me was destroying the faith and trust I’d established with Lucas. He hadn’t forced me to move in with him, however. That had been the horrible circumstances under which we returned from vacation.

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Mom grabbed my hand and I snapped out of it. Her concern was etched on her forehead. “Vera, I’m worried that you’ll end up being hurt. That’s all I’m saying. A man who respects you lets you make your own decisions and doesn’t meddle.”

There was that word again—meddle. I had slung it at Lucas in the heat of an argument. He had told me he was concerned. It was all too similar to Mom’s story, and I began to feel overwhelmed by the weight of the coincidences. My peppermint was gone, and my stomach was still upset.

“Mom, I don’t feel so well. I think I’m going to lie down for a while.” I stood, dropping my napkin across the untouched food on my plate. “Ella will get you anything you need. This afternoon, I can show you around the city if I’m feeling rested.”

I stumbled away without listening to her. She probably thought her words had gotten to me and I was changing my mind. I wasn’t—at least I didn’t think I was. Still, the way things happened so fast with Lucas had made me question everything I knew for a long time. It was only after the apartment turned out to be as horrible as he told me it was that I started to really believe he was right.

The air conditioning cooled me when I let myself in the back door. Before I hit the bottom of the steps, though, I was crying. I was happy with Lucas, so why would my mother try to convince me that he was a horrible person? I took the steps to the second floor and into the master bedroom, hoping to wash my face and lie down for a while, but Lucas was there. He turned to greet me.

“Hey, beautiful, I was just dressing to join you on the patio. I’m sorry I missed

breakfast.” He moved toward me, and the closer he got the more he frowned. “Is everything okay?”

I blinked back more tears, but the few stubborn ones clinging to my lower eyelid broke free, sluicing down my cheeks. “No, it’s not okay.” I sat on the foot of the bed and swiped at the tears on my face.

“Hey, I’m here.” He sat down next to me and took my hand. “What is it?”

I thought I would projectile vomit right there. I was sad and angry and confused. I didn’t want him to touch me, but I wanted him to hold me at the same time. I didn’t know what I wanted.

“Why did you want to have sex with me that first night on the island?” I bit the inside of my cheek and refused to look up at him. I was terrified that he would lie to me, that I’d see it in his eyes. Mom had planted a seed in my head that Lucas wasn’t the man I thought he was and my hands shook with unspoken fears.

When his fingers touched the bottom of my chin and he forced me to look up at his eyes, I melted. “Vera, I know you had a lot to drink that night and you might not remember everything, but I promise that it was you who insisted on the sex. Of course, I didn’t deny you because you are an absolutely stunning woman whom I found very fascinating.”

Of course I initiated it. I was wasted and on the rebound. I closed my eyes, though he held my chin there so I was face to face with him, and tried to remember. Flashes of memories started coming back to me. I literally attacked him and put the moves on him.

“Remember me asking you if you were certain? I even told you I didn’t think you were coherent enough to consent. I didn’t want this to happen.”

My eyes shot open. “What to happen?” Panic flooded my being, making my already turbulent stomach do flips. Did he know I was pregnant?

“This... this doubting and questioning. If I thought for a single moment that you’d blame me for pressuring you, I’d have never even allowed you back to my room. I would never do that to you. You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He kissed me softly and brushed away a few tears, finally letting go of my chin. “I love you, Vera.”

“You what?” I stuttered, licking the kiss off my lips and studying his face.

“You heard me. I am in love with you, with your smile, your personality, your heart. I think your mind is incredible, and I don’t ever want you to leave me or be upset with me. So you tell me whatever it is that is bothering you, and I will fix it. I’ll move heaven and Earth to make you happy and your dreams come true.”

My heart swung wildly between the fear that this was all emotional manipulation and the desire to make him the happiest man on Earth by telling him I, too, loved him. I bit my tongue. Fear washed over me as my gut churned again. I looked into his eyes, craving the freedom to express everything I felt and the secret that weighed on my heart so heavily, but I sat there dumbstruck.

“It’s okay if you don’t feel that way yet.” He cupped my cheek and brushed his thumb over my cheekbone. “I will be patient, okay?”

I nodded, but more tears rebelled against my blinking eyes. I wanted to tell him so badly, but I was so afraid.

“And I don’t care what your mom says. She had her own experiences with a man who wasn’t me. I’m not that man. Alright?” He kissed me on the forehead and pulled me against his chest. “I will never hurt you or manipulate you. If you don’t want to be

here, I will help you find a place. I will support you until you can manage on your own. I'm not here to force you into being dependent upon me."

I pushed him away. "Why would you say that?"

"Because I heard the lies your mother was telling you about me, and you need to know it's not true. I want you to be hugely successful, and I know you have this fierce independent streak. I love that about you. I want you to go places. That won't happen if you?—"

"You were eavesdropping?" I recoiled, upset with him that he had the nerve to listen to our private conversation. It made me wonder if all of this was a lie.

"No, I wasn't. I was headed out to sit with you when I realized how warm it was. I came back to put shorts on. Vera, look, her concerns have made you doubt me. Whatever I have to do to prove to you that I'm not who she thinks I am, I will do it. You say the word. Whatever reassurance you need or questions you have, you just ask."

His expression was sincere, but I was overwhelmed. "Right now, I just need rest. I'm not feeling well. Maybe it was too hot outside." I lied. I knew exactly why I wasn't feeling well. "I just want to lie down."

"You seem to be feeling ill a lot lately. Do you think we should get an appointment to get that checked out? I know a physician who does house calls."

"No!" I choked back my own panic. "No. That's okay. I'm sure it's just dehydration."

Lucas gave me a concerned and curious look and stood. He turned down the bed and patted the pillow. "Lie down, then. When you're ready, I'll be entertaining your mother. Let me know if you need a glass of water or something."

I lay down, and he left me to myself, but I didn't rest. All I could do was torture myself with guilt and fear. I wanted Lucas to be my fairy tale Prince Charming. But he was just a man like any other man. Even if he was keeping secrets and had a plan to force me to depend on him, I was no better. My secret was worse. Only, my secret would be exposed for what it was soon, and he could keep his indefinitely.

I cried myself to sleep. I just wanted off this rollercoaster. If only I had the guts to jump.

32

LUCAS

Lorna was riding my last nerve like a jockey at Churchill Downs. Vera wasn't home from her shoot yet, and Ella was waiting to serve dinner until she arrived. I was left to keep Vera's mother occupied, and her present aim seemed to be to destroy anything I believed about her daughter in the attempt to make me dislike her. The only thing it accomplished was to make me dislike the woman in front of me.

"So you don't wonder at all why she's just staying here?" She turned her nose up at me. "You've heard the term 'sugar daddy'?"

After more than a decade of learning to negotiate with some of the strictest, most shrewd businessmen, I had a fantastic poker face. "I don't wonder, Ms. Davids. I know. Vera wants to be here. I invited her, and she came."

"Well," she muttered and cast a haughty look at me, "I wonder if it's your money she likes or you."

"What are you insinuating?" I knew Lorna didn't think that about her daughter, and I could only assume that she wanted to find my trigger button and push it. The problem for her was, I didn't have a trigger button. I had learned to let life lead me. If Vera wasn't happy, she was free to go, genuinely and truly. My heart would be destroyed,

and maybe after that, I'd have some sort of coping mechanism or trigger button, but right now, all I felt was love. Love for Vera, and strangely enough, familial love for her mother that kept me from saying what I really thought of the woman.

"I'm saying, I think Vera is used to living a life that I have provided for her for the last two and a half decades, which is very similar to what you're offering her. She spent a bit of time on her own in less than ideal circumstances, and now maybe she just finds herself wanting those nicer things again." Lorna smirked at me as if she had played the trump card and won the hand.

"I beg your pardon, but it was Vera who chose to take her own apartment—an apartment that wasn't even in livable condition. I tried to get your help convincing her to move out, or did you forget that already?" I shook my head at her nonsense. "Did you call your own daughter a gold digger?" The woman would stop at nothing to protect her child. It was admirable in a certain way, even though she was entirely wrong. I hoped that one day, Vera would protect our child from real dangers, though I'd do my best to ensure she always felt safe so she didn't turn into this mess that her mother displayed.

The front door shut, and Lorna acted offended that I'd confronted her. She didn't say another word. When Vera trudged in, she was pale, sucking on a candy again. I rose to meet her, offering her a forehead kiss as usual, and pulled her chair out.

"Rough day?" I scooted the chair in as she sat, and Ella appeared with a cart hosting a scrumptious looking meatloaf and a heap of potatoes and carrots surrounding it on a serving platter. She set the food out as I took my seat.

"Sort of." Vera crunched the candy and pulled another out of her pocket, a peppermint. She eyed her mother, who looked at Vera with suspicion scrawled over her face. "I just felt so tired I fell asleep and they had to redo my hair and makeup. It pissed the photographer off. It's whatever."

“Oh, dear,” Lorna said, covering her mouth. Her expression of suspicion shifted to one of knowing.

“What?” Vera asked her. She smiled at Ella, who set a plate of food in front of her and moved on. As Ella served the rest of us, Lorna clicked her tongue and shook her head as if in disbelief. “What, Mom?”

“I can’t believe you haven’t told me this yet.” Lorna turned to look at me, her brows knit in anger. “How long have you known? Why have you kept this a secret?”

Vera’s face drained of the little color it had left. She looked terrified. I looked from her face to her mother’s and back. “What? I don’t have a secret.”

“Oh, Lord have mercy, child. I said it but I didn’t even believe it myself.” Lorna scowled at Vera and shook her head harder. The drama wasn’t necessary, but I had a sinking feeling that my own secret suspicions were about to be confirmed. “The fatigue, the sickness, the peppermints. Vera, you are pregnant? Why? So you could make sure Mr. Smith continues to shell out his money?” She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. “It’s worse than I thought.”

“Mom!” Vera stood to her feet so quickly she lost her balance and used the table to steady herself. She looked white as a ghost. I rose to offer her my hand. The accusation didn’t surprise me after the conversation I’d just had with Lorna. I was more concerned that Vera would say something she’d regret. “I can’t believe you thought that.”

“So you don’t deny it? You’re having the man’s baby? And by the looks of it, you haven’t even told him yet.” Lorna stood too, shocking Ella who stood nearby. Ella apologized and backed away, slinking out of the room quickly. “Vera Laine, I’m ashamed of you.”

“Mrs. Davids, can we please refrain from verbally assaulting your daughter? I’d like to have a peaceful dinner.” I put an arm around Vera’s waist. She was trembling.

“I tried to tell you both that this entire situation was no good. Now look at this mess. You’re dating a woman young enough to be your daughter. She’s gotten herself pregnant. You know this will ruin her career, and you’ll be forced to care for her and the baby because no one will ever hire her again—not with stretch marks and leaky boobs.” Lorna just wouldn’t quit, and I had had enough.

“Mrs. Davids, I?—”

“I should take you home and whip your backside the way I used to when you were a child. Young lady, you get your behind up those stairs and pack your things. You’re coming home with me.” She turned to me and started in. “I’ll have my lawyers contact you about a paternity test and child support because I?—”

“Lorna, enough!” I shouted. I hated shouting, and it made Vera shake harder. She started to step away from me, but I held her firmly to my side. I wasn’t taking this, and she didn’t have to either. “Out of respect for Vera, I will not say what I am actually thinking right now. What I will say is that your daughter is the most precious thing I’ve ever had the pleasure of encountering in my life. You are wrong about her.

“From the first moment I met her, all she talked about was being independent, making a name for herself, and having her career. We used protection every time because she knew the consequences of a pregnancy on her future. She chose her own apartment, and I supported her even when it was unsafe. She is not a gold digger, and she never was. And I’m not controlling her, either. I never would. If you have nothing nice to say, I will ask you to retire to your room because I am having a peaceful dinner with the woman I love very deeply.”

Lorna scoffed angrily and glared at Vera. “You’re going to let him talk to me like

this?”

Vera turned into my chest and hid her face. I heard a few sniffles, and I wrapped my arms around her tightly as Lorna stormed out of the room. I held Vera for a moment and then kissed her forehead. She had to feel awful after that.

“Let’s go talk, okay?” I whispered.

She nodded and followed me. I took her hand and led her to the living room where I sat on the couch. She sat on my lap and curled up. She felt lighter than normal, as if she’d lost weight, and her skin really was pale. I worried about her.

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“It’s true?” The question made her stiffen, but she nodded.

“I’m so sorry, Luke. I swear I didn’t get pregnant on purpose. It had to have been that first night on the island. I was so drunk. We didn’t use protection, did we?”

“No, baby, we didn’t.” I smoothed her hair back out of her eyes. “And I’m not angry, okay? I think I knew.”

She sat up and peered down at me. “You did?”

“Yeah, I did. You have been so sick and tired. You hardly eat anything. Those peppermints seem to be the god you worship now.” I splayed my hand on her stomach. “How many weeks?”

“Like almost thirteen.” She frowned. “I was so afraid to tell you. I didn’t want you to think I did this on purpose. I never wanted to get pregnant. It’s going to ruin my career. It’s just that when I found out, I was angry with you for calling the landlord. Then Midge said you were my sugar daddy, and I had to prove to her that it wasn’t true. I never thought of you that way.” Tears streamed down her face freely now, and I pulled her back to my chest.

“I know you didn’t. Okay? I know I was the one pursuing you the entire time. And when I even suspected that maybe you were pregnant, I couldn’t wait for you to tell me. I kept thinking how amazing it would be to be a dad and for you to have my baby. Wow... Vera, I am in love with you. Nothing can ever change that.”

“I’m not out for your money,” she sobbed.

“I know, baby. It’s okay. Your mom is wrong.” I sighed. “She is really hurt by her past. She’s afraid. We can’t even be mad at her. She just wants what’s best for you.”

“I can be mad.” Vera’s hands turned to fists and she curled up into a ball. “I can be furious. I am furious!”

“No, baby.” I kissed her forehead again. “She loves you. And you can’t be mad about that. Besides, you have to have a great relationship with her. I don’t know the first thing about parenting, and we’re going to need support. My parents are gone.”

Vera sighed. “You’re not disowning me?”

I forced her to sit up and look at me, and I cupped both of her cheeks. “Disown you?” I was hurt that she would ever think that. “Vera, I want you to marry me. Why would I disown you?”

The tears came faster, and she leaned down and kissed me hard. If Lorna wouldn’t have been in my house, I’d have laid Vera out on my couch and made love to her right then to let her know how much she meant to me.

“I love you too, Luke. I fought it so hard because I thought it was just a rebound thing, but it’s not. You’re not. You’re everything I ever wanted, even if you are older than me.” She smiled through the tears, and I caught her joke.

“Alright, well don’t sign me up for the retirement community yet. I have a child to raise, or maybe more than one someday.” I pulled her back and kissed her again as we chuckled. “Are you okay now?”

She nodded. “Still pissed at my mom, though.”

“We’ll get through to her. You’re going to need her. And I don’t want to walk down

the aisle with a sad bride who wishes her mother was there. Got it?”

“So, is that a proposal?” she asked, smiling.

“I don’t do anything in moderation, Ms. Davids. When I propose, you’ll know it.” I winked at her and kissed her again. The night had started out quite awful, but that smile was priceless, and I was glad Vera had gotten that off her chest. Now, perhaps we could move forward.

33

VERA

I was surprised to find Mom setting sandwiches on the bar, little paninis the way she made back home with ham and tomato, and a thick slice of pineapple, all slathered in a layer of mayo, grilled to perfection. It made my mouth water just to smell the different aromas, and for the first time in days, I felt like I could actually eat. I sat at the bar and watched her finish putting the sandwiches together as she hummed. She acted like nothing had even transpired the night before.

I was still furious with her, but I knew her making these sandwiches was a token of remorse. Maybe she finally understood that I loved him, or maybe she was just going to try another manipulation tactic. Either way, the sandwiches were my favorite, and my mouth watered just thinking about taking a bite. When she set the plate in front of me, I dug in without even thanking her. That was my downfall. She saw how eager I was and assumed I was not upset with her.

“Oh, dear. It’s so good to see you feeling better. I went ahead and bought the plane ticket, so you’re all set there. We just need to organize to have your things shipped and?—”

“Mom?” I said with food in my mouth. I chewed as quickly as I could and swallowed before dragging the back of my wrist over my mouth and continuing. “I’m not going to Hawaii with you.”

“But Vera, you know nothing about being a mother. You’ll need me. I can’t live that far away from you. That’s my grandchild.” She looked hurt, and I could see in her eyes that she genuinely thought she was doing the right thing, but I was still angry.

I hadn’t let my emotion from last night go. It burned inside my chest like a forest fire out of control. I tried to contain it, but without Lucas to tell me to keep my mouth shut, I flew off the handle—and my seat. I stood and started pacing angrily. She watched me, mumbling things I couldn’t hear. But when she said something I did understand, I almost bit her head off.

“Vera, I just don’t want you marrying a man like I did out of obligation because?—”

“Just stop!” I turned on her with everything I had. “I am not you. Lucas is not Dad. We are happy.” My voice was so loud I knew everyone in the house could hear me.

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“But dear, he’s so much older. By the time the baby is an adult, he will be?—”

“Fifty-eight, I know!” I growl-screamed and turned my hands to fists. “What the hell is wrong with you! You still can’t see that I love him? That we’re happy? You’d marry George Clooney if he asked you. He’s nearly twenty years older than you.”

“But dear, we’re both adults.”

I laughed and shook my head. Livid didn’t begin to explain how I felt. “Mom, I’m an adult. I’m twenty-four. I can make my own decisions. You had me when you were twenty-two.”

Lucas appeared out of nowhere, but he didn’t say a word. He stood watching the interaction. I was glad he was letting me handle this myself, though I did try to temper my words now that I knew he was listening.

“I am so upset with you. Since the time I moved out, you’ve done nothing but try to make me come home. You control and manipulate everything I do.” I felt tears burning my eyes. “I am so sick of you treating me like I’m a child.”

Lucas was at my side in a heartbeat, handing me a tissue. Mom’s eyes followed him everywhere he went.

“You have to understand that I am not moving home with you. I am staying here and I am going to have Lucas’s baby. I love him, and I’m not leaving him because you’re afraid of things that will never happen.”

Lucas gently guided me to a chair and helped me sit down. I was so upset I was shaking, and sitting helped me calm down. He said nothing, but he did offer me another tissue.

“Oh, Vera, I?—”

“No!” I shouted. “I’m not finished.” I went to stand, but Lucas took my hand, kissed my forehead, and nodded at the seat, so I sat again. He didn’t control me or tell me what to do, but his actions were so loving, I couldn’t help but yield to him. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t say everything I needed to say. “Mom, you got hurt by a really cruel and sinister man who wanted you to suffer because he was selfish and stupid. Lucas is the most amazing man, Mom. I wish you could see it.”

“Oh, Vera...” Her disappointed tone made me want to scream.

“No, Mom. Look, maybe I don’t have patience to sit and have this discussion with you today.” I covered my face with my hands and sighed. Lucas gently pried them away and offered me a glass of water. It was just what I needed. When I had set the glass down, he handed me another tissue and a peppermint. I couldn’t help but want to cry. He was so sweet.

“Why can’t you see it?” I cried, turning away from my mother.

“I do see it.” Mom was silent for a moment. The only sound in the room was the crinkling of the peppermint candy wrapper as I pried it open. “I see it, sweetheart.”

Lucas’s hand on my shoulder was reassuring, but as I turned and saw tears in Mom’s eyes, it finally broke the anger I felt and the tears came again. I was so sick of crying, but these tears felt like healing.

“You what?” I asked, glancing at Lucas before looking back at my mom.

“I see it.” She sighed and walked over to me. She knelt on the ground in front of me and took both of my hands. I managed to put the peppermint in my mouth before she wrangled me. “I’m so sorry, Vera.”

“What? What do you mean?” I shook my head, suddenly confused as hell.

“Lucas,” she said, looking up at him, “I owe you an apology.” Mom kissed my hands and squeezed them. “You’re right, honey. He is an amazing man. I just watched the most loving and selfless display of affection I’ve ever witnessed.”

Lucas took a step back, giving me space to talk to my Mom, but I still didn’t understand what she meant. “Mom, I’m really confused. What affection?”

“You needed a tissue. He got you one. You needed to sit. He got you a chair. You clearly were upset. He got you a glass of water, another tissue, a peppermint... The way he spoke so kindly to you. Vera, I have been entirely wrong about this man, and I am so sorry.” She blinked, and more tears dribbled across her cheeks. “Will you ever forgive me?”

I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed her. Of course I would forgive her. She was my mom, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t still upset. All I could do was hug her for a moment. When I let her go, she stood and smoothed her slacks out. “I’m going to go freshen up,” she mumbled, then hurried out of the room.

Lucas was quick to replace her, crouching in front of me and kissing my hands. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “You didn’t stop me from yelling.”

“I told you, I’m never going to control you. You have a right to be angry if you want. I just hope that you let that anger go now. Can you see that she cares about you?”

“I do,” I said, looking down. “How can you be so calm when she literally tried to break us up?”

“Because I’m not worried about any exterior thing that tries to divide us. I’m confident that no matter what happens, if we love each other, we’ll make it through.” He stood and pulled me to my feet, then wrapped his arms around me.

“And I’d really like it if you finished that sandwich because if not, I’m going to be forced to eat it and I don’t want to get a dad bod yet. I haven’t been a dad long enough to have a dad bod.”

I snickered and wiped my face. “Yes, well it is a delicious sandwich. You can have half if you want.” He guided me back to the barstool, and I sat down and had a bite. I felt better now after having blown off that steam. I needed to apologize to Mom for all the shouting, but at least I felt like we were on the same page now.

“Thank you,” Lucas whispered.

I turned to him. “For what?”

“For coming back.” He rested his hand on my thigh. “You really are the best thing that ever happened to me, Vera, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

34

LUCAS

Vera’s sweet voice awakened me. I yawned and stretched, feeling the sheets against my bare body. We’d fallen asleep after making love, and neither of us had the energy or desire to get dressed, so I held her until we met in dreamland. Now, she sat next to me with the covers pulled up over her chest, speaking to someone on the phone. I slid my hand beneath the sheets and found her leg. She grinned at me and swatted my hand, but I slid it up her thigh.

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Fink.” She tapped on my hand the closer it got to finding the treasure hidden between her legs and rolled her eyes at me. “Sure, I don’t mind that at all.” I dived beneath the covers, searching for her skin. She pushed on my head as I kissed her hip and let my lips trail across the top of her leg as my fingers found her soft folds and pushed toward her entrance.

I growled softly, prying her legs apart as she wriggled. I could tell she was trying to keep her voice steady as she spoke, but I was making it very difficult for her. My

fingers searched until I found what I wanted, and I thrust into her. Then I rose to all fours and pushed her legs apart so I could drive my head between her legs.

“Uh, can I call you back?” she muttered. “Something just popped up.”

I snickered, feeling my cock hardening. She was right. Something was popping up, and I liked it. Her pussy was wet, and my tongue lapped at the fluids collecting as I fingerfucked her.

“God, Lucas.” She giggled. I felt the covers being folded back and lifted my head to look up at her. “That was a serious call.” She playfully scolded me, but after she laid her phone on the nightstand, she scooted down in the bed until she was lying down.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked her, stretching out next to her. I lifted my hand between her legs, working her pussy and enjoying her heat.

“Yes.” Vera grabbed my wrist and held it tightly. “Can we talk for a sec?”

Reluctantly, I withdrew my hand and she let go of my wrist. I stuck my fingers in my mouth and licked them clean, staring at her as she gave a seductive smirk. “What would you like to talk about?” Without the covers, I was a bit chilly, so I pulled them back up over our bodies and snuggled closer to her.

“That was Mr. Fink. It turns out he has found several jobs for me. I still have a full month of shoots lined up, but after that, he found some makeup shoots. They’ll be chest-up, which means my growing belly won’t be in the shots. And he even found several maternity shoots too. I had no idea there was such a demand for glamor maternity.” She grinned at me, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“That’s fantastic, Vera. I’m so happy for you.” I kissed her shoulder.

She looked at me with a serious expression and rested her hand on my arm. “Did you do this? Throw more money at him or something?”

“No, baby. I had nothing to do with this. This was all you.” I kissed her shoulder again, then her collar bone. Then her neck.

“So, you didn’t even call him to tell him he couldn’t fire me?” It was like she didn’t believe me. I propped myself up on my elbow.

“Why? Did he say I had?”

“No. I was just making sure.” Vera slipped her arm beneath my body and then wrapped her other over my shoulder and pulled me down on top of her. I happily lay on her, kissing her and feeling her skin against mine.

“Well it’s all you, babe. You’re gorgeous and they know it.” My dick wanted her so badly, and I wasn’t going to be the one to tell it that she was off limits. I grabbed her breast and squeezed it, then slunk beneath the covers again as I said, “Now, where was I?”

“Luke, what about my Mom?” She tapped my head a few times as I kissed down her sternum to her navel. She spread her legs, and I had almost gotten to her mound when someone knocked on the door. “Stop,” she hissed. “Get up! Stop!” Her rejection came with a few hard smacks to my head. I giggled and crawled back up beside her.

“What was that for?”

She laughed. “Someone is knocking.”

“If it’s staff, they’ll leave. If it’s your Mom, well...” I found her pussy and massaged it. “She can wait.”

“Lucas, you’re insane.”

The knocking continued, and I called out, “Yeah?”

Without warning, the door opened, and my hand was frozen to Vera’s hot valley. If I moved a muscle, Lorna would know exactly where my hand had been. I looked up at Vera’s pink cheeks and stifled a grin. “Mom? It’s early.”

I tried not to laugh at the surprise on her face as she looked around the room, trying to find any place to put her gaze that wasn’t our bed. I snickered under my breath as she fumbled for words and wiggled my fingers against Vera’s clit. She glared at me then grinned.

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“Uh, well... Dear, I made breakfast. I... Well, you should go ahead and finish up here and come down to eat.” Lorna backed out of the room, her cheeks brighter than Vera’s, and the two of us laughed as the door clicked shut.

“Ah, good. She said finish up.” I threw back the covers, exposing Vera’s naked body, and got up on my knees. My cock was rock-hard, and I stroked it. “So, let’s finish.”

Vera rolled her eyes at me and slid out of bed. “Funny, Mister, but if you think I’m going to screw you now that my mother knows what we were doing, you’re crazy. Let’s get dressed and eat.”

“Aw, come on. At least let me taste you.” I reached for her arm, and she let me pull her toward the bed. I kissed her, but I knew it was going nowhere.

“Not now. Maybe when she does her yoga later.” Vera winked at me, grabbed my dick, and stroked it for a second and said, “Just tame the tiger. Wouldn’t want the old gal to get any ideas. She’s only a few years older than you.”

“The tiger has set his eyes on one piece of meat, and it’s the only thing he wants.” I followed her to the bathroom, trying to get frisky the whole way, but she shooed me out and started a shower. By the time she was clean and had returned, I was dressed and my cock had deflated.

I waited for her to dress, and we headed downstairs for breakfast. Lorna had cooked up good, old-fashioned Western omelets. We sat down to enjoy the meal, and I was pleasantly surprised that the woman was in a good mood. She was smiling, sharing stories about Vera as a child. When Vera acted ill, Lorna popped right to her feet and

dashed off to the kitchen.

When she returned she had a glass of brown-colored water in her hand along with a small white capsule. “Here, dear. Take this.” She handed the items to Vera, who grimaced.

“That looks like urine.” She cringed. “I’m not drinking that.”

“Yes you are, now drink.” Lorna thrust the glass out and handed her the pill. Vera looked at me for support, but there was no way I was getting in the middle of it. I shrugged and shrank back. I didn’t want to upset Lorna again.

“Alright,” Vera complained. She took the capsule and placed it on her tongue, then sipped the liquid. After a few sips, she pulled the glass away from her mouth and with a thoughtful look said, “Ginger?”

Lorna smiled and sat back down. “An old remedy my mother taught me. Cold ginger tea and vitamin B6. Both of those things really help with morning sickness.”

Vera simpered and took another swig of the tea. “It’s good, but it looks really gross.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Lorna touched Vera’s hand. “Honey, I just really wanted to apologize again. I got so worked up over this entire thing, I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Vera set the glass down and held her mom’s hand. It was sweet seeing them interact in such a calm way. Vera had only ever had harsh words for her mother, and to see the shift in their relationship was incredible. It made me believe anything was possible.

“Mom, I love you. I just wanted you to know I’m not a child. You don’t have to protect me. I have Lucas now.” She looked to me affectionately, then back to her

mother. “I’m safe.”

“Oh, I believe it now. I guess I just had to see for myself.” She patted Vera’s hand and nodded at the food. “Are you going to eat more?”

“I think so. This tea is settling my stomach.”

“Alright, well before you dig in, have another drink. I want to tell you something.” Lorna sat back and opened her phone, swiping a few times. “I bought a house.”

“You what?” Vera nearly had the glass at her mouth, and I was glad she hadn’t taken a sip. She would have ended up spitting the tea out.

“I’m moving to Miami.” Lorna beamed. “Well, Weston... It’s west of Fort Lauderdale, but it’s close enough to visit as much as I want without being a nuisance. And I can be a part of the baby’s life. It’s close to a great retirement community, so as I age, I’ll have friends nearby too.”

“Mom, that’s?—”

“Amazing.” I interrupted. I could see the troubled expression on Vera’s face, and I wanted to reassure her that I would always be here to guide her.

“Amazing,” Vera echoed. Though she didn’t look convinced.

“I can’t take possession for at least six weeks. They preferred a longer settlement to get their affairs in order. So, I’ll need a place to stay a few weeks. But I do have to return to Honolulu to get my affairs in order there. Then I can settle up with the old place and have my things shipped. I’m so excited.”

“So you couldn’t get me to move home, so you’re moving here?” Vera looked pale

again.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Vera?” Lorna asked, and Vera turned to me.

She met my gaze and didn’t turn away, so I responded for her. “It’s really amazing, Lorna. We would be more than happy to host you here in the guest room until things get settled. And who knows?” I turned away from Vera to see Lorna’s expression. “Maybe you’ll meet someone new here and find out that not all men are horrible monsters.”

She blushed. “Maybe so.”

I had the feeling that the woman would always be single, but it never hurt to compliment or encourage someone. We ate breakfast as normal, and Vera was able to finish her plate of food. That bit was encouraging. We discussed plans to bring Lorna’s things to the mainland and how much it would take. And I knew the timing was right.

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I had no plan. I had no pomp or hype. All I had was a simple ring and my love, and even though I never did things in a small way, I knew it was all that was needed.

“Excuse me, ladies. I have to get something.” I got out of my seat and walked to my office, taking the small, black velvet box out of the top drawer. The ring would look perfect on Vera’s finger.

I returned to the room confident as I had ever been. I strolled right up to Vera and dropped to one knee. She looked at me like I was crazy, then got a gleam in her eye. Lorna gasped, and I bent to tie my shoe.

“Oh, God, Luke.” Vera laughed and swatted me, and I grinned and looked up at her.

“What?”

“I thought you were going to propose. You need to stop doing that.” Her eye roll got me. I chuckled and produced the ring.

“I am.” Vera was looking at Lorna when I held the ring out, but she turned to me and the laughing stopped immediately. “Ms. Davids, I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know you for the past nearly fourteen weeks. That doesn’t seem like very long, but it’s long enough to know what I want. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Make babies with me. Go on adventures. Build a family and a life together.”

Vera’s eyes twinkled as she nodded. “As long as you stop with the cheesy jokes and... aw, heck, you’ll have the best dad jokes ever.”

She threw her arms around me. I stood, lifting her off her feet as I went, and I spun her around in a circle. Lorna clapped and laughed, and my heart was full. It had been a whirlwind of a summer, but it had changed my life. I couldn't be happier. My life felt strangely like it was complete, but also like it had just started.

"I can't wait to make you my wife."

Vera squeezed me harder. "I can't wait to make you a father."

I laughed again. They say good things always come in pairs. This woman and the baby she carried are the best things. I'd take that to the bank.

35

EPILOGUE

VERA

One year later...

"That was such a beautiful ceremony," Midge said as she hugged me. The room was a little loud with the music playing, but I couldn't complain. The day had gone off without a hitch.

"You can thank Tina." I nodded at Lucas's personal assistant who sat next to Mom holding Victor. At almost four months old, he looked more like a little person than a baby. Lucas selected a baby tuxedo for the event, and Mom had made sure to be meticulous about bib usage so he didn't spit up on the black satin lapels.

"Speak nothing of it, Vera. You and Lucas are like family." Tina grinned and bounced the baby.

Midge hooked her arm through mine and took a few steps away from the table of chatty women. “So your career actually took off, huh? I heard you got a huge slot in Motherhood Maternity’s ad.” She had expressed her jealousy after I scored the shoot. Motherhood Maternity was the largest producer of maternity clothing for women, and I had gotten multiple contracts with them for every clothing line.

“Yeah, well I’m just glad Vogue asked me back even after having received the contract with Motherhood. It seems even if my body has some flaws from pregnancy, they still want me.”

“Of course they still want you,” Lucas said, coming up behind me. He wrapped his arms around my belly and scratched his stubble across my neck as he kissed me. “How is my beautiful wife?”

I turned and wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him as a chorus of tinkling sounds echoed around the room. Our guests tapping forks on their glasses indicated a traditional kiss from the bride and groom was demanded. I had no problems kissing my sexy husband in front of all these people. Midge snickered and covered her mouth.

“Well, I can see you two have no shame,” she commented.

“None at all,” I told her, looking over my shoulder. Lucas let me go but lingered by my side.

“So, you leave tonight?”

We were headed to Honolulu for our honeymoon and a visit to some old friends back home for a reception there. Lucas had never been to Honolulu, only the big island, so it would be a treat for us both. “Yeah, Mom is going too. She’ll watch Victor so I don’t have to be without him for very long.”

“That’s nice. You wouldn’t want to end up getting pregnant again.” Midge’s offhand comment made Lucas swarm me again. His grabby hands had me by the hips this time as he kissed my bare shoulder.

“Nonsense. That contract with Motherhood is good for five years. That means we still have four years to make as many babies as we can, and I’m thinking it might be nice to have eight or ten.” His teeth bit down on my skin, and I yelped.

“Yes, I second that!” Mom walked up to us holding Victor. “I want a dozen grandbabies all as perfect as this little angel.”

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“So you all want my skin to have tiger stripes?” I laughed.

“I’m on your side,” said Midge. “One and done for me. Look, guys, I’m taking off. It was nice meeting you, Tina.” Midge waved and kissed me on the cheek. “Stay out of trouble back home. I’ll catch you when you’re back.”

Midge walked away, and I turned to take Victor from Mom’s arms. He smelled like baby shampoo and Mom’s perfume, and it made me happy. “He wasn’t too much trouble for you during the ceremony, was he?”

“Not at all. He slept the whole time.” Mom straightened his little tuxedo coat.

“I can’t get over how much he looks like me.” Lucas touched Victor’s nose and kissed my forehead. “I am the luckiest man alive.”

I felt the same, that I was the luckiest woman alive. I looked around our reception hall at our guests. Some of my associates from the modeling world. Midge, who was walking away. Henry, who had come around to believe I was good for Luke after my advice caused him to swing a new direction with a client and score a million-dollar contract. And my mother, who had become our biggest supporter. The only one missing, who I thought should have been there, was my father.

As was his normal custom, he shirked his paternal duty in favor of some other grand adventure and sent a card instead. In a non-traditional fashion, I had Mr. Fink walk me down the aisle. Though he was only my agent, he had become as close to me as a brother over the past year. He was rough around the edges, but he cared, and in my book, that was all that mattered.

“You look sad,” Lucas said, leaning closer to me.

“Not sad, sentimental. It seems like this entire roomful of people are in my life because of you.”

“Here, let me take him.” Mom interrupted to steal Victor away from me.

I handed him over and followed my husband out onto the dance floor to enjoy another dance as a married couple. He twirled me around and captured me into his arms where I leaned against his chest.

“I think that was because of fate, and maybe because of how amazing you are.”

“Or maybe, just maybe, you really are the most amazing man on this planet.” I looked up at him, full of emotion. “I am in love with you, Mr. Smith.”

“And I am in love with you, Mrs. Davids-Smith.” He winked and kissed me.

Life felt complete now, and I couldn’t have imagined a more perfect wedding day. With a two-week honeymoon planned and my career stronger than ever, I could safely say I was finally happy.