



The Hacker

Author: *Jack Flynn*

Category: Romance

Description: I was born to leap.

To spin.

To fall—and love the fall.

Ballet gave me discipline.

But adrenaline? That gave me life.

I didn't mean to crash into Elias Dane's world.

Didn't mean to shatter the rules he clung to like armor.

He's the one who hides behind the screen.

The one who calculates every risk, every move.

Cold. Brilliant. Dangerous in ways no amount of muscle could hide.

I should've scared him.

Instead, I woke something up inside him.

Something feral. Something possessive.

Now there's nowhere I can run where he won't find me.

No stunt wild enough to shake him loose.

He calls it protecting me.

I call it obsession.

But somewhere between the crash and the freefall,

I forgot one thing:

It's not the fall that kills you.

It's the man who's waiting at the bottom.

Total Pages (Source): 404

1

VIVIENNE

The studio smelled of sweat and rosin, a sharp, resinous tang that clung to the air.

My pointe shoes, battered and pink, squeaked against the Marley floor of the Charleston Crescent Ballet Company's rehearsal space, each step a tiny rebellion against the ache in my arches.

I was Vivienne Laveau—Vivi to those who dared get close—and I lived for this: the burn, the precision, the way my body could carve music into motion.

My red curls, wild and barely tamed in a bun, bounced as I spun through a series of fouettés, the mirrors throwing back a blur of pale tights and black leotard. I looked like fire, or so my mama used to say, her New Orleans drawl thick with pride.

Fire that danced, fire that fell.

“Vivi, you’re a half-beat behind!” Madame Odette’s voice sliced through the piano’s melody, her French accent as unyielding as her expectations. She stood at the front, arms crossed, her silver hair pulled into a bun so tight it seemed to tug at her thoughts. “Focus, or you’ll be scrubbing rosin off the floor instead of dancing Giselle next month.”

I flashed her a grin, breathless, my chest heaving. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Madame.”

My legs trembled, but I pushed through, landing the final turn with a flourish. The other dancers clapped lightly, their faces a mix of exhaustion and admiration.

We were a small company, twenty of us, but fierce, clawing our way to relevance in Charleston's arts scene. The Crescent Ballet was our home, a converted warehouse downtown with high ceilings and a reputation for grit.

"Break, ten minutes," Madame Odette called, and the room exhaled. I collapsed onto the floor, stretching my legs, my toes screaming for mercy. My friend, Lena Hemming, a willowy brunette with a wicked sense of humor, dropped beside me, her water bottle sloshing.

"You're gonna kill yourself pushing like that," she said, nudging my shoulder. "Those turns were insane, but, like, slow down, superstar."

I laughed, wiping sweat from my brow. "Can't slow down, Lena. Gotta feel the rush."

My heart was still pounding, not just from the rehearsal but from the memory of last weekend's skydive. The wind roaring, the earth a patchwork quilt below, my body weightless until the chute snapped me back to reality. I leaned back on my hands, my curls sticking to my neck. "Speaking of rushes, I'm booking another jump soon. You in?"

Lena groaned, and across the room, our friend Marisol Yokely, a petite dancer with a pixie cut, overheard and joined us, her eyes wide. "Vivi, are you serious? Skydiving again? You're gonna break an ankle, and then what? No Giselle, no career, just you limping back to New Orleans."

"Worth it," I said, grinning.

I could still feel it—the freefall, the way my stomach lurched like I’d left it behind, the world spinning until I was nothing but breath and adrenaline. “It’s like dancing with the sky. You leap, you spin, you fall, and for a second, you’re untouchable. Nothing compares.”

Marisol shook her head, sipping her water. “You’re unhinged. I’m not risking my feet for a thrill. Madame Odette would have your head if she knew.”

“She’d have to catch me first,” I teased, stretching my calves.

My body was a machine, disciplined to a fault, but my soul? That craved chaos.

Growing up in New Orleans, I’d learned to chase what set me alight—jazz on Bourbon Street, the pulse of a second line, the way a storm could make the city feel alive. Skydiving was just the latest fix.

Lena leaned closer, her voice low. “You’re reckless, Vivi, but I love you for it. Just ... maybe don’t tell Madame Odette you’re jumping out of planes. She’ll make you do barre for a month straight.”

I snorted, imagining Madame Odette’s horrified face. “Deal. But y’all are missing out. The rush is better than sex.”

Marisol choked on her water, and Lena cackled. “Bold claim, Laveau,” Lena said. “You got someone in mind to test that theory?”

I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks warmed. Romance wasn’t my thing—not when I had dance and the sky to keep me high. Men were distractions, and I didn’t have time for those. Still, Lena’s teasing stirred something, a flicker of curiosity I shoved down fast.

The break ended, and we dragged ourselves back to the barre, Madame Odette's metronome ticking like a heartbeat.

Hours bled together, my muscles screaming, my mind narrowing to counts and positions. By the time rehearsal wrapped, I was a sweaty, aching mess, my curls frizzing out of their bun, my leotard clinging to my skin. I peeled off my pointe shoes, wincing at the blisters, and headed to the office to grab my bag.

The Crescent's office was a cramped space off the studio, cluttered with posters of past performances and a desk buried under paperwork.

As I stepped inside, I froze.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

A man stood there, leaning against the desk, his broad shoulders filling out a black T-shirt, his blond hair catching the fluorescent light. He was tall—six-three, maybe—muscular in a way that said he worked for it, not just genetics. His jaw was sharp, his eyes a piercing blue, and he had a smirk that screamed trouble.

He looked like he'd stepped off the cover of a romance novel, all rugged charm and quiet intensity.

My heart did a little pirouette, which I promptly ignored.

“Vivi, there you are!” called Teresa Sneed, our office manager and resident tech guru. She was a wiry woman with a perpetual coffee stain on her blouse. “This is Elias. He’s helping me with ... a thing.”

Elias’s eyes flicked to me, and I felt it—a jolt, like the moment before a jump.

Wow.

His gaze lingered on my face, then dipped to my sweat-damp leotard, slow and deliberate. My skin prickled, and I crossed my arms, suddenly aware of my messy curls and flushed cheeks.

“Nice to meet you, Vivi,” he said, his voice low, with a hint of a drawl that didn’t quite place. There was humor in it, like he was already in on a joke I hadn’t heard. “Heard you talking about skydiving out there.”

I raised an eyebrow, tossing my bag onto a chair. “Eavesdropping, huh? Yeah, I

jump. You ever tried it?”

His smirk widened, but something tightened in his expression, a flicker of unease. “Nah, I prefer solid ground. Gravity’s my friend.” He said it with a dry chuckle, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Scared of heights?” I teased, stepping closer, my hip brushing the desk. The air between us crackled, and I caught a whiff of his cologne—woody, clean, expensive. My pulse kicked up, and I hated how much I noticed it.

“Not scared,” he said, leaning in just enough to make my breath catch. “Just smart. Why jump out of a perfectly good plane when you can stay down here and ... enjoy the view?”

His eyes locked on mine, and the room felt smaller, warmer. My lips parted, a retort ready, but Teresa interrupted, oblivious. “Vivi, Elias is a genius with computers. He’s doing me a favor, fixing our system.”

“Fixing what?” I asked, tearing my gaze from Elias. Teresa hesitated, her fingers twisting a pen.

“Just ... a glitch,” she said, too quickly. “I hope, anyway. Nothing big.”

Elias’s smirk faltered, and he straightened, his posture shifting to something more guarded. “Yeah, a glitch,” he echoed, but his tone didn’t match Teresa’s. There was weight to it, a secret I couldn’t quite grasp.

I narrowed my eyes, sensing the lie but not pushing. Instead, I turned back to Elias, leaning against the desk, mirroring his stance. “So, Mr. Cipher, what’s your deal? You just wander into ballet companies to fix glitches?”

He laughed, a rich sound that sent a shiver down my spine. “Something like that. Friend of a friend. I’m good with tech, and I owed a favor.”

“Must be some favor,” I said, my voice lighter than I felt. His presence was unsettling, like a storm cloud rolling in over the Lowcountry. I wanted to poke at it, see how much I could stir him up. “Sure you don’t want to try skydiving? I could use a partner.”

His jaw tensed, but the grin stayed. “Tempting, Red, but I’ll pass. You keep your death wish. I’ll stick to ... safer thrills.”

“Red?” I arched a brow, my curls bouncing as I tilted my head. “Original.”

“Fits you,” he said, his voice dropping, and damn if it didn’t make my stomach flip. He was flirting, and I was falling for it, my body betraying me with every heated glance.

Teresa cleared her throat, breaking the spell. “Vivi, you should head out. Long day tomorrow.”

“Right,” I said, grabbing my bag, but my eyes stayed on Elias. “See you around, Cipher.”

“Count on it,” he replied, and the promise in his voice made my skin tingle.

I was halfway to the door when Teresa’s phone buzzed. She glanced at it, her face paling. “Elias,” she whispered, her voice tight. “It’s worse than we thought.”

He crossed the room in two strides, his humor gone, replaced by a laser focus that made him look ... dangerous. He leaned over her shoulder, reading the screen, and his expression hardened.

“What’s going on?” I asked, pausing in the doorway.

Elias looked up, his blue eyes sharp, unreadable. “The company’s been hacked,” he said, the words landing like a punch. “And I’m going to find out who did it.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

ELIAS

I leaned back in the creaky office chair, the fluorescent lights of the Crescent Ballet's cramped office buzzing like a swarm of pissed-off wasps. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, the screen's glow casting shadows across my knuckles.

The company's network was a goddamn sieve—holes so wide a script kiddie with a YouTube tutorial could've waltzed through. Whoever had breached it wasn't even trying that hard.

That's what pissed me off most. Sloppy work. No respect for the craft.

Teresa Sneed, the ballet's office manager, hovered behind me, her coffee-stained blouse radiating nervous energy.

She'd called me, almost begging, her voice tight with panic over the phone two days ago. Phishing scheme, she'd said. Some glitch. I'd almost laughed. A glitch didn't scrape financials or sniff around for guest lists. This was deliberate, surgical, and it was escalating fast.

I hadn't owed her a favor, despite what I'd told Vivi. That was just me being polite, smoothing the edges of a truth too messy to unpack in casual conversation.

Teresa and I had a history—a weekend fling years back, all heat and no substance. It fizzled as quickly as it sparked, but we'd stayed friendly enough. Distant, sure, but friendly.

When she called, I'd been surprised, maybe even a little flattered. A job like this? A chance to flex my skills, hunt a hacker, maybe send another asshole to the feds—or worse? Hell, it was practically a vacation.

But now, as I dug into the network's logs, my jaw tightened. This wasn't just a phishing scam. The intruders were after everything—benefactor records, financials, guest lists. And then, the thing that made my blood run cold: the dancers' personal data. Names. Addresses. Phone numbers. The kind of shit that could turn a casual hack into a fucking nightmare.

Vivi stood behind me, too close, her presence like a live wire sparking against my skin. I could smell her—sweat, sharp and human, mixed with something floral, maybe jasmine. It was intoxicating in a way that made my gut twist.

I didn't like it.

Didn't like how it stirred something in me, an old itch I'd sworn I'd never scratch again. Longing. Hunger. The kind of shit that made a man lose focus, make mistakes.

I'd buried that part of me years ago, after the last time I let someone get too close. Promises were made to be kept, not broken. But fuck, she was testing me without even trying.

“Elias,” Teresa said, her voice cutting through the hum of the ancient desktop. “What's happening? Can you fix it?”

I didn't look up, my fingers flying across the keys as I traced the intruders' path.

“They're scraping everything,” I said, my tone clipped, professional. “Benefactors' data—bank accounts, donation histories. Financials for the company. Guest lists for the gala next month. And ...” I hesitated, my eyes narrowing at the screen. “They're

pulling the dancers' personal info. Names, addresses, the works."

Vivi sucked in a breath, and I felt her shift closer, her arm brushing the back of my chair. My spine stiffened, but I kept my eyes on the code. Focus, Dane. Focus.

"Why the dancers?" Vivi asked, her voice low, edged with something sharp. Not fear—anger, maybe.

Defiance.

It suited her, that fire. Matched the red curls spilling loose from her bun, the way her green eyes had sparked when she'd teased me about skydiving.

I didn't answer right away. Couldn't. Because a part of me—a stupid, irrational part—wondered if she was the reason this felt personal. Her name was in that database. Her address. The thought of some faceless creep out there, hunting her, knowing where she lived ...

My hands froze for a split second before I forced them to move again.

"Could be leverage," I said finally, my voice colder than I meant it to be. "Blackmail. Or worse. Doesn't matter why. They're in, and they're not being subtle."

Teresa's hands twisted together, her knuckles white. "Can you stop them?"

I snorted, already deep in the system's guts. "Already am."

My fingers danced, isolating the intruders' connection, severing their access with a few precise commands.

They were good—not great, but good. They'd used a VPN, bounced their signal

through dozens of servers, but I'd seen better.

I slipped a pack of tracers into their stream, a little gift they wouldn't notice until it was too late. My spiders, as I called them—custom scripts I'd built over years of chasing assholes like this—were already crawling through their system, hunting for a foothold. I'd find them. And when I did, I'd handle it my way.

Vivi leaned in, her breath warm against my shoulder as she peered at the screen. "What's that?" she asked, pointing at the lines of code flickering by.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I fought the urge to shift away from her. “Locking them out,” I said, keeping it simple. “Kicking their asses to the curb.”

She laughed, a soft, throaty sound that hit me like a shot of whiskey. “You make it sound easy.”

“It’s not,” I said, but a corner of my mouth twitched. Damn it. I was showing off, and I knew it. For her. The realization burned, and I shoved it down, focusing on the task.

With a final flourish, I slammed the system shut, erecting a temporary firewall that’d hold until I could rebuild the whole damn network. The intruders were gone—for now.

I leaned back, cracking my knuckles. “System’s locked down,” I said, glancing at Teresa. “But your security’s a joke. I’ll need to rebuild it from scratch. Firewalls, encryption, the works. Stuff even the NSA would sweat to crack.”

Teresa exhaled, her shoulders sagging. “You can do that?”

“Already planning it,” I said, my tone brisk. “I’ll stick around, get it done. You’ll be Fort Knox by the time I’m through.”

It sounded like bragging, and I hated it. Hated how Vivi’s presence made me want to puff out my chest, prove something.

I wasn’t that guy.

I didn't perform for an audience.

I worked alone, always had.

The job was the rush—cracking systems, outsmarting the other guy. Not this. Not her.

But she was watching me, her lips parted, her eyes bright with something I couldn't read. Curiosity? Respect? Whatever it was, it sank into me like a hook, pulling at that buried thing I'd tried so hard to kill. The possessive demon inside me stirred, clawing at its cage. It wanted her. Wanted to know her, claim her, keep her safe from whatever was out there. I told myself it was the job, the challenge, the thrill of the hunt. But I wasn't that good a liar.

"Thank you, Elias," Teresa said, her voice soft. "I didn't know it was this bad."

"It's worse," I said bluntly, standing to stretch my legs. The office felt too small with Vivi so close, her scent still lingering in the air. "But it's handled for now. I'll come back tomorrow, finish the upgrades."

I didn't need to come back. I could've done the rest remotely, patched the system from my place. But the words were out before I could stop them, driven by that same reckless pull.

I needed an excuse to see her again. To figure out why she got under my skin like this.

Vivi tilted her head, her curls catching the light. "Tomorrow, huh? You sure you're not just sticking around for the rosin fumes?"

I smirked, despite myself. "Tempting, Red, but I'll pass. Got enough to keep me

busy.”

Her laugh hit me again, low and warm, and I turned away, busying myself with shutting down the computer. I didn’t trust myself to keep looking at her. Not when every glance made that demon growl louder.

Teresa’s phone buzzed, and she stepped away to answer it, leaving me alone with Vivi for a moment. The silence stretched, heavy, charged. I could feel her watching me, and when I finally glanced up, her eyes were on mine, unflinching.

“You’re good at this,” she said, her voice quieter now, almost serious. “The whole ... computer genius thing. It’s kinda hot.”

My pulse kicked up, and I hated how much I liked hearing that.

“Don’t get used to it,” I said, aiming for dry but landing somewhere closer to gruff. “I won’t stick around long.”

“Too bad,” she said, her lips curving. “I could use a thrill like you.”

The air crackled, and for a second, I forgot how to breathe. She was flirting, and I was falling for it, my control fraying like cheap rope. I opened my mouth to fire back, but Teresa returned, her face pale.

“Elias, that was the bank,” she said. “They flagged some transfers. Small ones, but ... they think it’s tied to this.”

I nodded, already mentally mapping the next steps. “I’ll trace it. Whoever these assholes are, I’ll find them.”

I didn’t tell her the rest—that my spiders were already burrowing into the hackers’

system, that I'd probably have their location by the time I got home. Or that I'd deal with them personally.

I'd taken down worse than this—corporate spies, black-hat collectives, even a cartel's tech guy once.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

These guys? They were local, I could feel it. Sloppy, overconfident. I'd have them begging for mercy before the week was out.

"Get some rest," I told Teresa, grabbing my jacket. "I'll handle it."

I glanced at Vivi one last time, and the demon roared, its claws sinking deeper. She was trouble, the kind I didn't need but couldn't resist. I told myself I was staying for the job, for the challenge.

But as I walked out into the humid Charleston night, the truth burned in my chest.

I was coming back for her.

3

VIVIENNE

Dragging a kayak through my studio apartment wasn't exactly a glamorous look, but it was the reality of living above Liquid Courage.

The air downstairs always smelled like tequila, pineapple syrup, and bad decisions, but I loved it.

It was home.

I wrestled the kayak out the door, bumping the frame, the stairs, probably a few ghosts.

Down below, a few of the regulars spilled onto the sidewalk, plastic souvenir cups in hand, singing some off-key song about heartbreak and slushies.

One of them—Big Mike, a bearded guy who lived on rum punch and charm—saw me and laughed.

“Where you headed, Vivi?” he called.

“Night cruise,” I said, struggling to get the kayak onto my shoulder.

“Don’t drown! I ain’t sober enough to save you!”

I blew him a kiss and dumped the kayak into the back of my dented SUV.

The harbor was only a few minutes away, and the drive was a breeze with the windows down and the salt air tangling in my curls.

I found Jessa waiting at the launch, spinning a Red Bull can on one finger like a circus act.

Her long dark braid whipped around in the breeze, her board shorts clinging to her legs.

Jessa was the kind of girl who thought "danger" was just another word for "good story."

“About damn time!” she shouted as I pulled up.

“I had to evict my kayak from my living room!” I called back, laughing.

“You and that bar apartment,” she said, shaking her head. “One day they’re gonna

find you crushed under a kayak and three frozen margaritas.”

“Better than dying bored,” I said as we shoved our kayaks into the water.

The night wrapped around us thick and sweet, heavy with humidity and the low hum of music from downtown. The moon hung fat and golden over the water, slicing silver ribbons across the surface.

Technically, paddling out into Charleston Harbor after dark wasn’t the smartest thing two women could do.

The harbor wasn’t just pretty lights and tourist sailboats—it was a working port, and even at night, tugs and cargo ships cut through the water like silent giants. Their massive wakes could flip a kayak in seconds if you weren’t careful.

Not to mention the currents—strong, unpredictable, twisting through the inlets and around the barrier islands like invisible hands trying to drag you under.

And then there was the wildlife. Bull sharks liked these waters. So did the occasional rogue alligator that wandered too far south from the rivers.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

We weren't stupid. We wore life jackets, carried waterproof flashlights, kept a weather eye out.

But still.

Most sane people wouldn't risk it.

That was the thing, though.

I wasn't sane—not in the way Charleston's society girls were sane, clutching their pearls and their good reputations.

I was born in the backstreets of New Orleans, raised on jazz and hurricanes—the storm kind and the cocktail kind.

Thrill-seeking wasn't a hobby for me. It was stitched into my bones.

Every leap, every spin, every reckless choice—skydiving, motorbiking, night kayaking through a shark-infested harbor—it all made me feel alive in a way nothing else could touch.

Dance gave me discipline. But adrenaline? That gave me freedom.

Luckily, I had friends like Jessa who felt the same way.

We paddled into the harbor, the city disappearing behind us.

“All right, tell me what’s up,” Jessa said after a few minutes, her voice teasing.

“What?” I asked, feigning innocence.

“That stupid little smile you're trying to hide. It’s a man, isn’t it?”

I snorted. “Not everything’s about men, Jess.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Everything’s about men when you look like you just stole the last cookie and got away with it. I know you, Vivi. Don’t try to pretend with me.”

I sighed, dragging my paddle through the water lazily.

“There might be a guy,” I admitted. “Elias. Tech genius type. Friend of the ballet company’s office manager.”

“Tech genius, huh?” she said, bumping my kayak with hers. “Tell me he’s not a troll.”

“He’s ... definitely not a troll.” I bit my lip, thinking of those shoulders, that lazy smirk, those eyes like twin blue flame throwers. “More like ... Viking hacker with a grudge against gravity.”

Jessa let out a low whistle. “And you’re not dragging him upstairs above Liquid Courage because ...?”

“Because he’s all broody and tightly wound,” I said. “I’m pretty sure he calculates his emotional responses in code.”

“So basically, your dream man,” she said, grinning.

I laughed. “Maybe.”

At least he wasn't like the usual guys who showed up in my life—smiling too wide, flexing too hard, seeing “ballerina” like it was some kind of fantasy box to check off.

I could spot them a mile away.

The ones who thought dating a dancer meant I'd be delicate and pliable, all soft sighs and gratitude.

Or worse, the ones who fetishized the discipline, imagining control in the studio translated to submission everywhere else.

Spoiler alert: it didn't.

I wasn't some demure little swan waiting for a prince. I was fire. Wild and spinning and hard to hold. And most of the men who came sniffing around figured that out too late—usually around the time I chose a skydiving trip over a second date.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Elias didn't look at me like that.

Didn't look at me like a prize or a prop.

If anything, he looked at me like a problem he wanted to solve—and maybe break open in the process.

Which, honestly? Was way more tempting than I wanted to admit.

The thought lingered as I dug my paddle into the water, muscles in my arms burning pleasantly. It felt good to move differently after spending hours locked in the brutal precision of rehearsal.

My feet, abused and blistered from pointe shoes, floated weightless in the kayak, and I almost sighed from the relief.

No pressure.

No burning arches.

No Madame Odette barking counts over a metronome.

Just me, the sky, and the endless dark water stretching out like a road to nowhere.

We floated farther from the launch, letting the harbor swallow us up.

Jessa cracked open another Red Bull, the sound sharp in the humid night.

“You ever think we’re maybe a little too reckless?” she asked, smirking.

“All the time,” I said. “Still doesn’t stop me.”

But just as the words left my mouth, the water shifted—fast. A sudden, powerful current sucked at the bottom of my kayak, spinning me sideways.

I dug my paddle in instinctively, trying to correct, but the nose of the boat caught something—a hidden sandbar or debris—and jerked violently. The kayak pitched hard, the harbor tilting in a sickening roll of black and silver. For one heart-stopping second, I thought I was going in.

My body reacted before my mind could catch up, knees bracing, muscles locking tight. I fought the pull, using every ounce of strength left in my battered legs and arms to stay upright.

The adrenaline hit so fast it was like a slap—hot and dizzying.

Jessa shouted something—warning or encouragement, I couldn’t tell—but my heartbeat drowned everything else out.

Thump-thump-thump.

Like a drum in my ears. Like the echo of the stage floor beneath my pointe shoes.

For a moment, true fear slithered through me—cold and real and sharp. The harbor wasn’t a joke.

If I tipped, if I went under at the wrong time, if a freighter rolled through and churned up the water ... I could disappear. Swallowed whole by the dark.

But the fear wasn't clean. It twisted with something hotter, something heady.

The same electric jolt I felt the second before a leap—the knowledge that I might crash and burn spectacularly, but God, the flight would be worth it.

I gritted my teeth and forced the kayak to right itself, dragging my paddle hard against the current. The boat wobbled. Teetered. Then, slowly, steadied.

I gasped, chest heaving, the salt air burning in my lungs.

My feet throbbed inside my sneakers, angry reminders of the hours spent in brutal, unrelenting pointe work earlier today.

Blisters, bruises, calluses—I wore them like medals.

But right now? Floating here, fighting against something bigger than me?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I didn't feel broken.

I felt alive.

A raw laugh tore out of me before I could stop it.

Jessa, still nearby, whooped and pumped her paddle in the air like a victory flag.

"That's what I'm talking about!" she hollered.

"Not dead yet!" I yelled back, laughing until the sound dissolved into the night.

My arms ached, my feet throbbed, my heart raced. But the thrill swallowed everything else. This—this was the edge I lived for. The razor-thin line between falling and flying.

We drifted closer to the Battery, the lights from the city growing sharper, scattering silver across the dark water.

Up ahead, a boathouse and dock jutted out into the harbor, anchored to an estate so massive it almost looked ridiculous against the shoreline.

Dominion Hall.

I knew the name. Everyone in Charleston did.

The place was pure, unapologetic excess.

Pale stone and sprawling grounds, private gates, and a reputation dripping with rumors.

Some said it was old family money, others swore it was new wealth built on something bloodier.

Men who were too young to be that rich, too dangerous to be that quiet.

Private security, black-tinted SUVs, the occasional whispered sighting of men who looked like they could kill you with their bare hands and not lose a wink of sleep over it.

The kind of place you didn't get invited to unless you were either insanely rich, stupidly brave, or both.

I'd never been that curious. Until now.

On the dock, a cluster of people lingered—men mostly, big and broad-shouldered, the type who looked like they either owned the harbor or fought wars on it.

And a few women, too, tucked close to them like they belonged there. Laughing softly, sipping drinks, their bodies turned toward the men like planets caught in orbit.

I didn't recognize any of them.

Not yet.

Until I saw him.

Elias.

Standing apart from the rest, arms crossed over his broad chest, wearing that same black T-shirt that clung like it had been painted on.

His blond hair caught the moonlight, and even from the water, I could see the tension rippling off him in waves.

The second he spotted me, his whole body stiffened.

His gaze slammed into mine like a punch, hot and furious.

Jessa caught the shift immediately.

“Uh, oh,” she murmured. “Big Bad Viking does not look thrilled. Is that your guy?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I nodded and grinned, wicked.

“What’s he gonna do, swim after me?”

Jessa snickered but slowed her kayak, letting me drift closer toward the boathouse like a lure on a line.

Elias stalked forward to the edge of the dock, looming there like some angry sea god.

His friends—whoever they were—fell quiet, sensing the shift even if they didn’t understand it.

“What the hell are you doing?” Elias barked across the water, voice low and rough.

I rested my paddle across my lap, raising my eyebrows in mock innocence. “Kayaking,” I called back sweetly. “Obviously.”

“You’re in the goddamn harbor. At night. Alone.”

“Correction—we are in the harbor,” I said, gesturing at Jessa, who gave him a lazy wave. “And the sharks are probably too drunk to bother us.”

One of the guys beside Elias choked on his beer, and the others—couples, clearly—tried to hide their amusement.

Elias didn’t move.

He just glared, and I swear if looks could lasso a person, I'd already be hog-tied on the dock.

"You're out of your fucking mind," he muttered.

I paddled a little closer, my kayak bumping softly against the dock where he stood, towering over me.

I tilted my head back, letting my curls tumble loose, flashing him my best what's your problem? grin.

"You worried about me, Cipher?" I teased.

Elias dropped into a crouch, forearms resting on his knees, the muscles in his arms pulling tight.

He looked like he was trying not to throttle me—or kiss me. Hard to tell which.

"You don't know what's out here," he said, voice low enough to make my stomach clench. "The night doesn't take prisoners."

"Neither do I," I said lightly, leaning just a little closer.

The heat between us crackled like static off a live wire. He stared at me like he wanted to tear the world apart—and hated himself for it.

"You're gonna get yourself hurt one day," he said, voice rough. "And I'm not the kind of man who stands by and watches."

The words landed harder than I expected.

Not a threat. A promise.

For a second, I forgot how to breathe.

Then I shoved off from the dock with my paddle, spinning lazily away, heart thudding in my chest.

“Well then, Cipher,” I called over my shoulder, “you better keep up.”

I didn’t look back. Didn’t have to. I could feel him standing there, fists clenched, watching me disappear into the dark.

And the wildest part?

I didn’t want to be saved. I wanted to be chased.

ELIAS

The dock's wooden planks groaned under my boots as I stood rooted, fists clenched, watching Vivi's kayak vanish into the black shimmer of Charleston Harbor. Her taunt—you better keep up—hung in the humid air, sharp and reckless, slicing into me like a switchblade. My pulse thundered, not from exertion but from something darker, something that clawed at the edges of my control. She was fire, that redheaded hellion, and I was a damn fool for standing so close to the blaze.

Laughter shattered the moment, low and mocking, from my brothers behind me. Marcus, always the loudest, leaned against the boathouse railing, his beer bottle dangling from his fingers. His dark eyes glinted with that smug amusement that made me want to knock his teeth out just to shut him up.

“Who's the mermaid, Elias?” he called, his Charleston drawl thick with salt. “Got yourself a new project, or is she just another glitch?”

I didn't turn, didn't give him the satisfaction. My jaw tightened, and I forced my fists to unclench, shoving them into my jeans' pockets. “None of your business,” I said, voice low, clipped. The demon inside me snarled, not at Marcus but at the thought of Vivi reduced to their bullshit banter.

“Oh, come on,” Marcus pressed, stepping closer. “Red hair, smart mouth, paddling out in the harbor like she's auditioning for a fucking action movie? Who's the hotty in your totty? Spill, brother.”

The others joined in, their voices a chorus of razzing I had no patience for. Dominion Hall's brotherhood, once my fortress, felt like a cage tonight, their settled lives pressing in like a vice. Almost every one of them had found their woman, their anchor, and now they looked at me like I was next in line for domestication. Fuck that.

"She's nobody," I snapped, turning just enough to meet Marcus's gaze. "Drop it."

He grinned, undeterred, because Marcus was a bulldog when he smelled weakness. "Nobody, huh? Didn't look like nobody when you were about to dive in after her. What's her name? Bet it's something spicy, like her."

"Vivienne," I said before I could stop myself, the name slipping out like a curse. I regretted it instantly. Marcus's grin widened, and the others exchanged glances, the kind that promised weeks of relentless shit-giving.

"Vivienne," Marcus repeated, rolling the word like a cigar. "Sounds like trouble. You always did have a thing for the wild ones."

I turned away, my boots thudding against the dock as I headed for the path back to Dominion Hall. "You don't know shit," I muttered, but the words lacked heat. He wasn't wrong, and that was the problem. Vivienne Laveau was trouble, the kind that didn't just burn—it consumed. And I was already too close to the flames.

The laughter faded behind me, swallowed by the hum of cicadas and the distant lap of waves. Dominion Hall loomed nearby, its pale stone glowing under the moonlight, all sharp angles and our mountains of money.

Once, this place had been my sanctuary, a fortress where I could lose myself in code and control, where the world made sense. Now it felt stifling, crowded with my brothers' growing families, their women, their futures. The new compound on Isle of

Palms couldn't be finished soon enough. I needed space, distance, a place to breathe without their eyes waiting for me to fall like they had.

I climbed the stairs to my wing, my footsteps echoing in the cavernous halls. My suite was at the far end, a minimalist cave of glass and steel, all clean lines and cold surfaces. My computers hummed softly, screens glowing with the results of my spiders' work. I'd almost forgotten about them, distracted by Vivi's reckless stunt in the harbor. That pissed me off more than anything—how easily she'd derailed me, how she'd made me forget the hunt.

I dropped into my chair, the leather creaking under my weight, and pulled up the data. My spiders had done their job, burrowing through the hackers' system, mapping their digital footprints. The results blinked on the screen, precise and undeniable. Not far. Just inland, a half hour's drive. A small operation, sloppy but ambitious, holed up in a shithole apartment in North Charleston, if the IP addresses were accurate. And they were. I didn't make mistakes.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard, itching to dig deeper, to tear their system apart. I could send the data to the feds, let them handle it. It was the smart move, the clean move. I'd done it before—dropped a file in the right inbox, watched from a distance as the arrests rolled in.

But the thought felt hollow tonight, unsatisfying. My blood ran hot, my pulse a steady drum in my ears. I didn't want clean. I wanted to feel it—their panic, their fear—when they realized they'd fucked with the wrong man.

No, not my world. Her world. Vivienne. Vivi. The thought of her name in their database, her address in their hands, made my vision tunnel. She was out there right now, paddling through shark-infested waters, laughing like the danger was a game.

Reckless. Fucking reckless.

I believed in code, in systems, in puzzles that fit together with perfect precision. Risk was fine—calculated, measured, controlled. But her? She leapt without looking, spun through life like she was daring the universe to break her. It was stupid. Dangerous. And it made me want to pin her down, shake her, make her see how close she was to the edge.

I leaned back, scrubbing a hand over my face. My cologne lingered on my skin, woodsy and sharp, but it couldn't mask the memory of her scent—sweat and jasmine, raw and alive. It clung to me, a ghost I couldn't shake. I should've gone to bed, let the data sit until morning, wiped her from my mind. Should've done a lot of things. But the demon inside me was awake, pacing its cage, and it wasn't interested in should over should not.

I wanted my hands on them. The hackers. I wanted to look them in the eyes, see the moment they realized they'd crossed a line they couldn't uncross. Not because they'd breached the ballet company's network—that was just a job. Because they'd reached into her world, threatened her safety. The thought was irrational, possessive, and it felt like truth.

Without a word to my brothers, I grabbed a duffel from the closet and threw in the essentials: laptop, burner phone, lockpicks, a USB drive loaded with my nastiest scripts. My pistol went in last, a cold weight at the bottom of the bag. I didn't know if I'd use it, but I wasn't taking chances. Not with these assholes.

I slipped out of Dominion Hall, the night air thick with salt and heat. My black SUV waited in the garage, its engine purring to life as I slid behind the wheel. The drive inland was a blur, the highway stretching out like a dark ribbon under the moon. My mind should've been on the job, on the hackers, on the plan forming in my head. But it kept circling back to her. Vivi, grinning like a devil as she paddled away, her curls catching the moonlight. Vivi, who didn't know what was out there, who didn't care. Who made me want to break every rule I'd ever set for myself.

Her devil and my demon.

I gripped the wheel tighter, my knuckles whitening. Charleston's waters were a graveyard for fools—every month, some idiot drowned or vanished, thinking a moonlit swim or a night float was a cute idea.

She wasn't invincible, no matter how much she acted like it. The harbor didn't care about her fire, her defiance. It would swallow her whole, and the thought of her gone—her laugh, her spark, her reckless, infuriating light—made my chest ache in a way I hadn't felt in years.

I forced my focus back to the road. The GPS pinged softly, guiding me off the highway and into a rundown neighborhood in North Charleston. Cracked pavement, sagging porches, the kind of place where nobody asked questions. The address matched a squat apartment building, its windows dark except for a faint glow on the second floor. That's where they were, no doubt scratching their heads, wondering why their connection to the ballet's network had gone dead. They'd be planning their next move, oblivious to the storm coming for them.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I parked blocks away, killed the engine, and sat for a moment, letting the silence settle. My spiders had given me enough: three guys, mid-20s, small-time hackers with big egos. They'd hit a few local businesses before, nothing major, but this was their boldest play yet. They weren't masterminds, just greedy, sloppy, and dumb enough to think they could get away with it. Easy prey.

I grabbed my bag and slipped out of the SUV, moving through the shadows like I was born to them. Dominion Hall had taught me that—how to be a ghost, how to hunt without being seen. My brothers and I weren't just rich assholes playing at power. We were forged in blood and betrayal, built to protect what was ours. And Vivi ... she wasn't mine, not yet, but the demon didn't care about technicalities. It wanted her safe, and it would tear through anyone who threatened that.

The apartment building's lock was a joke, giving way under my picks in seconds. The stairwell smelled of stale beer and bad decisions, the kind of place that made your skin crawl. I moved silently, my feet barely touching the steps. The second-floor hallway was dim, a single flickering bulb casting long shadows. Apartment 2B was at the end, the faint hum of electronics seeping through the door.

I paused, listening. Voices, low and agitated, mixed with the clatter of keyboards. They were still awake, still working. Perfect. I set my bag down and pulled out my laptop, connecting to their Wi-Fi with a script that took ten seconds to run. My spiders had already mapped their system—now it was time to play.

I sent a pulse through their network, freezing their screens and locking their keyboards. The voices inside stopped, replaced by curses and the scrape of chairs. I smirked, slipping the laptop back into my bag. Time to meet the neighbors.

I knocked, three sharp raps, and waited. The door cracked open, a skinny guy with a patchy beard peering out. His eyes widened when he saw me—six-three, broad-shouldered, not exactly the pizza delivery guy.

“Who the fuck are you?” he stammered, his hand twitching toward the door.

I didn’t give him a chance to close it. My boot hit the door, slamming it open, and I stepped inside, my presence filling the cramped living room. Two other guys froze, one at a desk cluttered with monitors, the other on a sagging sofa, a laptop balanced on his knees. The air stank of cheap weed and energy drinks.

“Evening, gentlemen,” I said, my voice low, almost pleasant. “You’ve been busy.”

Patchy Beard scrambled back, tripping over a pizza box. “We didn’t do anything, man! Who are you?”

I tilted my head, letting the silence stretch, letting them feel the weight of it. “You hit the Crescent Ballet’s network. Scraped their data. That was a mistake.”

The guy at the desk, a lanky kid with a neck tattoo, laughed nervously. “You’re crazy, man. We don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I stepped closer, my shadow falling over him. “Don’t lie to me. I’ve been in your system for hours. I know every move you’ve made.”

“Here’s how this goes,” I said, my voice cold. “You’re going to delete every scrap of data you stole. Wipe your drives, your backups, everything. Then you’re going to disappear. Leave Charleston. If I ever catch you near a keyboard again, I’ll bury you.”

Patchy Beard sneered, finding his spine. “Fuck you, man. You think you can just

walk in here and scare us? We've got backups. You can't touch us."

Neck Tattoo chimed in, his voice shaky but defiant. "Yeah, we're not your bitches. You're not a cop. Get the hell out."

The third guy, the one on the sofa, stood, his hands balled into fists. "You heard them. Leave, or we'll make you."

Something snapped inside me. The demon bellowed, its cage shattering, and all I could see was Vivi's name in their database, her address in their hands, her life at their mercy. These fuckers thought they could defy me? Thought they could keep her data, keep her vulnerable?

My vision tunneled, red at the edges, and the room felt too small, too hot. The rage boiled over, raw and unstoppable, fueled by the thought of her out there, reckless and untamed, needing me to protect her.

"You're making a mistake," I said, my voice dangerously soft.

Patchy Beard laughed, stepping closer, his bravado fueled by stupidity. "No, you are."

I moved before I could think. My fist caught his jaw, the crack of bone echoing in the cramped space. He crumpled, hitting the floor like a sack of trash, but it wasn't enough. The demon demanded more. I grabbed him by the collar, yanking him up, and slammed his head into the wall. Blood sprayed, his body going limp as I let him drop, lifeless.

Neck Tattoo lunged, swinging a wild punch, but I was faster. I grabbed his arm, twisted it until it snapped, and drove my knee into his gut. He doubled over, gasping, and I didn't stop. My hands found his throat, squeezing until his eyes bulged, his

fingers clawing at me uselessly. I slammed him against the desk, monitors crashing to the ground, and kept squeezing until he went still, his body a dead weight in my grip.

The guy from the sofa screamed, scrambling for the door, but I was on him in two strides. I caught his collar, yanked him back, and drove my fist into his face, once, twice, until blood poured from his nose. He fell, whimpering, and I straddled him, my hands around his neck.

“You thought you could touch her?” I snarled, my voice barely human.

He choked, his eyes wide with terror, but I didn’t care. The demon was free, and it wanted blood. I tightened my grip, watching the life drain from him, until he was nothing but a husk beneath me.

I stood, chest heaving, the room silent except for the hum of a forgotten fan. Blood stained my hands, my shirt, the floor. The air reeked of copper and fear. I stared at the bodies, the reality of what I’d done sinking in, but the demon was quiet now, sated. They were gone. Her data was safe. She was safe.

I moved mechanically, wiping down surfaces, erasing my presence. My scripts had already locked their system—nobody would find the ballet’s data now. I grabbed my bag, stepped over the bodies, and slipped out into the night. The stairwell was empty, the neighborhood asleep. I slid into my SUV, my hands steady but my mind a storm.

I’d crossed a line, one I’d sworn never to cross again. I wasn’t like my brothers, who balanced their darkness with their women, their families. I was the one who stayed cold, controlled, untouchable.

But Vivi had broken something in me, awakened something I couldn’t cage. The thought of her—her grin, her defiance, the way she’d looked at me like she saw through every wall I’d built—drove me to this. She wasn’t mine, not yet, but the

demon didn't care. It wanted her, and it would burn the world to keep her safe.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I started the engine, the road stretching out before me. I'd go back to Dominion Hall, finish the ballet's network upgrades, keep my distance. That was the plan. But as I drove, the demon whispered, low and relentless.

She's not safe until she's yours.

I didn't argue.

5

VIVIENNE

The studio was quiet when I slipped through the back door the next morning, my sneakers squeaking faintly on the scuffed Marley floor.

The sun wasn't even properly up yet, just a watery smudge over the harbor, but I'd already showered, wrangled my curls into a messy bun, and thrown on leggings and a hoodie.

All because of a man I barely knew.

Pathetic.

And yet, there I was—early for once, heart beating a little too fast as I hunted for Teresa.

I found her exactly where I figured she'd be: hunched behind her battered desk in the

Crescent Ballet office, nursing a coffee the size of her head and scowling at a spreadsheet like it had personally offended her.

“Morning, sunshine,” I chirped, letting the door swing shut behind me.

She jumped like I’d fired a gun, nearly sloshing coffee on her keyboard.

“Jesus, Vivi! You trying to kill me?”

“Not today.” I plopped into the chair across from her, draping my arms over the sides.

“I come bearing questions.”

Teresa narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Questions usually mean trouble.”

“Probably.” I flashed her a grin. “I want the dirt on Elias.”

She froze, her hand halfway to her coffee mug.

A beat.

Two.

Then she exhaled like I’d asked for her social security number and firstborn child.

“Really?” she muttered.

I leaned forward eagerly. “So? What’s the story?”

Teresa rubbed her temples, her fingers leaving little red marks.

“We dated. Briefly. Years ago.”

She said it like she was confessing to a crime she didn't even regret.

My eyebrows shot up. "Wait, seriously? You and Elias?"

"Don't sound so surprised. I used to be fun once."

She took a long sip of coffee, grimacing.

"But no. It was ... awful. Like dating my brother. Zero chemistry. We fought about everything. Plus, he was already married to his laptop."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I laughed. “So not a thing anymore?”

“God, no,” she said emphatically. “We’re barely friends. We tolerate each other because we’re both stubborn jackasses who hate unfinished business.”

I grinned wider. “Good to know.”

Teresa narrowed her eyes at me, suspicion darkening her expression.

“Not that it matters. Good luck getting that man out from behind a screen long enough to notice anyone. Elias doesn’t date. He obsesses over code, computers, encryption. Real romantic.”

My heart gave an annoying little skip, which I immediately ignored.

“Maybe he just hasn’t met the right problem yet,” I said innocently.

Teresa gave me a look. “You’re going to break him. Or he’s going to break you. Either way, I want front row seats.”

I was about to push her for more when the front door banged open, the morning breeze whooshing in ahead of Lena and Marisol.

Both looked disgustingly fresh and chipper for seven a.m., their hair slicked back into neat ballet buns, dance bags slung over their shoulders.

Lena spotted me first and made a beeline, dropping her bag with a thud.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the adrenaline junkie herself,” she teased. “What mischief did you get into last night, Vivi?”

Marisol plopped into the chair beside me, swinging her legs like a kid.

“Let me guess. Wrestling gators?”

I laughed, holding up my hands in mock surrender.

“Nothing too crazy. Jessa and I went kayaking.”

Lena groaned. “In the harbor? At night?”

“Is there another way?” I deadpanned.

Marisol shook her head like I was a hopeless case.

“You’re going to get eaten by a bull shark one day and we’re all going to have to perform a tribute show in your honor.”

“Speaking of performing,” Lena added, pulling a water bottle from her bag, “don’t forget we have that thing this weekend.”

It wasn’t a full production—thank God.

In the summer, the Crescent Ballet kept things lighter, hosting smaller events to keep donors happy and the community engaged.

This weekend’s gig was one of those: a private matinee for a group of major patrons and their families, held at the old Dock Street Theatre downtown.

Air-conditioned, elegant, and about two hundred seats max.

Low pressure compared to the brutal winter season, but still important.

The program was a sampler—a few classical pieces, a modern number or two, and a closing ensemble we'd been hammering out all month.

Polished but not perfect. Designed to look effortless, charming, accessible. A soft pitch for fundraising in the fall.

Normally, I didn't mind these things.

Performing for moneyed donors meant smiling until your face hurt and clapping politely at awkward standing ovations, but it also meant staying visible, staying wanted.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

In a small ballet company, that was survival.

There was always some fresh-faced prodigy coming up the ranks, some new girl with longer lines and better feet.

You didn't stay relevant by coasting.

You stayed relevant by showing up, dazzling, and making damn sure your name stuck in the right people's heads.

And while nobody said it out loud, we all knew: One wrong move, one poorly timed injury, one slip in the wrong donor's eye, and you could be out by fall.

Still.

None of that meant I planned to spend my days acting like I was ninety and breakable.

"Oh, I haven't forgotten," I said, twirling a piece of hair around my finger. "Which is why I'm asking—what are we doing after rehearsal today?"

Both of them froze.

"Please tell me you're not thinking what I think you're thinking," Marisol said slowly.

"I was thinking," I said innocently, "that we could go do something fun.

Paddleboarding in Shem Creek? Jet skiing off Isle of Palms? Maybe find a sketchy place that'll let us parasail without signing too many waivers?"

Lena dropped her face into her hands. "You need help."

"Serious help," Marisol agreed.

They exchanged a look—the same look they gave each other when one of Madame Odette's lectures got especially unhinged.

"We love you, Vivi," Lena said firmly, "but we actually want to have ballet careers."

"Yeah," Marisol added. "Preferably with all our limbs still attached."

I pouted. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"We left it in preschool," Lena said dryly. "Right around the time we realized broken ankles don't look good in a tutu."

I sighed dramatically, slumping in my chair.

"Fine. Jessa it is."

"Jessa's just as crazy as you," Marisol muttered under her breath.

"Exactly." I grinned. "She understands me."

Teresa snorted from behind her coffee mug.

"God, help us all," she said.

I smiled wider, feeling a familiar itch under my skin—the need to move, to leap, to fall.

Tonight, after rehearsal, I'd find something wild enough to scratch it.

And maybe—if fate was feeling generous—I'd find a certain Viking hacker still brooding around the edges of my world. Just close enough to catch. Or to catch me.

Either way, I wasn't planning on playing it safe.

Not now.

Not ever.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Lena's phone buzzed, and she and Marisol gathered their bags, chattering about rehearsal schedules and costume fittings as they disappeared down the hall.

The second the door swung shut behind them, I swiveled back toward Teresa, my curiosity practically vibrating out of my skin.

"Okay," I said, dropping my voice. "Now that it's just us—tell me more."

Teresa gave me a long, suffering look over the rim of her coffee mug.

"About what?"

I leaned forward, planting my elbows on her cluttered desk.

"I saw Elias last night. At Dominion Hall."

Teresa stiffened, just a tiny flicker of tension across her shoulders, but I caught it.

"So," I pressed, "is he ...?"

I trailed off, letting the question hang.

Teresa sighed heavily, setting her mug down with a clunk.

"Yes. He's a Dane."

I blinked.

“That’s ... bad?”

“That’s complicated,” she corrected grimly. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms.

“Dominion Hall isn’t just some rich boys’ clubhouse, Vivi. It’s a fortress. Built by the Dane brothers after they came back from the military—special ops, black ops, whatever you want to call it. Nobody really knows what all they did overseas, but whatever it was? It stuck. They run a business now, a legit one, probably, but ...” She trailed off, her expression pinched.

“But what?”

Teresa hesitated like she was weighing how much she could say without getting struck by lightning.

“They’re dangerous men, Vivi. Not just in the ‘ooh, bad boy with a motorcycle’ way. Real dangerous. Connections, power, money, the kind of loyalty that gets people buried when they step out of line.”

I felt a thrill shiver through me, and not the smart kind.

“So Elias isn’t just some hacker who fixes office computers on the side?”

Teresa snorted. “No. He’s the guy who could crash the city’s infrastructure if he wanted to. Elias likes to stay out of the public eye, but make no mistake—he’s just as brutal as the others when it comes to protecting what’s his.”

The weight of her words settled between us, heavy and real.

I twirled a loose curl around my finger, trying to look casual even though my heart

was pounding a little harder.

“So you’re saying I should stay far, far away.”

Teresa’s gaze sharpened, cutting through the bravado I was barely holding together.

“I’m saying don’t get mixed up in things you don’t understand. And don’t expect him to play by rules you’re used to.”

For a long moment, we just stared at each other—the office humming quietly around us, the sound of distant piano scales bleeding through the studio walls.

Finally, I shrugged, pushing up from the chair.

“Good talk,” I said lightly, slinging my bag over my shoulder.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Teresa groaned, scrubbing a hand down her face.

“You’re going to do something reckless, aren’t you?”

I shot her a wicked smile over my shoulder.

“Probably.”

I wandered back into the empty studio, the rubber soles of my sneakers whispering across the floor. The morning sun was inching higher now, throwing long beams through the high windows, catching dust motes in golden streams.

I sank down onto the worn bench along the wall, stretching my legs out, and let my head fall back against the mirror.

How exactly did a girl get the attention of a man who lived behind a dozen screens and a hundred walls? Not with polite conversation, that was for damn sure.

He wasn’t the type to be impressed by small talk or batting my lashes across a dinner table. Elias Dane was a man who understood adrenaline. Who respected danger.

Maybe not in the same way I chased it—but he knew the stakes. He just hid from them. Maybe what he needed wasn’t a gentle knock at the door. Maybe he needed the door kicked in.

I smiled slowly, tapping the back of my head against the mirror in a lazy rhythm.

If I wanted him to look away from his precious screens, I'd have to become more interesting than the codes he obsessed over. More unpredictable than the firewalls he built.

Lucky for him, unpredictability was my specialty.

A hundred ideas sparked in my mind.

Some stupid. Some reckless. Some ... delicious.

I could show up wherever he was working, poke at him until that cool mask cracked again.

I could make him chase me the way he clearly didn't want to.

Or—

I could push harder. Make him have to come find me.

The memory of last night—the fury in his voice, the way his body had tensed like he was ready to dive straight into the harbor after me—sent a shiver racing down my spine.

Elias Dane liked control.

He wasn't going to give it up.

I was going to make him lose it.

On purpose.

And I was going to enjoy every second of the fall.

6

ELIAS

The morning sun bled through the high windows of my suite, a watery gold that did nothing to warm the cold steel and glass around me. I hadn't slept. Not a wink. My body was wired, my mind a jagged mess of blood and jasmine, the ghost of Vivienne Laveau haunting every corner of my skull.

I sat at my desk, the screens glowing with lines of code I hadn't touched since I'd stumbled back to Dominion Hall in the small hours, my hands still tingling from the lives I'd ended. The hackers were gone, their apartment a tomb, their data erased. But the weight of what I'd done clung to me like damp Charleston heat, heavy and unrelenting.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, the stubble rough under my palm. My cologne—once woodsy, sharp—was now overwhelmed by the faint tang of sweat, but it couldn't drown out her scent, burned into my memory from that cramped ballet office. Sweat and jasmine, raw and alive, like she'd left a piece of herself behind to torment me.

I'd killed for her last night, snapped three necks because they'd dared to touch her world, her data, her safety. And the worst part? I didn't regret it. Not one fucking bit. The demon inside me was quiet now, sated, but I was unraveling, and she was the reason.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Dominion Hall was silent, the kind of quiet that felt like a held breath. My brothers were probably still asleep, tangled in their beds with their women, their lives neatly slotted into place. I envied them, hated them, for it. They'd found their anchors, their reasons to soften the edges of the darkness we'd all carried since our black-ops days.

Me? I was still the oak, the one who didn't bend, didn't break. Until Vivi. She was breaking me, and I was letting her, chasing the fall like a junkie chasing a hit.

I leaned back in my chair, the leather creaking under my weight, and stared at the screens. The ballet company's network was locked down, my temporary firewall holding like a fortress. I'd checked it twice already, paranoia gnawing at me. What if I'd missed something? What if another copy of her data—her address, her phone number, her life—was still out there, floating in some dark corner of the web? My spiders were still crawling, sniffing for traces of the hackers' network, but they'd come up empty. The job was done. Clean. Except for the bodies. Except for the line I'd crossed.

My burner phone was gone, the SIM card crushed and the device ditched in a storm drain on my way back. My contact had handled the cleanup—bodies vanished, apartment scrubbed, no trace leading back to me or Dominion Hall.

I was untouchable, as always.

But I didn't feel it. I felt exposed, raw, like Vivi had peeled back my skin and left me bleeding. Her grin from the harbor last night—wicked, untamed, daring me to chase her—played on a loop in my head. She'd paddled into shark-infested waters, laughing like the danger was a game, and I'd wanted to drag her out of that kayak.

I stood, pacing the room. The ache in my chest was a living thing, clawing at me. I'd killed for her, but it wasn't enough. She was out there right now, probably already planning her next reckless stunt, her next leap into the void.

I believed in code, in systems, in puzzles that fit together with perfect precision. Risk was fine—calculated, measured, controlled. But Vivi? She was chaos, a storm that didn't give a damn about my rules. And fuck, I wanted to tame her, to claim her, to make her mine in a way that left no room for her to run. My cock shuddered at the thought.

My personal phone buzzed on the desk, snapping me out of the spiral.

A text from Teresa.

Network's holding. You coming by today?

I stared at it, my thumb hovering over the screen. The ballet company. Vivi. I could say no, finish the upgrades remotely, cut her out of my life before she ruined me. But the demon laughed, low and mocking, and I knew I wouldn't.

I typed back.

Yeah. I'll be there.

Sent it before I could think twice.

The door to my suite creaked open, and Marcus's voice cut through the silence, lazy but sharp. "You look like shit, brother. Rough night?"

I didn't turn, my jaw tightening as I kept my eyes on the screens. "What do you want?"

He stepped inside, uninvited. I could feel his gaze, sizing me up, smelling the blood I'd washed away. "You took off like a bat out of hell last night. Thought I'd check if you were still breathing or if that mermaid drowned you."

"Fuck off," I said, but there was no heat in it. Marcus was a pain in the ass, but he was my brother, and he knew me too well. Too fucking well.

He leaned against the wall, crossing his arms, his dark eyes glinting with amusement. "She's got you twisted, doesn't she? Lady in Red."

I didn't answer, my hands curling into fists. He didn't need to know how deep she'd cut, how her face alone was enough to make my control fray.

"Careful, Elias," he said, his tone softening, almost serious. "Women like that? They don't just break your heart. They take your whole damn world."

I met his gaze, my voice low. "I don't have a heart to break."

He snorted, pushing off the wall. "Keep telling yourself that. Don't do anything stupid."

He left, the door clicking shut behind him, and I was alone again with the hum of my computers and the weight of his words.

Vivi was breaking me, and I was letting her.

Worse, I was craving it, wanting the chaos she brought. I sank back into my chair, pulling up the ballet's network again, telling myself I was checking for vulnerabilities. But it was a lie. I was looking for her—her profile, her schedule, anything that would tell me where she'd be next.

The company had a performance this weekend, a private matinee at the Dock Street Theatre. She'd be there, dancing, her body carving music into motion, her fire on display for a room full of rich assholes who didn't deserve her.

The thought made my skin crawl, the demon snarling at the idea of other eyes on her. I could go, watch her, make sure she was safe. The justification was thin, but I clung to it.

I pulled up the theatre's security system, slipping into their cameras with a script that took seconds to run. The feeds were grainy, but I mapped the layout—exits, blind spots, the stage where she'd spin and leap, untouchable but exposed. I'd be there, in the shadows, where she wouldn't see me. Where I could keep her safe without her knowing.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

The thought of her dancing, unaware of me watching, sent a shiver down my spine. It was wrong, invasive, but the demon didn't care. It wanted her, and I was running out of reasons to fight it.

I closed the feeds, my hands shaking slightly, and stood, needing to move, to burn off the energy coiling in my veins. I grabbed my jacket and headed for the ballet company, the humid Charleston morning pressing against me as I stepped outside.

The city was waking up, the air thick with salt and the faint mull of marsh. The drive to the Crescent Ballet was short, the streets quiet except for the occasional jogger or delivery truck. I parked a block away, my SUV blending into the row of cars, and sat for a moment, gripping the wheel. I didn't need to be here. I could've done the upgrades from my suite, kept my distance, let her fade into the background.

But the demon wouldn't let me. It wanted her close, wanted to see her, smell her, feel the crackle of her presence.

I stepped out, the morning sun warm on my shoulders, and walked to the converted warehouse that housed the ballet company. The back door was propped open, a faint hum of piano scales drifting out. I slipped inside, my boots silent on the scuffed Marley floor, and headed for the office. Teresa was there, hunched over her desk, a big coffee mug steaming beside her. She looked up as I entered, her eyes narrowing.

"You're early," she said, her voice wary. "Everything okay?"

"Network's fine," I said, keeping my tone clipped, professional. "Just finishing the upgrades."

She nodded, but her gaze lingered, like she could see the cracks in my armor. “Vivi was asking about you.”

My pulse kicked up, but I kept my expression neutral. “Yeah? What’d she want?”

Teresa snorted, leaning back in her chair. “The usual. Dirt. Wanted to know your deal. I told her you’re a pain in the ass who’s married to his laptop.”

I smirked, despite myself. “Fair.”

“She’s trouble, Elias,” Teresa said, her voice softening. “You know that, right?”

I didn’t answer, my throat tightening. Trouble didn’t begin to cover it. Vivi was a fucking hurricane, and I was the idiot standing in her path, waiting for the wind to tear me apart.

I set up my laptop, diving into the network upgrades, but my focus was shit. Every sound from the studio—laughter, footsteps, the thump of a dance bag—made my head snap up, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. I hated it, hated how she’d turned me into this, a man who jumped at shadows because they might be her.

But when she finally appeared, it was worse than I’d imagined.

She slipped into the office, her red curls barely tamed in a messy bun, her leggings and hoodie doing nothing to hide the fire in her. She didn’t see me at first, her attention on Teresa, her voice light and teasing. “Any more hacker emergencies, or are we back to boring paperwork?”

My hands froze on the keyboard, my breath catching. She was here, close enough to touch, her scent hitting me like a drug. Jasmine and sweat, just like before, but now it was sharper, fresher, like she’d just stepped out of the shower, just for me. The

demon roared, demanding I stand, grab her, pull her against me until she understood what she was doing to me.

Teresa glanced at me, a warning in her eyes, before answering. “Network’s handled. Elias is just tying up loose ends.”

Vivi’s gaze snapped to me, and fuck, it was like a punch to the gut. Her green eyes sparked, a slow, wicked grin curving her lips.

“Cipher,” she said, her voice low, playful. “Didn’t expect you back so soon. Miss me?”

My throat clenched, but I forced a smirk, leaning back in my chair. “You wish, Red.”

She laughed, throaty and warm, and the sound sank into me like a hook. She leaned against the desk, too close, her hip brushing the edge of my laptop.

“Heard you’re some kind of tech wizard. Fixed our little glitch like it was nothing. That true?”

“Something like that,” I said, my voice rougher than I meant. Her presence was a live wire, crackling against my skin, and I hated how much I wanted to lean into it.

She tilted her head, her curls spilling loose, her eyes locked on mine. “You don’t strike me as the hero type, Cipher. So what’s in it for you? Saving damsels in distress isn’t exactly a hacker’s MO.”

I held her gaze, the demon snarling at the challenge in her voice. “Maybe I just like a challenge.”

Her grin widened, and for a moment, the world narrowed to her—her lips, her eyes,

the way she seemed to see through every wall I'd built. "Good," she said softly. "Because I'm the best kind."

She pushed off the desk, sauntering out of the office, her hips swaying just enough to make my blood run hot.

I watched her go, my hands clenched under the desk, the demon screaming to follow her, to drag her back, to make her mine.

Teresa cleared her throat, breaking the spell, but I barely heard her. Vivi was gone, but she'd left a fire in her wake, and I was burning.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I forced my focus back to the upgrades, my fingers flying over the keys, but my mind was on her. The performance was in two days. She'd be there, dancing, her fire on display for a room full of strangers. I'd be there too, in the shadows, watching. And when she inevitably did something reckless—because she would, it was who she was—I'd be there to catch her. Or to break her. I wasn't sure which anymore.

The demon whispered, its voice a low growl: She's yours. Take her.

I shoved it down, but it was getting harder to fight. Vivienne Laveau was unraveling me, and for the first time in years, I didn't want to stop her.

7

VIVIENNE

By the time rehearsal ended, my feet were sore and my bun was falling apart, but I still had adrenaline buzzing under my skin.

I didn't want to go home.

Didn't want to ice my ankles, or eat protein-packed ballet snacks, or scroll through Netflix pretending to care about what normal people did on weeknights.

No.

I wanted chaos.

And I knew exactly who to call.

“Jessa,” I said into the phone, breathless, as I stepped out of the building. “You doing anything illegal tonight?”

She grinned without missing a beat.

“I can be.”

A few hours later, we were crammed in her ancient Jeep, engine coughing down East Bay Street as twilight settled over Charleston like a veil.

“Please tell me this plan is as stupid as you made it sound,” she said, foot tapping the gas like she was vibrating with the same restless energy I felt.

“Stupid enough to get a certain someone’s attention,” I said.

Her eyes darted to me, then back to the road. “You mean the hacker Viking with the murder glare?”

“That’s the one.”

Jessa let out a low whistle. “Girl, I knew you had a thing for danger, but damn.”

I didn’t respond. Didn’t need to.

She knew. She always knew.

About the way I sought out storms, craved the edge of control. About the way I was drawn to men with shadows stitched into their skin—soldiers, drifters, artists who burned too hot.

But this was different.

Elias wasn't just another thrill.

He didn't flirt. Didn't chase. Didn't even seem to want me—except when he did, and it showed in the way his jaw clenched, in the way his eyes tracked every inch of me like he hated himself for it.

That restraint?

That feral tension coiled behind his cold logic?

It got under my skin more than any smooth-talking adrenaline junkie ever had.

He wasn't my usual type—the ones who burned fast and fizzled before dawn.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

He was precision. Pressure. Power barely held in check. Maybe that was what scared me the most. Because I'd walked away from a hundred bad ideas before.

But Elias Dane didn't feel like a bad idea. He felt like a bomb with no timer. And I was the one lighting the fuse.

Jessa didn't push—she never did—but she shot me a sidelong glance that said she saw everything.

The reckless hunger in my eyes. The obsession already curling around me.

She didn't ask if he was worth it. Because we both knew that question didn't matter anymore. I was already in too deep. And I didn't want out.

The Ravenel Bridge loomed ahead, all cables and steel, cutting across the sky like a ribcage. The sun had dipped below the marsh. The bridge glowed in the haze, majestic, dangerous, begging to be touched.

“Driving over it?” Jessa asked, slowing.

“No.”

I pointed to the gravel turnout near the base on the Charleston side. “We're climbing it.”

She barked out a laugh. “You're out of your goddamn mind.”

“Absolutely,” I said, already pulling off my sweatshirt to reveal the black tank top beneath. “Let’s go.”

But she didn’t move right away.

Jessa stared up at the dark steel skeleton of the Ravenel Bridge, her expression suddenly less amused and more ... tense.

The wind cut harder this close to the water, sharp and unpredictable. From the open Jeep windows, it lifted the ends of her braid and whipped my curls into my mouth.

“You know if we fall,” she said slowly, “it won’t be a broken ankle this time. It’ll be game over. Splat on the pavement. Or the water, if we’re lucky. But from that height?” She shook her head. “Water feels like concrete.”

I paused, hands gripping the dash. The air smelled like rust and salt and wet metal. Down below, the harbor traffic passed obliviously. Boats. Barges. Giant container ships that didn’t stop for much of anything.

Jessa’s voice dropped to a whisper. “We won’t survive it, Vivi. Not a misstep. Not a gust of wind at the wrong time.”

For a second, just a heartbeat, her fear twisted something inside me.

But I looked up.

At the cables soaring into the sky like silver wires spun by gods.

At the massive pylons that held it all together, strong and impossible.

At the promise of flight and falling and the thin line between the two.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “But imagine if we don’t fall.”

Jessa exhaled hard, like she knew I couldn’t be talked down.

Because I couldn’t. Not tonight.

Not with that pressure in my chest, the same one that had followed me from Elias’s voice echoing across the office to his eyes locking with mine like he was already tearing me apart.

I needed to fly.

Or crash.

Or maybe both.

We parked behind a utility trailer, ditched our bags in the back, and jogged to the fence that marked the construction access path. A warning sign flashed red in the growing dark:

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Perfect.

“Last chance to chicken out,” I whispered, fingers curling around the chain-link.

Jessa rolled her eyes. “If we die, I’m blaming you from the afterlife.”

“Deal.”

We scaled the fence fast. Years of barre work gave me the kind of balance that made rooftops and scaffolding feel like stage sets.

The structure creaked under our weight as we climbed the first exterior catwalk, then up the maintenance ladder bolted to one of the support pylons. My breath was tight in my chest. Not from fear. From anticipation.

Jessa climbed beside me with a muttered curse.

“You owe me a drink if we survive this.”

“If we survive this,” I said with a grin, “I’ll buy you the whole damn bar.”

But we didn’t stop. Because I wasn’t looking for permission. I was looking for a reaction. And somewhere out there in the dark, I knew one very specific man was about to give it to me.

The wind whipped harder the higher we went, tugging at my curls, plastering my tank top to my skin. The harbor stretched out below us—black and shimmering, speckled with tugboats and cargo lights. Charleston twinkled at our backs.

“Jesus, Vivi,” Jessa muttered as we perched on the crossbeam maybe four stories up, legs dangling. “This is ... fucking insane.”

I tilted my head back and laughed into the wind.

“This,” I said, “is living.”

She pulled out her phone—because, of course, she did—and aimed the camera down toward the water, then toward our feet hanging off a literal death trap.

“Smile for your stalker,” she said, teasing.

I didn’t even blink. I looked straight into the lens and smirked.

“Already watching,” I said under my breath.

And I wasn’t wrong.

There was no way Elias wasn’t seeing this.

Someone would tag it. Someone always did. Charleston’s thrill-seeker crowd lived for this kind of thing. I could practically feel his eyes on me from wherever he was holed up—watching, seething, probably destroying a keyboard with his bare hands.

God, I hoped so.

The wind howled, and somewhere far below, a horn blared from a barge slicing

through the harbor. Jessa nudged me. “Okay, I hate to ruin your death-flirting vibe, but I think we should climb down before someone calls the cops.”

“Five more minutes.”

“Vivi—”

“I want him to come find me,” I whispered.

Jessa blinked. “What?”

I stood slowly, shoes wobbling on steel, arms outstretched like wings. “I want him to lose control.”

The wind whipped my hair across my face, and my body vibrated with the hum of the city, the danger, the high of being untouchable.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Somewhere out there, Elias Dane was watching this.

And I wanted him furious.

“Vivi, come on,” Jessa called, her voice strained over the gusts. “This is the part of the horror movie where the best friend dies because she didn’t leave when she had the chance.”

I just smiled and stepped away from the beam we’d been sitting on, gripping the nearest support cable. The steel was cold and slightly slick with sea spray. My shoes slid for a half-second before catching.

Jessa stood slowly, clearly trying not to freak out. “Where are you even going?”

“Up,” I said, jerking my chin toward the sloped backbone of the bridge. “I want the skyline.”

“You mean the place with no railing, no ledge, and wind that could snap your neck like a breadstick?” She looked me over like I’d lost my last marble. “Jesus, Viv. This isn’t like base jumping with gear. This is death if you twitch the wrong way.”

I didn’t answer.

Because she was right. And I didn’t care.

My palms were already stinging from gripping the narrow struts, but I pulled myself up higher anyway, scaling the exposed trusswork like it was a jungle gym. The city

dropped away beneath me, the water glittering like broken glass. The sound of traffic on the bridge above felt distant—like another world. Like nothing could touch me here.

Jessa's phone was still filming. She angled it up, catching me silhouetted against the electric spill of Charleston's lights.

"Vivi, I swear to God," she muttered. "You are not gonna die in a tank top. That's an insult to dancers everywhere."

"Then keep filming," I called over my shoulder. "Might be the best footage you ever get."

Below us, a car slowed. Then another.

A man got out, squinting up toward the bridge support.

A woman next to him pulled out her phone. "Are they climbing it?" she gasped. "Oh, my God."

I kept going. Higher. Into the sharp belly of the sky.

The wind punched harder now, gusting in surges that made the bridge hum beneath my feet. I braced against the swaying steel, laughing like I had any business enjoying this.

Jessa climbed after me but stopped a few feet down, crouching low. "Vivi. Seriously. You've made your point, okay? He's definitely watching. Half of Charleston is watching."

That's when I heard it.

The low thrum of rotors.

A news helicopter.

Jessa turned her head sharply, following the sound. “Shit.”

The spotlight came next—sweeping out from above like the eye of God, locking on us with blinding precision.

“God, Vivi,” she hissed. “We are so screwed.”

I froze for half a breath, squinting up at the floodlight, the wind roaring past me, my heartbeat matching its pace.

And then I grinned.

Good.

Let the whole city watch.

Let Elias watch.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Let him feel what it's like when I'm the one slipping through his fingers.

From somewhere below, a siren started to wail. Police or Coast Guard or hell, maybe Homeland Security. Who knew? The wind carried the sound upward in eerie distortion.

Jessa was crouched now, clearly terrified. "We need to go, Vivi. Like now. I'm not kidding. They'll arrest us. And if we fall ..."

But I couldn't climb down yet.

Not until he saw.

I turned toward the camera, standing tall—arms outstretched, hair whipping, Charleston glittering like a promise at my back.

And I smiled.

The kind of smile that said, Come get me, Cipher.

8

ELIAS

My screens flickered, a grid of code and grainy feeds, but all I saw was her. Vivienne Laveau, silhouetted against Charleston's glittering skyline, arms wide like a goddamn siren on the Ravenel Bridge. The footage was everywhere—X, news streams, some

asshole's shaky phone video tagged #CrazyBallerina.

She'd climbed a fucking bridge, four stories up, with nothing but steel and wind between her and a 200-foot drop. And she'd smiled. Smiled like she knew I was watching, like she was daring me to break.

My fingers twitched over the keyboard, itching to erase every pixel of her defiance. I could've done it—hijacked the streams, crashed the servers, wiped her reckless stunt from the internet.

But that wouldn't erase the image seared into my brain: her red curls whipping in the wind, her green eyes blazing, her body balanced on a razor's edge. She was a glitch in my system, a variable I couldn't control, and it was driving me insane.

I leaned back in my chair, the leather creaking. My pulse pounded, a relentless drum. My suite was cool, sterile, but I was burning, my skin tight with need. Vivi's scent—jasmine and sweat, raw and alive—lingered from that cramped ballet office two days ago, a ghost I couldn't shake. I'd killed for her, snapped three necks because they'd dared to touch her world. And now? She was out there, taunting death on a bridge, taunting me, and I was coming apart, thread by bloody thread.

My phone buzzed, an alert from a script sniffing X for her name. Another post: Ballerina goes rogue on Ravenel Bridge! Who is this chick? I slammed the phone down, the crack of plastic echoing.

My screens hummed, my haven of logic and control, but they were useless tonight. Code was my lifeline, my way of bending the world to my will. Every line, every function, was a puzzle I could master. But Vivi? She was chaos, a storm that mocked my firewalls, and I was drowning.

I stood, pacing the polished concrete, my mind screaming. The demon inside me was

awake, snarling for her. I wanted her here, in my space, where I could pin her down, make her see what she was doing to me. I wanted her wrists under my hands, her pulse racing, her defiance mine to break. The thought was a drug, hot and wrong, and it made my blood roar. She wasn't mine—not yet—but the demon didn't care. It wanted her claimed, caged, safe from the world, from herself.

My laptop pinged, another alert. I froze, eyes snapping to the screen. A live feed from a news chopper, its spotlight locked on the bridge. There she was, still up there, Jessa crouched lower, looking like she was praying. Vivi stood tall, arms wide, her tank top plastered to her skin by the wind. The camera zoomed in, catching her grin—wicked, fearless, a middle finger to gravity and me. The caption crawled across the bottom: Unidentified women climbing Ravenel Bridge. Authorities en route.

My vision tunneled, red at the edges. Authorities. Cops, Coast Guard, maybe SWAT. She was exposed, and they'd drag her down in cuffs, or worse—she'd slip, and the harbor would swallow her. Charleston's waters were a graveyard, claiming fools like her every month. The thought of her gone—her laugh, her spark, her infuriating light—ripped a growl from my throat. I slammed my fist into the desk, monitors rattling, but the pain didn't help. It only made her sharper, brighter, a beacon I couldn't ignore.

I grabbed my jacket, keys, burner phone. No plan, no pause. My scripts could wait, my firewalls could hold. Vivi was on that bridge, and I was going to get her down, even if I had to climb up there myself.

The demon roared, but this wasn't just about saving her. It was about owning her, making her understand she couldn't keep slipping through my fingers. She was mine, whether she knew it or not, and I was done watching from the shadows.

The drive to the Ravenel Bridge was a blur, Charleston's streets streaking past in a haze. My SUV's engine growled, matching the storm in my chest. I parked near the

base, where a crowd had gathered—gawkers, news vans, cops setting up barriers. The chopper’s rotors thumped overhead. I slipped through the crowd, hood up, face a mask. Nobody noticed me. Nobody ever did. That was my gift—being a ghost, until I chose otherwise.

The bridge loomed, its cables glinting like wires in a circuit, its pylons thrusting into the sky. My tech-addled brain mapped it like a network: access points, weak spots, paths to her.

First, I needed eyes. I pulled out my burner, tapped into the chopper’s feed with a script I’d built for jobs like this. The signal was encrypted, but encryption was just a lock, and I was a master key. Ten seconds, and I was in, the feed streaming to my phone. There she was, higher now, gripping a support cable, her body swaying with the wind. Jessa was below, shouting, but Vivididn’t look down. She looked out, at the city, at the harbor, like she was daring it to take her.

My jaw clenched, my free hand fisting. She was reckless, fucking reckless, and I wanted to shake her, scream at her, pull her into my arms and never let go. The demon was loud, its claws sinking deeper, and I let it. I wanted her safe, but more than that, I wanted hermine. The thought was a live wire, crackling through me, and I hated how right it felt.

I moved, slipping past the cops, who were too busy yelling into radios to notice. The fence was a joke, the lock giving way in seconds. I climbed the ladder, boots gripping the rungs, the wind biting my face. Someone yelled for me to stop. I ignored them.

The harbor stretched below, black and hungry, but I didn’t look down. My focus was her, on the beam where she stood, four stories up, playing chicken with fate.

The higher I climbed, the louder the wind howled, tugging at my jacket, stinging my eyes. A woman in the crowd screamed. The bridge hummed under my hands, a living

system, and I felt it—the pulse of steel, the rhythm of its structure. It was like code, predictable if you knew the patterns, and I always did. But Vivi? She was the anomaly, the bug I couldn't squash, and it was killing me.

I reached the crossbeam where Jessa crouched, her face pale, her braid whipping in the wind. She saw me, eyes widening, but I didn't stop.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

“Get down,” I barked, voice rough over the gusts. “Now.”

“Where the hell did you come from?” she shouted, but she was moving, scrambling toward the ladder. Smart girl. One less problem.

Vivi was higher, on the sloped truss, her body pressed against a cable, her shoes slipping on the slick steel. The chopper’s spotlight locked on her, and the crowd below gasped, their voices a distant hum. I climbed after her, muscles burning, heartpounding. The demon was a roar, drowning out everything but her.

“Vivi!” I shouted, voice raw, half-swallowed by the wind. She didn’t turn, but her head tilted, and that grin—fuck, that grin—flashed in the spotlight.

“You came,” she called, voice light, teasing, like we weren’t four stories up with death waiting below. “Knew you couldn’t resist.”

“Get down,” I growled, closing the distance, hands gripping the truss. “Now.”

She laughed, throaty and warm, and it hit me like a shot of whiskey. “Make me, Cipher.”

My control snapped, the demon breaking free. I lunged, fast, my hand catching her wrist. Her skin was warm, her pulse racing under my fingers, and the contact was a jolt, electric and consuming. I pulled her against me, her body flush with mine, the wind screaming around us. Her eyes locked on mine, green and defiant, and the world stopped.

“You’re out of your fucking mind,” I snarled, face inches from hers. “You think this is a game? You think I’ll let you kill yourself?”

Her grin didn’t falter, but her eyes softened, just a flicker. “You’re here, aren’t you? That’s what I wanted.”

I tightened my grip, my other hand sliding to her waist, anchoring her to me. “You don’t get to play with your life like this. Not anymore.”

She leaned closer, lips brushing my ear, breath hot against my skin. “Then stop me, Elias. If you can.”

The demon roared, and I was done. I kissed her, hard and desperate, my mouth claiming hers like I could pour every ounce of my obsession into her. She kissed me back, fierce and unyielding, her hands fisting in my jacket, her body pressing against mine. The wind howled, the spotlight burned, but none of it mattered. There was only her—her taste, her heat, the way she burned through every wall I’d built.

I pulled back, forehead against hers, breath ragged. “You’re mine,” I said, words low, possessive, a vow I hadn’t meant to make. “No more running. No more games.”

Her eyes searched mine, and for the first time, I saw a crack in her defiance, a flicker of something raw.

“You sure you can handle me, Cipher?”

I smirked, despite the storm in my chest. “Try me, Red.”

The sirens below grew louder, the chopper’s rotors thumping closer. I didn’t care. I guided her down, hand never leaving her, body shielding her from the wind. Jessa was on the ground, arguing with a cop, but I didn’t stop. I led Vivi past the crowd,

past the flashing lights, to my SUV. The cops yelled, but I was a Dane, untouchable, and they knew it. Nobody followed.

I opened the passenger door, eyes locked on hers. “Get in.”

She raised an eyebrow, that grin creeping back. “Bossy.”

“Now,” I said, voice low.

She slid inside, movements deliberate, provocative, like she knew what she was doing to me. I slammed the door, rounded the hood, and got behind the wheel. The engine roared, and I pulled out, the bridge fading in the rearview.

“Where are we going?” she asked, voice soft but edged with challenge.

I didn’t answer, hands tight on the wheel. I didn’t know. Dominion Hall, her apartment, anywhere I could keep her close—it didn’t matter. She was here, with me, and I wasn’t letting her go. Not tonight.

My phone buzzed, an alert from my scripts. I ignored it. The world could burn for all I cared. Vivi was in my car, her presence a live wire against my skin. I’d killed for her, climbed a bridge for her, and now I was hers, whether I liked it or not.

The demon was quiet, but I wasn’t fooled. It was waiting, ready to rage again. And as I drove into the Charleston night, the city’s pulse matching the one in my veins, I knew one thing: Vivienne Laveau was mine, and I’d tear the world apart to keep her.

The moment the SUV hit the open road, I unbuckled my seatbelt.

Elias didn't flinch, but I felt the shift. The subtle tick of his jaw. The white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. The way his eyes flicked toward me, just once, like he already knew I was about to start trouble.

Good.

“You planning to dive out?” he asked, voice cool and dry.

“Nope,” I said, twisting toward him in the passenger seat. “I just like to be comfortable when I’m abducted.”

He didn’t crack a smile.

Didn’t speak.

Which only made it more fun.

The silence between us wasn’t awkward. It was electric. Thick and sharp, like the air right before a thunderstorm. The kind that makes your skin itch and your heart misbehave.

I slipped off my hoodie, slowly—deliberately—revealing the damp black tank top beneath, stretched tight across my ribs from the wind and adrenaline. His eyes didn’t move, but I knew he saw. He didn’t miss anything.

“You’re really not going to ask where I want to go?” I said, reaching over to tug the elastic from my bun. My curls fell in a wild red mess around my shoulders, tangled from the wind. “Maybe I wanted to be arrested.”

His hands clenched the wheel tighter.

“You’re not going to jail,” he said flatly.

“Oh, is that a Dane family perk? Get-out-of-handcuffs-free cards for everyone?”

“You’re not going to jail,” he repeated, slower this time. “Because you’re not leaving my sight.”

My pulse thudded. Not fear—no, this wasn’t fear. It was heat. Hunger. The dark kind of thrill that curled in your stomach and whispered, More.

“You sound almost jealous,” I said, leaning my head against the window, watching his profile under the amber glow of the streetlights. “Would it bother you? Me locked up? Cuffed to something that isn’t your bedpost?”

His hands jerked the slightest bit on the wheel. Victory.

“I don’t share,” he said quietly.

“You barely even touch,” I countered.

His eyes cut to me, sharp and dangerous. “Don’t test me.”

I smirked, tilting toward him until my lips were just inches from his neck. “What if I want to?”

He didn’t answer. Just drove faster.

We took a turn, tires gripping hard, the SUV eating up the road. I didn’t ask where we were going. I didn’t care. Because wherever this ended, I wanted it. All of it.

Still, I wasn’t done poking the bear.

“You going to punish me, Cipher?” I whispered, letting the word crawl across his skin. “For making you climb a bridge in the dark? For making you want me so badly it makes you furious?”

He growled low in his throat. Not a word. A sound.

Good.

I reached out and laid my hand on his thigh—light, barely there, but enough to feel the steel coiled beneath the denim.

“You came for me,” I said, softer now. “You didn’t have to.”

His hand left the wheel for one second—just one—and wrapped around my wrist, pinning it in place against his leg.

“You think this is a game,” he said, eyes still on the road. “But it’s not.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I swallowed hard. The grip was firm. Possessive. Perfect.

“Then make it real,” I said.

His nostrils flared.

We didn’t speak for a while. Not because there was nothing to say. But because everything worth saying was humming in the air between us, pulsing hotter with every block. And wherever he was taking me, I hoped there was a bed.

Because if he didn’t touch me soon, I was going to do something much crazier than climb a bridge. I was going to fall. All the way. And I had a feeling Elias Dane wasn’t the type to catch gently.

The silence stretched, thick with everything unspoken, vibrating between us like a wire pulled too tight.

His hand was still on my wrist, thumb brushing slow circles over my pulse, but my brain—my reckless, thrill-junkie brain—was already pivoting. Because here was the truth: as much as I wanted him—his mouth, his hands, that dangerous energy coiled like a fuse under his skin—I didn’t want to surrender. Not yet.

The chase was too much fun.

He was a puzzle, a fortress, a man who stared down firewalls and international threats without blinking ... and here he was, climbing bridges like I was the threat.

I didn't want to end that game just yet. I wanted to stretch it, tease it, pull him further out of control.

So I smiled sweetly and pulled my wrist free.

"Actually," I said, settling back against the seat, "I think I want a drink."

He didn't look at me.

Didn't need to.

"No."

The word landed like a gavel.

I raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"You're not walking into a bar after what you just did. You're recognizable now. You're trending." He gestured vaguely toward the console, where his phone had buzzed every thirty seconds "You want to get cornered by drunk idiots and TikTok clout chasers? Be my guest. But I'm not letting you."

"Letting me?" I echoed, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

His jaw ticked.

"Vivi—"

I saw it then. The shift. The smallest crack in that hard, unshakable shell.

He was scared.

Not of me. Of what I did to him. Of how far he'd already come for a girl who stood on ledges and smiled at helicopters like she was waving to God.

So I did what I did best.

I pushed.

As we rolled to a stop at a red light, I unlatched my door and popped it open.

"Vivienne," he snapped, but I was already sliding out, landing lightly on the sidewalk with a dancer's grace.

The city buzzed around me—warm air, neon glows, the hum of life. I turned toward him and leaned down through the open passenger window.

"I'm going for a drink," I said, eyes gleaming. "You can come with me. Or you can sit in your car and sulk. Your choice, Cipher."

His eyes were wildfire under ice.

Controlled, but barely.

“Get back in the car.”

“Why?” I asked, tilting my head. “Afraid someone else might see me first?”

That did it.

He slammed the gear into park and killed the engine so fast the entire SUV rocked. Then he was out of the driver’s side, stalking around the hood like a predator off-leash.

But I didn’t back away. Didn’t flinch. I just tipped my chin up and smiled.

“You know,” I said sweetly, “this city’s full of possibilities.”

His steps slowed, his glare sharpening.

I kept going, each word like a match flicked at the fuse of his control. “Maybe I’ll meet someone in a bar. Someone hot. Someone dangerous. Maybe a guy who likes risk the way I do. Not one who hides behind firewalls and orders me around.”

Elias stopped a foot in front of me, his entire body coiled like he was holding himself back by sheer force of will.

“I could use a drinking buddy,” I went on, circling him slowly like I wasn’t the one being hunted. “Maybe someone who wants to climb a rooftop with me after. Or skinny dip in the harbor. Or sneak into a hotel and pretend we’re married just for the thrill of it. Can you imagine?”

I dragged my fingers along my collarbone, slow and absentminded. “He’d smell like bourbon. He’d want to dance. He’d laugh when I pulled him into the shadows. He’d say yes, Elias. You wouldn’t.”

His hand shot out. Fast. Unyielding. And landed on my waist. Not pulling me in—but not letting me go, either.

His voice, when it came, was a rasp dragged over glass. “No one touches you.”

I arched a brow, breath catching. “That a threat?”

He leaned in, mouth brushing my ear, voice low and lethal.

“It’s a fucking fact.”

Goosebumps chased down my spine.

But I still smiled. Still tilted my head back and whispered, “Then you’d better make sure I don’t want them to.”

That broke something.

In him.

In me.

And the air between us? It didn't sizzle. It detonated.

He just grunted, a low guttural sound.

I turned slowly, my grin sharpened to a blade. "That didn't take long."

He didn't speak. Didn't need to.

The heat rolling off him made the air feel thick. Suffocating. Delicious.

I felt the moment his restraint cracked—barely a fissure, but enough for the truth to leak out in the way his eyes raked over me, from the flush high on my cheeks to the curve of my hips.

The streetlamps turned my tank top translucent in places, and I didn't bother fixing it.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Let him look. Let him burn.

“Pick a bar,” he growled. “One where no one knows your name.”

I blinked slowly, deliberately. “So now you’re letting me?”

His mouth twitched, just a fraction. “No. I’m watching you.”

“Oh, is that what this is?” I stepped back, just out of reach, forcing him to follow. “You watching me? Because from here, it kind of looks like you’re chasing.”

I turned then, heading down the sidewalk, hips swaying like I was born to provoke.

His footsteps followed, quiet and lethal.

We passed a row of bars, but I didn’t stop until we reached a dive with flickering neon, a name half burned out, and zero chance of a crowd. The kind of place where people minded their business and drinks came in plastic cups.

Perfect.

I pushed the door open, the scent of old beer and cheaper bourbon rushing out to greet me. A country ballad crackled from the jukebox. A few patrons glanced up—none of them interested enough to recognize me.

I felt him behind me as I crossed to the bar. Heat. Gravity. Danger.

I didn't order a drink. I just turned, leaned back against the counter, and looked at him.

He stood just inside the door, jaw hard, arms crossed, eyes burning.

"You came," I said softly.

"You ran," he said back.

"I wanted you to follow."

And then I did something that surprised even me.

I reached for him.

Not his hand. Not his arm.

I reached for the waistband of his jeans and tugged him forward, inch by inch, until the space between us disappeared and my mouth was almost at his ear.

"You can still walk away, Elias. Go home. Pretend you're not losing control."

His hand slid to my hip again. His grip was bruising. "I'm not losing control," he said, voice like gravel. "I'm choosing what to do with it."

The bartender cleared his throat, and I glanced over.

"One whiskey, neat," I said, still looking at Elias. "And one Coke."

Elias didn't object. Didn't move. Just stood there like a storm with a fuse burning slow.

And I?

I planned to light it. Every last inch.

10

ELIAS

The dive bar's neon buzzed like a dying insect, casting a sickly red glow over Vivi's skin as she leaned against the counter, her tank top clinging to her curves. Her green eyes locked on mine, sharp and defiant, daring me to cross the line I'd been toeing since the moment I saw her. My blood roared, the demon inside me clawing at its cage, hungry for her—her heat, her chaos, her fucking soul. She was playing with fire like she was born to burn me alive.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I stood inside the door, arms crossed, every muscle coiled tight. The air was thick with old beer and bourbon, the jukebox whining some country ballad that grated on my nerves. A few drunks slouched at tables, too far gone to care about the storm brewing between us. Vivi's lips curved, that wicked grin that made my control fray like cheap rope. She'd tugged me close, her fingers grazing my jeans, her breath hot against my ear, and now she was waiting, testing, pushing me to snap.

"You came," she said, voice low, a velvet blade slicing through the noise.

"You ran," I shot back, my voice rough, barely masking the need clawing at my throat.

"I wanted you to follow."

Her words hit like a match to gasoline. She reached for me again, her fingers hooking into my waistband, pulling me forward until there was no space left, just her heat against my chest, her scent flooding my senses. I could feel her pulse, fast and wild, under my thumb as I gripped her hip, bruising, possessive. The demon roared, and I was done fighting it.

"You think you can play me, Red?" I rasped, my mouth brushing her ear, my voice a growl. "Think you can dance on bridges and in bars and I'll just watch?"

Her laugh was throaty, a sound that sank into my bones. "I'm not dancing, Cipher. I'm daring you."

I tightened my grip, pulling her closer, her body molding to mine like she was made

for it. “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

“Then show me,” she whispered, lips grazing my jaw, her breath a spark that lit every nerve on fire.

The bartender cleared his throat, breaking the spell. “One whiskey, neat. One Coke,” he said, sliding the drinks across the counter. Vivi didn’t move, didn’t look away, her eyes burning into mine like she could see the demon and wanted to fuck it raw.

I let go of her, just enough to grab the whiskey and down it in one swallow, the burn grounding me for a split second. She took the Coke, sipping it slowly, her lips wrapping around the straw in a way that made my jeans feel too tight. She knew what she was doing, and I hated how much I loved it.

“Pick a corner,” I said, voice low, nodding toward the bar’s shadows. “Somewhere no one’s watching.”

She raised an eyebrow, that grin creeping back. “Bossy.”

“Now,” I said, the word a command, a plea, a fucking prayer.

She sauntered toward a booth in the back, hips swaying like she was walking a tightrope over my sanity. I followed, the demon pacing, my eyes on her like she was the only thing in the room. The booth was tucked against a wall, the vinyl cracked, the table sticky with years of spilled drinks. She slid in, one leg curled under her, and leaned back, sipping her Coke like we were on a goddamn date.

I sat across from her, elbows on the table, hands fisted to keep from reaching for her. “Every asshole with a phone is posting about you,” I said, voice tight. “The bridge. The ballerina. You’re not invisible anymore.”

She shrugged, unbothered, her curls spilling over one shoulder. “Let them talk. I don’t live for their rules.”

“You live for the rush,” I said, leaning forward, my voice dropping. “But you’re not the only one who feels it. You climb bridges, you kayak at night, you push me—and someone’s gonna push back. Someone who doesn’t give a fuck about your smile.”

Her eyes flickered, just a hint of something—fear, maybe, or recognition—but she buried it fast. “You worried about me, Cipher? Or just mad I’m not locked in your tower yet?”

I smirked, despite the storm in my chest. “You’d burn my tower down, Red.”

“Damn right,” she said, leaning closer, her breath warm against my lips. “But you’d love the flames.”

The air crackled, the space between us a live wire. I wanted to grab her, drag her across the table, kiss her until she forgot her own name. But the bar was too public, too exposed, and the demon wanted her alone, where I could take my time, where I could make her mine without eyes on us.

A crash shattered the moment—a bottle hitting the floor, followed by a slurred shout. I turned, instincts kicking in, my hand twitching toward the knife in my boot. Two drunks were squaring off near the bar, one with a broken bottle, the others swinging a chair. The bartender yelled, but it was too late. The crowd surged, some cheering, some scrambling for the door, and chaos erupted like a spark in dry grass.

Vivi’s laugh cut through the noise, bright and reckless. “Now this is my kind of night.”

I grabbed her wrist, pulling her out of the booth. “We’re leaving.”

She yanked free, eyes gleaming. “Not yet. I want to see how this plays out.”

“Vivi,” I growled, but she was already moving, slipping through the crowd like she was born for mayhem. The demon roared, and I followed, shoving past a guy who smelled like cheap vodka. The drunks were grappling now, blood on the floor, the bottle’s jagged edge catching the neon light. Vivi stood too close, her head tilted, like she was studying a fucking painting.

I caught her arm, spinning her toward me. “You don’t get to die in a bar fight.”

“Who said anything about dying?” she said, grinning. “I’m just living.”

A fist swung wide, missing its target and nearly clipping her. I pulled her back, my body shielding hers, and threw a punch that dropped the guy cold. The crowd roared, the fight spreading like wildfire, bottles shattering, tables overturning. Vivi’s laugh was a beacon, pulling me through the chaos, and I realized she was moving toward the back door, her steps deliberate, like she’d planned this.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I followed, shoving a guy out of my way, my eyes never leaving her. The back door led to an alley, the air thick with dumpster rot and salt from the nearby harbor. Vivi stepped out, her tank top glowing under a flickering streetlamp, her curls a wild halo. She turned, leaning against the brick wall, her chest heaving, her grin pure trouble.

“You’re insane,” I said, slamming the door shut behind me, the bar’s noise muffled now. My hands were shaking, not from the fight but from her, from the need burning through me like a fever.

“Says the guy who climbed a bridge for me,” she said, stepping closer, her fingers trailing down my chest, leaving fire in their wake. “You’re not as cold as you think, Cipher.”

I grabbed her wrists, pinning them above her head against the wall, my body pressing into hers. “You don’t know what I am,” I snarled, my mouth inches from hers, her heat seeping into me. “You don’t know what I’ve done for you.”

Her eyes searched mine, fearless, hungry. “Then tell me.”

I kissed her, hard and desperate, my mouth claiming hers like I could pour every ounce of my obsession into her. She kissed me back, fierce and unyielding, her tongue a spark that set me ablaze. Her wrists twisted in my grip, not to escape but to pull me closer, her nails digging into my skin. The demon roared, and I let it, my hands sliding to her hips, lifting her until her legs wrapped around me, her body a perfect fit against mine.

“You’re mine,” I growled against her lips, the words a vow, a curse. “No more

bridges. No more bars. Just me.”

She bit my lip, hard enough to draw blood, and laughed, the sound vibrating through me. “You think you can cage me, Elias? Try it.”

I spun us, pressing her harder against the wall, my hands tearing at her tank top, the fabric ripping under my fingers. Her skin was hot, smooth, a canvas I wanted to mark, to claim. She arched into me, her breath ragged, her hands fisting in my hair, pulling me down to her throat. I bit her, not gently, tasting salt and jasmine, her moan a sound I’d kill for again.

“Fuck, Vivi,” I rasped, my hands sliding under her shorts, finding her wet, ready, her heat driving me to the edge. “You’re gonna ruin me.”

“Good,” she whispered, her voice a blade, her legs tightening around me. “I want you ruined.”

I didn’t think, didn’t care about the alley, the bar, the world. I shoved her shorts down, my jeans following, the cool brick against my palms as I lifted her again. She was fire, liquid and untamed, and when I thrust into her, it was like diving into a storm. Her nails raked my back, her moans loud enough to wake the dead, and I didn’t stop, couldn’t stop. Every thrust was a claim, every gasp a surrender, our bodies slamming together like we were trying to break each other.

“Harder,” she demanded, her voice raw, her eyes locked on mine, green and blazing. I gave her what she wanted, my hips driving into her, the wall shaking with the force of us. The alley was a blur, the harbor’s pulse a distant echo, the world reduced to her—her heat, her taste, her fucking defiance.

“You’re mine,” I said again, my voice breaking, my hands gripping her thighs, bruising her skin. “Say it.”

She laughed, wild and unhinged, her head falling back. “Make me.”

I kissed her, swallowing her laugh, my tongue claiming every inch of her mouth. She clenched around me, her body trembling, and I felt it—the edge, the fall, the moment she broke. Her moan was a scream, her nails drawing blood, and I followed her, my release a roar that tore through me, leaving me raw, exposed, hers.

We stayed there, panting, her legs still wrapped around me, her forehead against mine. The alley was quiet now, the bar’s chaos a distant hum, the streetlamp flickering like it was giving up. Her breath was warm against my lips, her eyes half-closed, sated but still dangerous.

“You’re trouble,” I said, voice hoarse, my hands still on her, unwilling to let go.

“You love it,” she whispered, her lips brushing mine, soft now, almost tender.

I didn’t answer, didn’t need to. She was right, and we both knew it. I’d killed for her, chased her, fucked her in an alley like a man possessed, and I’d do it again. The demon was quiet, but it wasn’t gone. It was waiting, watching, ready to rage if anyone tried to take her from me.

I set her down, steadying her as she adjusted her shorts, her tank top hanging in tatters. She laughed, low and warm, and pulled my jacket over her shoulders, the fabric swallowing her frame. “You owe me a shirt,” she said, smirking.

“I owe you nothing,” I said, but my voice was softer now, the edge dulled by her. I grabbed her hand, pulling her toward the SUV parked at the alley’s mouth. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” she asked, falling into step beside me, her fingers lacing with mine like it was natural, like we hadn’t just fucked each other senseless against a wall.

“My place,” I said, opening the passenger door. “No bars, no bridges. Just you and me.”

She slid inside, her grin back, sharp and reckless. “You think you can keep me, Cipher?”

I leaned in, my lips brushing her ear, my voice a low growl. “I already have.”

I slammed the door, rounded the hood, and got behind the wheel. The engine roared, the city’s neon fading as we drove toward Dominion Hall. My phone buzzed, another alert from my scripts, but I ignored it. The hackers were gone, the network secure, but Vivi was the real threat—the glitch I couldn’t fix, the storm I didn’t want to. I’d built my life on control, on systems, on knowing every outcome. But her? She was chaos, and I was addicted.

The road stretched out, Charleston’s pulse a low hum in my veins. Vivi leaned back, her legs propped on the dash, my jacket slipping off one shoulder. She was mine, for now, and I’d tear the world apart to keep her. The demon whispered, sated but never satisfied, and I let it. Because Vivienne Laveau wasn’t just trouble—she was my apocalypse, and I was ready to burn.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

The gates of Dominion Hall loomed like the whole place was holding its breath.

I didn't hold mine.

When Elias turned into the drive, I let my window down, allowing the warm night air to spill in over my bare legs. The SUV rolled slow up the winding path, past live oaks strung with moss and shadows thick enough to hide bodies in.

It was beautiful. And menacing.

Like him.

He said nothing. Just gripped the wheel like it might misbehave, jaw set like he was already regretting letting me in.

Too late, Cipher. I'm here now.

Dominion Hall revealed itself in pieces: first the outer buildings, low and sharp-edged with glass walls and stone. Then the central structure—a brutalist masterpiece that looked like a fortress.

The SUV eased to a stop in front of the main entrance. Elias cut the engine.

I didn't move.

He looked over at me, expectant. "Let's go."

I blinked slowly. “You think I’m just going to follow you inside like some obedient little ballerina?”

A muscle twitched in his cheek. “Yes.”

I smiled. Sweet. Lethal. “Then you don’t know me at all.”

I popped my door and stepped out, barefoot on the driveway, the wind catching the hem of my ruined tank top. I hadn’t asked for a new one. I liked the way this one looked on me—torn, stretched, like a trophy from the alley wall.

Elias sighed and came around the front of the car, but I was already moving.

I turned in a slow circle, taking in the property like it belonged to me. “So this is where the Dane brothers plot world domination? Very Architectural Digest meets Black Ops.”

He didn’t answer. Which was fine. I wasn’t looking for answers. I was looking for reactions.

I strolled toward the side path, lit faintly by embedded lights in the concrete. Somewhere beyond the trees, I heard the low burble of water.

“Where are you going?” Elias asked behind me.

“Exploring,” I called over my shoulder. “You dragged me into the villain’s lair. Least you can do is give me a tour.”

He cursed under his breath, but I knew he’d follow.

He always did.

I wandered past a series of outbuildings, catching movement inside one of them. A man stood at a workbench, sleeves rolled up, sanding something with a blade in his hand. Another leaned in the doorway, arms crossed, watching me like he wasn't sure whether to flirt or frisk me.

“Evening,” I said sweetly.

The one in the doorway—tall, dark, movie-star jawline—gave me a grin. “You must be the ballerina.”

“You must be trouble,” I shot back.

Elias appeared at my side, one hand sliding to the small of my back in a gesture that said she's mine even if his face didn't. He didn't introduce me. Didn't need to. His body was screaming the message.

The guys nodded, exchanged some silent understanding with Elias, then went back to whatever Dane-level nonsense they'd been doing.

We kept walking.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

“You going to tell me which one that was?” I asked.

“No.”

“Rude.”

We passed another building—this one low-slung and glass-walled. Inside, a woman with blonde hair did pull-ups on a steel rig. She dropped down and met my gaze through the glass.

I smiled.

Elias exhaled through his nose like he was already exhausted. “Do you have to antagonize everyone?”

“Only the ones who look like they could kill me,” I chirped. “It’s a kink.”

We rounded a hedge and stopped short at the edge of a shallow courtyard.

And there it was.

The pool.

Lit from beneath like the glow of some hidden galaxy, it stretched long and narrow between two wings of the main house, framed by tile and low, smoldering fire features that flickered in the breeze. The surface was so smooth it looked solid—like if you stepped onto it, it might hold you.

I took a step forward anyway, barefoot and bold.

“Is this where you waterboard your enemies?” I asked, half-teasing, half-mesmerized.

Elias didn’t answer. But I felt the shift in him—his body tense at my side, his eyes fixed on me instead of the pool.

I dipped a toe into the water, then stepped back and gave him a look. “No blood? No bodies? Disappointing.”

He let out a low breath. “It’s just a pool, Vivi.”

I grinned slowly. “Then you won’t mind if I take a swim.”

He moved like he might object—might order me inside like I was some wayward charge who needed corralling—but then another voice cut through the evening air.

“You’ll want to be careful,” someone drawled from the far side of the pool. “She likes to watch.”

I turned toward the sound, spotting a muscular man lounging on a stone bench with a half-empty bottle of something dark in one hand and a smirk on his face. His eyes glittered with mischief. “The snake, I mean.”

I lit up. “Really?”

“That’s right,” he said. “Obsidian. She’s got a glass enclosure in the main living area. But she could get out.”

I looked at Elias.

He was glaring at the guy.

“You’re not funny,” Elias muttered.

“I’m hilarious,” the guy said, unbothered, then raised the bottle to me. “Welcome to Dominion Hall.”

I tilted my head, stepping forward just enough to accept the unspoken toast. “And you are?”

“Noah,” he said, flashing a grin that had probably gotten him out of a hundred bad situations. “The charming one. Occasionally the shirtless one, but that’s mostly after tequila.”

“I like you already,” I said, smiling. “Do all the Dane brothers come with warning labels, or just this one?”

Noah laughed, full and low. “If Elias had a label, it’d be Do Not Engage Without Supervision.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Elias took a slow step forward, towering, silent, very much done with this conversation. I could feel the shift in the air—possession prickling beneath his skin like a live wire.

Noah just winked at me. “Word of advice? Don’t get too close to the snake. She’s gorgeous, but she bites.”

“I’ve been warned,” I said, keeping my eyes on Elias. “But that’s half the fun, isn’t it?”

Elias reached for my hand, his grip firm. “We’re leaving.”

“Aww,” Noah called. “Play nice, brother. She’s got fire.”

“She is fire,” Elias muttered under his breath, tugging at me.

I gave Noah a lazy salute, then looked back at Elias, unmoving. I wasn’t going anywhere. Not until I was good and ready.

“You have a snake and didn’t think to mention it?” I asked.

“She’s not exactly a secret,” he said, his voice low.

I tilted my head, grinning. “No, but sounds like she is a whole vibe. Dangerous, sleek, impossible to ignore ...”

My smile widened.

“Sound familiar?”

And then, without another word, I peeled off the remains of my tank top and shorts, baring skin still kissed by sweat and adrenaline. I wore only a black thong now, and nothing else, and I didn't miss the way Elias's jaw clenched at the sight.

I stepped to the edge of the pool and looked over my shoulder.

“You coming?” I asked. “Or are you going to let me swim alone while a deadly serpent watches from the windows? Not to mention, your brother?”

Elias didn't move.

Which made it better.

I dove in.

The water was cool silk, folding around me as I sliced through it, then surfaced with a flip of my hair and a smile sharp enough to bleed. Noah gave a low whistle, then disappeared into the shadows, muttering something about needing to find his fiancé.

I swam to the edge nearest Elias and rested my arms on the tile, chin tilted, tits just barely under the surface.

“Still standing there like a statue, Cipher?” I purred. “Or do I have to dare you again?”

He didn't speak.

But his shoes hit the stone with two soft thuds.

Then his shirt.

Then his belt.

Then the rest of his clothes, all the way down to a sexy pair of black boxer briefs.

And when he stepped into the pool—stalking toward me with water slicking up his thighs like a threat—I bit my bottom lip and whispered, “I dare you to let the snake join us in bed.”

He stopped.

Dead still.

The night cracked open between us.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

And then his voice—low, brutal, delicious—split the silence.

“You’d be safer with the snake,” he said, his voice dark silk stretched over steel.

I licked a droplet from my bottom lip, heart hammering in my chest. “So let her in. Let her slither between the sheets and see which of you bites harder.”

He moved fast.

Water surged as he reached me, both hands gripping the edge of the pool on either side of my body. Caging me in. The heat coming off him, even submerged, made my breath hitch.

“Careful what you ask for,” he growled. “I’m not the one who waits in the shadows. I’m the one who sinks his teeth in and doesn’t let go.”

My thighs clenched under the water. He was too close and still not close enough. Every nerve ending in my body screamed for friction. For impact. For him.

“I don’t want you to wait,” I whispered. “I want you to fuck me.”

His hand slid beneath the water, fingers curling around my thigh, dragging me against him. I gasped at the contact—bare skin, heat meeting heat. My breath stuttered. My fingers gripped the edge of the tile.

A door creaked in the distance.

Laughter drifted out into the night.

Two more men—presumably, his brothers—stepped into the courtyard, one shirtless, one in tactical pants and boots, carrying what looked like a training dummy over his shoulder.

They both saw us.

Saw me.

Bare-assed in the pool. Black thong. Wet hair. Eyes glazed with want.

They didn't leer. Didn't catcall. Just nodded once—almost in respect—and kept walking.

Me? I didn't flinch. I didn't cover up.

I leaned closer to Elias and murmured, “Think they'd let us borrow the snake ... just for a night?”

He looked like he was going to combust.

“Vivi,” he warned, voice a growl so thick with restraint it bordered on dangerous.

I smiled sweetly, tilting my head. “What? I like things with bite.”

His jaw ticked. His arms locked around me under the water, and in one sharp, brutal movement, he lifted me from the pool.

“Elias—”

I shrieked as he tossed me over his shoulder, my soaked body pressed to the hard muscle of his back, water dripping from my legs, his hand gripping my bare thigh with unmistakable ownership.

“Put me down!”

“No.”

“You’re kidnapping me again.”

He walked across the stone, up the steps, into the house like he didn’t care who saw.

I wriggled, half-laughing, half-burning. “You’re not even going to let me towel off?”

“I’ll dry you myself.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

The front door shut behind us.

And the snake?

I could've sworn I heard something shift in the glass enclosure off the main hall. A flicker of black scales. A flash of tongue.

Obsidian watched us go.

I twisted just enough to look back at her.

“Don’t worry, girl,” I whispered, glancing over Elias’s shoulder toward the glass tank. “I’ll come back for you later.”

The snake didn’t blink. Didn’t move. Just stared—dark eyes gleaming like she knew secrets I hadn’t earned yet.

But I wasn’t scared of her.

Bringing a black viper to bed wouldn’t even crack my top ten worst ideas. Hell, it might not even make the list. Because the real danger? The one with teeth sharper than fangs and control tighter than coils?

Was already carrying me up the stairs like I was weightless and his to keep.

And me?

I wanted to test the locks. Tap the glass. Find every button he didn't want pushed and press it until it broke.

Because if he thought the snake was dangerous, he hadn't seen what I could do when I decided someone was worth the bite.

12

ELIAS

Vivi's wet body was a firebrand against my shoulder, her thighs slick from the pool, her black thong a flimsy barrier that did nothing to hide her heat as I carried her up Dominion Hall's stairs. Her laugh, low and taunting, echoed in the cavernous hall, a siren's call that made my demon roar.

I'd killed for her, fucked her against an alley wall, and now she was here, in my domain, daring me to break her.

Our snake, Obsidian, watched from her glass cage below, her black eyes glinting like she knew what was coming. I didn't care. Vivi was mine, and tonight, I'd own every inch of her, every gasp, every scream, until she understood what it meant to push me.

My suite's door slammed shut behind us, the steel and glass sealing us in. I didn't put her down, not yet. Her wriggling only made my grip tighter, my hand branding her thigh, the other splayed across her bare ass, feeling her pulse under my fingers. Her scent was a drug, sinking into my veins, shredding my control. The demon was free, its claws sharp, and I let it lead, my blood a furnace that burned for her.

"Put me down, Cipher," she said, half-laughing, half-demanding, her nails digging into my back. "Or I'll make you."

I smirked, tossing her onto my bed, the black sheets swallowing her like a sacrifice. She landed with a gasp, her red curls a wild halo, her skin glistening under the low light of my suite. She was in nothing but that thong, her breasts bare, nipples hard from the cool air or the thrill—I didn't care which.

She propped herself on her elbows, legs parted just enough to make my mouth water, her grin wicked and unyielding.

“You think you can handle me?” she said, voice a velvet blade, her eyes green fire that dared me to try.

I didn't answer with words. I stripped off my boxer briefs, my cock already hard, throbbing with need. Her gaze dropped, and her lips parted, a flicker of surprise in her eyes that made my demon growl with satisfaction.

I was big, thick, and I knew it, but it was the hunger in her stare that drove me feral. She wasn't scared—she was intrigued, and fuck, that was better.

I climbed onto the bed, my hands gripping her ankles, yanking her toward me. She gasped, a sound that shot straight to my groin, and I spread her legs wide, pinning them to the sheets.

Her thong was a scrap of black lace, soaked from the pool and her own arousal, and I ripped it off with one sharp tug, tossing it to the floor.

She was bare now, glistening, her pussy pink and perfect, and I wanted to devour her, to make her scream my name until her throat was raw.

“Elias,” she breathed, her voice a mix of challenge and need, her hips arching toward me like she couldn't wait.

I leaned down, my breath hot against her inner thigh, my lips grazing her skin.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

“You pushed me, Red,” I said, voice low, a growl that vibrated through her. “Now you’re gonna pay the price.”

I bit her thigh, hard enough to leave a mark, and she moaned, her hands fisting the sheets. My tongue followed, licking a slow path toward her center, tasting salt and her, a flavor that made my demon howl. I didn’t tease, didn’t play—I dove in, my mouth closing over her clit, sucking hard, my tongue flicking with ruthless precision. She bucked, a cry tearing from her lips, and I pinned her hips down, my fingers digging into her flesh, keeping her exactly where I wanted her.

“Oh, God, Elias,” she gasped, her voice breaking, her thighs trembling under my hands.

I didn’t stop, didn’t let her breathe. I licked her deep, my tongue thrusting inside her, tasting her heat, her sweetness, while my thumb circled her clit, fast and relentless. She was a storm, writhing under me, her moans a symphony that drove me insane. I wanted her to come, wanted her to shatter, but not yet—not until I was buried inside her, claiming every piece of her.

I pulled back, her slickness on my lips, and she whimpered, her eyes wide, pupils blown with lust.

“Don’t you fucking stop,” she snarled, reaching for me, but I caught her wrists, pinning them above her head with one hand. She fought me, her body twisting, but I was stronger, and the demon loved her struggle, loved how she burned against me.

“You don’t give the orders,” I said, my voice rough, my free hand sliding down her

body, pinching her nipple hard enough to make her gasp. “I do.”

Her eyes flashed, defiance and desire warring, and I kissed her, brutal and deep, letting her taste herself on my tongue. She bit me back, her teeth sharp, and I growled, my cock twitching against her thigh.

I released her wrists, only to flip her onto her stomach, my hand pressing her face into the sheets, her ass in the air. She moaned, low and needy, pushing back against me, and I slapped her ass, hard, the sound echoing in the room. Her gasp was a mix of shock and pleasure, and fuck, I liked that—liked how her fire met my demon and begged for more.

“You wanted me to lose control,” I said, my voice a blade, my hand soothing the red mark I’d left. “This is what it looks like.”

I spread her cheeks, my fingers finding her pussy again, sliding inside her, two, then three, stretching her, fucking her slow and deep. She was tight, hot, her walls clenching around me, and her moans were muffled by the sheets, her hips rocking back, desperate for more. I leaned over her, my chest against her back, my lips at her ear.

“You’re mine, Vivi,” I growled, my fingers curling inside her, hitting that spot that made her scream. “Every inch. Every scream. Say it.”

She turned her head, her cheek pressed to the sheets, her eyes blazing even through the haze of lust.

“Make me,” she rasped, her voice raw, defiant to the end.

I pulled my fingers out, slick and glistening, and gripped her hips, lining myself up. My cock pressed against her entrance, and I didn’t wait, didn’t ease her into it. I

thrust in, hard and deep, filling her in one brutal stroke.

She screamed, her body arching, her nails clawing the sheets, and I didn't stop, couldn't stop. She was fire, liquid and tight, and I fucked her like I was trying to break her, my hips slamming into her, the bed shaking with the force of us.

"Fuck, Elias," she gasped, her voice breaking, her body trembling under me.

I grabbed her hair, pulling her head back, my lips at her throat, biting, sucking, marking her as mine. She pushed back against me, meeting every thrust, her moans loud, unhinged, filling the room.

I reached around, my fingers finding her clit, rubbing hard, fast, driving her toward the edge.

"You're gonna come for me," I growled, my voice rough, my hips relentless. "You're gonna scream my name, and you're gonna know who owns you."

She laughed, wild and breathless, even as her body shook. "You think you own me, Cipher? Prove it."

I flipped her again, onto her back, never pulling out, my cock still buried deep. Her legs wrapped around me, her heels digging into my ass, urging me harder.

I pinned her wrists again, my body covering hers, my thrusts brutal, punishing, each one a claim. Her breasts bounced with every stroke, her skin flushed, her eyes locked on mine, green and blazing, daring me to push further.

I leaned down, my lips brushing hers, not a kiss but a threat. "You want proof?" I rasped, my voice low, dangerous. "I'll give you something you'll never forget."

I pulled out, ignoring her whimper, and grabbed her hips, flipping her to straddle me as I sat back on my heels. She was above me now, her pussy hovering over my cock, her eyes wide, a flicker of shock in them that made my demon howl. I gripped her waist, slamming her down onto me, impaling her in one swift motion.

She screamed, her head falling back, her nails raking my chest, drawing blood. I didn't care. I wanted her marks, wanted her to see them and know she'd done this to me.

"Ride me," I ordered, my voice a growl, my hands guiding her hips, hard and fast. She obeyed, her body moving like a dancer's, fluid and fierce, her pussy clenching around me, her moans a rhythm that drove me to the edge. I slapped her ass again, harder, the sound sharp, and her eyes widened, a gasp escaping her lips—a mix of shock and need that made my cock throb.

"You like that," I said, my voice dark, my hand soothing the sting before slapping her again, watching her body jolt, her pussy tightening around me. "You like it when I'm rough."

"Fuck you," she gasped, but her hips moved faster, her moans louder, her eyes glazed with lust. She was close, trembling, and I wanted to push her further, to shock her, to make her feel me in every nerve.

I leaned forward, my lips at her ear, my voice a whisper. "I'm gonna fuck you until you can't walk, Red. Until you can't think of anything but me."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I slid a finger to her ass, circling her tight hole, slick with her arousal. Her eyes snapped to mine, wide, a flash of shock that made my demon grin.

“Elias,” she breathed, but there was no fear, only hunger, and I pushed in, slow, deliberate, my finger stretching her as my cock filled her pussy. She moaned, loud and raw, her body shaking, her nails digging into my shoulders.

“Too much?” I asked, my voice low, taunting, my finger moving in sync with my thrusts.

“Never,” she snarled, her hips rocking harder, taking me deeper, her defiance a fire that burned us both. I added a second finger, stretching her further, and she screamed, her body convulsing, her orgasm hitting like a tidal wave.

Her pussy clenched around me, her ass tightening around my fingers, and I fucked her through it, relentless, my own release building, hot and unstoppable.

“Say it,” I growled, my voice breaking, my hips slamming into her, my fingers driving her past the edge. “Say you’re mine.”

“Elias,” she gasped, her voice a sob, her body trembling, her eyes locked on mine. “I’m yours.”

The words broke me. I roared, my release tearing through me, filling her, marking her inside and out. I thrust once, twice, riding the wave, my hands gripping her hips, bruising her skin.

She collapsed against me, panting, her forehead against mine, her breath warm and ragged.

We stayed there, tangled, slick with sweat and sex, the room silent except for our breathing. Her body was soft now, pliant, but her eyes were still fire, still Vivi, even after I'd shocked her, pushed her further than she'd expected. I liked that—liked how she'd met me at every step, taken everything I gave her and demanded more.

“You’re a fucking menace,” I said, voice hoarse, my hands sliding up her back, tracing the marks I'd left.

She laughed, low and warm, her lips brushing mine. “You love it, Cipher.”

I didn't answer, didn't need to.

She was right.

I'd killed for her, chased her, fucked her like the world was ending, and I'd do it again.

I pulled her closer, my lips finding her throat, tasting the salt of her skin. The demon was quiet, sated for now, but it wasn't gone. It would never be gone, not with her in my life, burning through every wall I'd built.

I rolled us, pinning her beneath me, my body still hungry, my cock already stirring.

“We're not done,” I said, my voice low, my hands spreading her thighs again. “Not even close.”

Her grin was pure trouble, her eyes gleaming. “Good. I'd hate to think you were getting soft.” She gave my cock a tug to prove it.

I kissed her, hard and deep, and the demon roared, ready to claim her again. Dominion Hall's shadows loomed outside, the hacker's ghosts a distant echo, but none of it mattered. Vivi was mine, and I'd burn the world to keep her. The fire was hers, the demon was mine, and together, we were unstoppable.

13

VIVIENNE

Elias's body pinned me to the black sheets, his weight a delicious cage, his cock already stirring inside me, hungry for more.

So was I.

I'd always had an insatiable appetite—craving the kind of sex that left bruises and bite marks, the kind that came with consequences.

It wasn't just about pleasure for me. It was about power. About release. About chasing the edge of something that felt like losing control without actually falling.

I wore out lovers the way most people wore out shoes. They always started intrigued—thrilled, even—but none of them lasted. They got overwhelmed. Or bored. Or scared. Sometimes all three.

But Elias? He wasn't breaking. He wasn't backing down.

He fucked like a man with demons, with purpose, with precision. Every thrust, every grip, every brutal kiss was him matching me stroke for stroke. Push for push. He didn't just take the fire—I felt him feed it. Shape it. Use it.

And that made me wonder if this wasn't just a challenge.

Maybe he was a match.

Maybe I'd finally found someone who could keep up.

Someone who could take everything I had—and give it right back.

My thighs burned, my wrists throbbed from his grip, and the raw ache between my legs pulsed with every heartbeat, but I wasn't done. Not even close.

His lips grazed my throat, his breath hot and ragged, promising another round, and I arched into him, my nails digging into his back, daring him to keep up. Dominion Hall's shadows loomed around us, but the only thing I craved was the edge—the razor-thin line where pleasure bled into danger.

His eyes, blue and feral, locked on mine. "We're not done," he'd growled, and I felt it, the heat of his promise, the way his hands spread my thighs like he owned every inch of me.

But my mind was already racing, chasing something wilder, something that would push us both past the brink.

I wasn't normal. I knew that. Never had been.

Other girls dreamed of safety, of softness, of kisses under moonlight and vows whispered in the dark.

I craved danger. I got off on chaos. My mind didn't quiet unless I was dancing with

something that could break me—whether it was a fall from the sky, a man with sharp edges, or the bite of a risk I had no business taking.

I'd tried to want other things. Tried to be softer. Smaller. Palatable. But it never stuck. Because deep down, I didn't just like danger.

I needed it.

And Elias? He didn't just carry danger—he was it. Coiled and simmering beneath the surface, built from the same sharp pieces I was. It made sense, then, that my brain would go hunting for the next high, even now, still trembling from what we'd just done.

It wasn't that I didn't care about consequences. I just couldn't stop wanting what I wanted.

And right now?

I wanted to take this already-unhinged night and make it mythic.

Noah's words from the pool echoed in my head—she's gorgeous, but she bites—and a reckless idea sparked, igniting my blood.

Obsidian. The snake.

I wanted her coils against my skin, her danger woven into us, amplifying every thrust, every scream.

I slid from under him, my body slick with sweat, my movements deliberate as I straddled his hips, teasing his cock with my heat.

“Stay,” I whispered, my lips brushing his, my curls falling around us like a curtain. His hands gripped my ass, hard enough to bruise, but I leaned back, flashing a wicked grin. “I’ve got a surprise.”

His jaw tightened, suspicion flickering in his eyes. “Vivi, what the fuck are you?—”

I silenced him with a kiss, deep and filthy, my tongue claiming his until he groaned into my mouth. Then I slipped off the bed, my bare feet silent on the hardwood, my skin prickling with anticipation.

I wanted Obsidian, and I wanted her now.

I grabbed Elias’s discarded T-shirt from the floor, the black fabric swallowing my frame, and padded out of the suite, leaving him sprawled on the bed, his cock hard and his eyes burning.

The hallway was dim, Dominion Hall’s silence pressing against my skin. My heart thumped, not from fear but from the thrill of sneaking through this house of secrets, my body still humming from his touch, my mind alight with what was coming.

The main living area sprawled below, a maze of luxury—leather sofas, a bar gleaming with expensive bottles, and there, against the far wall, Obsidian’s enclosure. The glass was thick, the tank lit by soft light, and inside, she lay coiled, her black scales glinting like polished midnight.

Her eyes, dark and unblinking, met mine as I approached, and my breath caught. She was lethal, unapologetic, a creature that existed on her own terms.

I understood her, craved her, wanted her danger to dance with ours.

It was insane. Reckless. And I didn’t care.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

I'd danced en pointe on broken toes. I'd kayaked straight into a squall just to feel the water fight me back. I'd jumped from a plane without checking the gear twice. Once, I'd let a stranger tie me up on a rooftop just to see if I'd panic. I hadn't.

None of that felt half as risky as this—reaching into a tank with a viper who could kill me in one strike.

But it wasn't death I was chasing. It was control. Or maybe the surrender of it. The thrill of staring down something that should terrify me and touching it anyway.

Inviting it closer. Daring it to try.

Obsidian didn't flinch. Didn't recoil. She watched me like she recognized something in my posture, my scent, my stillness.

Something wild. Something willing.

I smiled at her like we were the same. Because in a way, we were. Neither of us belonged in glass cages. We weren't meant to be tamed. We were meant to strike.

The enclosure's latch was a simple sliding bolt, unlocked, as if the Dane brothers dared anyone to be this stupid. I slid it free, the click sharp in the silence, and eased the glass panel open.

Obsidian stirred, her tongue flicking, tasting my intent. My pulse raced, the same electric rush I got skydiving, kayaking the harbor, climbing bridges. I reached in, my fingers brushing her cool, smooth scales, unafraid, unyielding.

“Come on, girl,” I whispered, my voice a velvet blade. “Let’s make this unforgettable.”

She unfolded, her body heavy and muscular, and I lifted her, draping her around my shoulders, her coils sliding over my skin like a lover’s caress. Her head rested near my collarbone, her tongue flicking against my neck, intimate and thrilling. I grinned, my bare legs carrying me back up the stairs, Obsidian’s scales whispering against Elias’s T-shirt, my pussy already wet, aching for what was next.

Elias was waiting when I slipped back into the suite, the door clicking shut behind me. He sat on the edge of the bed, his cock still hard, his eyes narrowing as he took in the sight of me—bare legs, his T-shirt barely covering my ass, and Obsidian coiled around my shoulders like a living shawl.

His breath hitched, his hands fisting the sheets. “Jesus Christ, Red,” he rasped, voice thick with lust and something darker. “What the fuck are you doing?”

I set Obsidian on the floor, letting her slither toward the bed, her coils gliding silently over the hardwood. “You said I’d be safer with the snake,” I said, climbing onto the bed, straddling his hips again, my pussy grazing his cock. “Let’s see if you’re right.”

His hands gripped my thighs, his eyes darting to Obsidian, who was now sliding onto the sheets, her head brushing my calf. “She’s a viper, Vivi,” he growled, but his cock twitched against me, betraying his hunger. “This is insane.”

“So am I,” I said, rocking my hips, grinding against him, the friction sparking fire through me.

Obsidian’s coils tightened around my ankle, cool and strong, and I gasped, the sensation amplifying every nerve. Elias’s eyes darkened, his grip bruising, and I knew he was as fucked up as I was, turned on by the danger. By me.

I peeled off the T-shirt, tossing it aside, my breasts bare, my nipples hard from the cool air and the thrill. Obsidian's head brushed my thigh, her tongue flicking against my skin, and I moaned, the sound raw, unfiltered. Elias swore, his hands cupping my breasts, his thumbs circling my nipples, sending jolts of pleasure straight to my core.

"You're gonna get us killed," he said, but his voice was rough, desperate, his cock throbbing against my wetness.

"Then we die screaming," I said, leaning down to kiss him, my tongue plunging into his mouth, claiming him as fiercely as he'd claimed me.

Obsidian's coils slid higher, brushing my hip, my stomach, and I shivered, the dual sensations—his hands on me, her scales against me—pushing me to the edge.

I broke the kiss, my lips trailing down his jaw, his throat, biting hard enough to draw blood. His groan was a low rumble, his hands guiding my hips, urging me to take him.

I reached down, guiding his cock to my entrance, and sank onto him, slow and deliberate, taking him inch by thick inch. He was huge, stretching me, filling me, and I gasped, my head falling back, my hands braced on his chest.

Obsidian's coils tightened around my leg, her head near my knee, and I moaned, the danger of her presence making every thrust electric.

Elias's fingers dug into my ass, his hips thrusting up, meeting my rhythm, fucking me like he wanted to break me.

"Move," he growled, his voice a command, his eyes wild.

I rode him, hard and relentless, my hips slamming against his, the bed shaking under

us.

Obsidian's head rested near my thigh, her eyes glinting, and I felt her power, her danger, amplifying every gasp, every scream. Elias's hands roamed, one sliding to my throat, squeezing just enough to make my pulse race, the other gripping my hip, bruising my skin.

"Feel her," I whispered, guiding his hand to Obsidian's coils, letting him touch her scales. His breath hitched, his cock twitching inside me, and I grinned, knowing he was lost, caught in this fucked-up dance of desire and risk.

I rocked harder, my clit grinding against him, my moans loud, filling the room, drowning out the world.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

“You’re mine,” he snarled, his hand tightening on my throat, his thrusts brutal, his eyes locked on mine.

Obsidian’s coils slid over my stomach, her tongue flicking against my skin, and I screamed, the pleasure-pain overwhelming, my orgasm building like a tidal wave. Elias thrust harder, his cock hitting deep, his fingers squeezing my throat, and I was gone, shattering around him, my pussy clenching, my body shaking.

He didn’t stop, flipping me onto my back, his cock still buried inside me, Obsidian’s coils draping over my chest, her head near my shoulder. He fucked me harder, his thrusts punishing, his eyes blazing.

“Say it,” he growled, his hand still on my throat, his other gripping my thigh, marking me. “Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” I gasped, my voice raw, my nails raking his back, drawing blood. Obsidian’s tongue flicked against my collarbone, her coils tightening, and I came again, screaming his name, my body convulsing under him.

He roared, his release hitting, filling me, marking me inside and out, his thrusts slowing but never stopping, like he wanted to stay inside me forever.

We collapsed, panting, Obsidian’s coils still draped over us, her head resting on my chest, her eyes glinting in the dark. Elias’s forehead pressed against mine, his breath ragged, his hands still on me, unwilling to let go.

“You’re fucking insane,” he said, voice hoarse, but there was awe in it, maybe even

worship.

“You love it,” I whispered, my lips brushing his, my body still trembling from the aftershocks. Obsidian stirred, her coils sliding off me, slithering back to the floor, as if she knew her part was done. I laughed, low and warm, my fingers tracing the marks I’d left on his chest. “Told you she’d make it unforgettable.”

He kissed me, slow and deep, his tongue claiming mine, and I felt it—the shift, the moment we became something more than fire and chaos.

Here, in this bed, with Obsidian’s eyes watching us, we were untouchable. Together, we’d burn the world.

14

ELIAS

Vivi’s body was a warm anchor against mine, her red curls splayed across my chest like embers on a dark tide. The sheets clung to us, damp with sweat, Obsidian’s coils a silent shadow in the corner of my suite. We’d fucked like demons, her fire torching my control, but now, in the quiet, her breath soft against my skin, I felt a pull—not just to claim her but to let her see me, the parts I’d buried deep. The demon was there, pacing its cage, but it was hushed, lulled by her warmth, her presence.

She shifted, propping her chin on my chest, her green eyes glinting in the low light. “You’re quiet, Cipher,” she said, voice husky, a teasing edge slicing through. “Planning to chain me to your bedpost?”

I smirked, my fingers tracing the curve of her spine, slow and deliberate. “You’d burn the chains to ash, Red.”

Her laugh was soft, a sound that sank into me, thawing places I'd kept frozen. "Damn right. But you'd fan the flames."

I didn't answer, just held her gaze, her eyes probing mine like she could see the demon and didn't flinch. She was chaos, a glitch in my code, but tonight, I didn't want to debug her. I wanted her to know me, just a sliver, even if it felt like peeling back my own skin.

She rolled onto her side, her thigh brushing mine, her hand resting on my stomach, fingers grazing the scars I never explained. "Tell me something real," she said, voice low, not a command but a dare. "Not the hacker shit. You. Who's Elias Dane when he's not chasing me?"

My jaw tightened, the instinct to shut down automatic. My career—military ops, black sites, bodies buried for Dominion Hall—was a vault I wouldn't open, not yet. But her eyes, steady and unflinching, tugged at something raw. I exhaled, slow, my hand finding hers, lacing our fingers together.

"Grew up on Sullivan's Island," I said, voice rough, the words scraping out. "Salt air, sand in everything. Me and my brothers ran wild, building driftwood forts, swiping beers from tourists' coolers."

Her lips curved, a real smile, not her usual wicked grin. "Sounds like trouble."

"We were," I said, a faint smirk tugging at my mouth. "Marcus was the loudmouth, starting fights he couldn't finish. Atlas watched, always planning. Charlie dreamed, sketching in the sand. Noah charmed his way out of everything."

She tilted her head, her curls catching the light. "And you?"

I paused, the truth heavy. "I fixed shit. Broken toys, busted radios, anything I could

take apart and put back together. Had to know how it worked, how to control it.”

Her fingers tightened around mine, her voice soft. “Sounds like you carried a lot.”

I snorted, but it didn’t hide the ache. “Wasn’t so bad. Had my brothers. Had my dad.” I hesitated, the memory of Byron Dane a weight, warm but shadowed. “Dad loved us, all of us. Good man, quiet, but he’d sit us down, tell stories about the sea, teach us to read the stars. We thought he was just a hard worker, scraping by. Then, when we were all deployed—me and my brothers scattered across the world in our respective units—we got word he was dead. Left us a letter and a fortune we didn’t know he had.”

Vivi’s breath caught, her hand stilling. “A fortune?”

I nodded, the truth still surreal. “Billions. Stashed in accounts, properties, shit we couldn’t fathom. We were soldiers, not tycoons. Found out he’d been playing some kind of game—deals, secrets, shit he never told us. Built an empire, and we inherited it overnight.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t push, just listened, her silence an invitation. I swallowed, the next part harder, the part that cut deepest.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

“My mom ...” I started, my chest tight, the words like glass in my throat. “She was light, you know? Sang and danced with us in the kitchen. I was just a kid when she vanished. No note, no trace. Dad shut down. Never talked about her. Focused on raising us.”

Vivi’s fingers slid to my face, turning me to her, her touch gentle but firm. “You think he got her killed?”

I looked away, my jaw clenching. “I think maybe his secrets did. I’ve been digging ever since, but the trail’s cold. She’s a ghost now.” Why was I telling her this?

Her eyes softened, fierce and tender. “That’s why you’re like this,” she said, voice low. “You’re chasing control because they took it from you.”

I held her gaze, her words slicing deep, raw and true. She saw me—the kid who lost his mom, the man who built walls to keep the world out. And fuck, I wanted her to keep seeing me, to tear those walls down until there was nothing left.

I kissed her, slow and deep, not the brutal claiming of before but something softer, something that scared me more. Her lips were warm, yielding, her tongue a slow dance with mine, and I felt it—the shift, the moment we weren’t just fire and demon but something real. My hands slid to her hips, pulling her closer, her body molding to mine, her breasts soft against my chest.

“Elias,” she whispered, her voice a sigh, her hands roaming my back, tracing scars and muscle, learning me. I rolled us, her beneath me, my cock hardening as I settled between her thighs, the heat of her pussy a siren’s call. This wasn’t about pain, not

this time. It was about pleasure, about knowing her in a way that went beyond skin.

I dipped my cock into her, slow, just the tip, teasing her entrance, feeling her wetness coat me. She gasped, her nails grazing my arms, her eyes fluttering closed. "More," she murmured, her hips arching, but I held back, savoring the way her body begged for me.

"Not yet," I said, voice low, my lips brushing her ear. I slid in an inch, then out, slow and deliberate, watching her face, the way her lips parted, her breath hitching. She was fire, but this time, I wanted her to burn slow, to feel every second of me.

She opened her eyes, green and blazing, and pushed me onto my back, straddling me, her hands on my chest. "You're teasing," she said, her voice a mix of frustration and lust, her pussy hovering over my cock, tormenting me.

"You want it, take it," I said, my hands on her hips, guiding but not forcing. She grinned, wicked and beautiful, and sank onto me, slow, her pussy swallowing me inch by inch, tight and hot, a perfect fit. I groaned, my head falling back, the pleasure so intense it was almost pain.

She rode me, slow and sensual, her hips rolling, her breasts swaying, her curls bouncing. I watched her, mesmerized, my hands roaming her body, cupping her breasts, thumbing her nipples until she moaned. "Fuck, Vivi," I rasped, my voice rough, my cock throbbing inside her.

She leaned down, her lips brushing mine, her breath warm. "I want to taste me on you," she whispered, and before I could process it, she slid off, her mouth closing over my cock, wet and warm, her tongue swirling around the tip. Then she licked me on every side, from tip to base. I groaned, my hands fisting her hair, the sight of her lips stretched around me enough to drive me insane. Then she sucked me deep, her hand stroking what her mouth couldn't take, her eyes locked on mine, defiant.

“Red,” I growled, my voice breaking, my hips bucking into her mouth. She hummed, the vibration sending shocks through me, and I was close, too close, but I wanted her pussy again, wanted to finish inside her. I pulled her up, kissing her, tasting myself on her tongue, and rolled us, sliding back into her, slow and deep, her moan a sound I’d never tire of.

We moved together, bodies in sync, her legs wrapped around me, her hands on my face, pulling me closer. It was slow, deliberate, every thrust a conversation, every gasp a confession. I felt her tightening, her breath hitching, and I kissed her, swallowing her moans, my cock driving deeper, chasing her pleasure.

A ding broke the haze, my phone on the nightstand, followed by hers, a sharp chime that cut through the air. I ignored it, my lips on her throat, my hips moving, but they dinged again, insistent, a tandem rhythm that made my gut twist. Vivi’s eyes flickered, but she pulled me closer, her nails digging into my ass, urging me on.

“Keep going,” she whispered, her voice desperate, her pussy clenching around me, so close to the edge. I wanted to, wanted to lose myself in her, but the phones kept going, a chorus of warnings I couldn’t ignore. The demon snarled, sensing a threat, and I reached for my phone, my cock still buried deep inside her, her heat a vice I didn’t want to leave.

“Elias,” she moaned, her hips rocking, trying to pull me back, but I glanced at the screen, my blood running cold. An alert from my monitoring program on the ballet’s network, the words stark and brutal: Effective immediately, Vivienne Laveau is suspended from the Charleston Crescent Ballet Company. Her whereabouts are to be supplied to the authorities.

I froze, my cock still inside her, her body trembling beneath me, so close to release. Her phone buzzed again, and I grabbed it, seeing the same message, mirrored, official, a fucking guillotine. Suspended. Authorities. Her life, her passion, her

fire—threatened by something I’d missed, something tied to the hackers, to me.

“Elias,” she said, voice sharp now, her eyes searching mine. “What is it?”

I didn’t answer, couldn’t, the demon roaring, tearing at its cage. I’d protected her, killed for her, but this—this was a blade I hadn’t seen coming. The ballet, her world, was turning on her, and my program had caught it, but too late. I dropped the phones, my hands framing her face, kissing her, hard and desperate, pouring my fear into her.

“We’re not done,” I growled, thrusting again, slow and deep, needing her to feel me, to know I wasn’t letting go. She moaned, her body responding, her eyes blazing with trust, with fire, even as the world burned around us.

I fucked her, slow and steady, my cock sliding in and out, her pussy clenching, her breath hitching. We climbed together, her nails in my back, my lips on hers, and when she came, it was soft, a shuddering wave that pulled me with her, my release spilling into her, marking her as mine.

We lay there, panting, her body soft against mine, the phones silent now, but the message a ghost in the room. I held her close, my hand in her hair, my voice low. “They’re coming for you, Red,” I said, the truth raw, brutal. “But they’ll have to go through me first.”

Her eyes met mine and she smiled, not her wicked grin but something real, something that scared me more than the alert.

The demon roared, ready to fight, and I knew—whatever this was, whoever was behind it, I’d burn the world to keep her safe. Vivi was mine, and no one, not the ballet, not the authorities, not the ghosts of my past, would take her from me.

VIVIENNE

Sunlight slanted across the black sheets, golden and warm, pooling in the hollow between Elias's ribs. I watched it spread over his chest like a blessing he didn't know how to accept, his breath deep and even beneath my cheek.

We hadn't spoken much after the phones started dinging.

We hadn't needed to.

I'd seen the look in his eyes. Whatever those alerts had said, they weren't good. But I hadn't asked. I hadn't looked. Not yet.

Maybe that made me a coward. Or maybe it made me sane. Because for once, I wanted to keep the chaos outside the door. Let the danger knock without letting it in.

So I'd buried my phone in a drawer, climbed back into bed, and wrapped my limbs around the most dangerous man I'd ever known like he was a comfort blanket. A broken, battle-scarred comfort blanket with a cock that ruined me.

Now, with morning spilling through the curtains and the scent of sex still clinging to my skin, I shifted carefully, not ready to break the spell. My body ached, delicious and sore, marked in places only I knew to look. My throat was raw from moaning, my thighs trembled from overuse, and my heart ... well, that traitorous bitch had started whispering things I wasn't ready to hear.

Elias stirred beneath me, his arm tightening around my waist, eyes still closed.

"You're awake," I murmured.

"Been," he rasped, voice wrecked from sleep and everything we'd done before it.

I traced a line across his chest, slow and lazy. "Then why didn't you say anything?"

"Didn't want to break it."

I looked up. “Break what?”

“This.” His fingers brushed my hip. “Whatever this was.”

My throat tightened. I wasn’t ready to define it either. Not when it still felt so fragile and fucked up and new. So instead, I kissed the underside of his jaw, right where his pulse thudded. “Then don’t.”

He didn’t answer. Just held me a little tighter, a little longer.

But eventually, reality came knocking. As it always did.

He shifted, lifting onto one elbow. “Vivi ...”

“No.” I sat up, hair tumbling down my back. “Let me guess. The sky is falling. The feds are on their way. The ballet’s canceled. There’s a vengeful hacker in the pantry.”

He didn’t smile. Not even a twitch.

So I did it for him—rolled my eyes, grabbed the sheets, and leaned back on my elbows. “Fine. Say it.”

He watched me carefully, like he was trying to assess how much I could take before cracking. “You’ve been suspended from the Charleston Crescent Ballet.”

I nodded once. “Figured.”

“They’re claiming it’s for ‘behavior unbecoming of a principal dancer.’” His voice was calm, measured. “It’s the bridge stunt. The media got hold of it. You’re everywhere.”

I stared at the ceiling, the fan spinning slow above me like it had all the time in the world. “So, I’m officially a liability now.”

“You’re a headline,” he said. “Which is worse.”

The bed was quiet for a long beat. The kind of silence that demanded truth.

“I knew it was coming,” I said softly. “You don’t climb suspension bridges and expect the board of directors to send you flowers.”

Elias sat up beside me, elbows on his knees. “You did it for me.”

“No.” I turned to him. “I did it for me. For that part of me that’s always been waiting to fall. You just happened to be there to catch me.”

His jaw ticked. “They’ll come after your reputation. Twist it. Make you look unstable.”

“They won’t have to twist much,” I said, a laugh catching in my throat. “I’ve always been one pirouette away from a breakdown.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:48 am

Elias looked at me then—really looked at me. And what I saw in his eyes wasn't pity. It was fury. Protectiveness. Something that felt dangerously close to love.

"I can fix it," he said. "I have leverage. We can bury the media threads. We can spin it. Say you were filming something. Doing performance art."

I reached out, touched his jaw. "You can do a lot of things, Cipher. But you can't unmake me."

His brow furrowed.

"I'm not meant for polite society. Never have been. I've always danced on the edge. The ballet gave me structure, sure. A role. But it was never going to be enough."

He was quiet, but I could feel the war in him—one part wanting to scorch the earth for me, the other knowing I was made of wildfire and wouldn't be saved that way.

"I'm not asking you to fix it," I whispered. "What if I'm asking you to stand beside me while it burns?"

Elias cupped my face, his thumb brushing my cheek like I might vanish if he blinked. "Then we'll watch it burn together."

I had him. And he had me. And that? That was dangerous in the best fucking way.

He leaned in, kissed me once—slow and deliberate, like sealing a pact—and then flopped back onto the pillows with a groan. "So what now? You're officially off-

duty. Should we throw a retirement party?"

I snorted. "Technically, my whereabouts are supposed to be reported to the authorities."

He stretched, utterly unbothered. "Yeah, well. I won't be doing that. I'll have our guy on the force take care of it."

"You're obstructing justice."

"I'm protecting it," he said, eyes closing. "Big difference."

I stretched beside him, catlike and smug. "A retirement party sounds tempting. But I don't think Dominion Hall stocks enough alcohol."

He smirked, eyes tracking the lazy arc of my arm as I reached overhead. "Seriously. What do you want to do today?"

I gave it a beat. Let the question hang in the air like something sacred.

Because with Elias? The possibilities were endless.

We could hop on a plane and be in Paris by dinnertime—white tablecloths, caviar, and a view of the Seine like something out of a dream. Or we could rent out an entire theater downtown just to watch *Black Swan* on a loop while we heckled it from the balcony. Hell, he probably had the resources to shut down a theme park for the day and let me pirouette down Main Street in stilettos and lingerie if I asked nicely. With that kind of money, the world bent a little differently—rules became suggestions, time became elastic, and impulse was just another form of currency.

Still, I stayed where I was.

“I don’t have to be anywhere,” I said finally, rolling onto my side. “For once in my life, there’s no barre, no rehearsals, no endless emails about costumes and fundraising galas. Just ... me. And this absurdly comfortable bed.”

“And the venomous snake,” Elias added dryly, glancing toward the far corner where Obsidian had curled into a tight black coil on the rug like she owned the place.

Right. Her.

“We should probably put her back,” I murmured, propping my chin on his chest. “Before she gets bored and slithers her way into someone’s closet.”

Elias made a noise that was half-laugh, half-grimace. “Pretty sure if she ends up in the wrong suite, there’s going to be a murder. Or at least a lawsuit.”

“Please. I’ll bet half the women here wear shoes more dangerous than Obsidian. Besides,” I grinned, “maybe it’s a loyalty test.”

“A snake test?”

“Exactly. If they can’t handle a little serpentine chaos, they don’t belong in this house.”

He arched a brow. “You’re terrifying.”

“And you like it.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

He sighed, tossing an arm over his face. “Fine. We’ll wrangle her in a bit. But I guarantee someone’s already noticed she’s missing.”

“They’re probably organizing a search party as we speak,” I said, grinning. “Flashlights. Team t-shirts. Maybe a reward poster.”

Elias gave me a sidelong look. “Think anyone would suspect she was last seen wrapped around your naked body?”

I bit my lip, eyes sparkling. “Only if they really know me.”

We both laughed, the sound easy, unexpected. It felt strange and beautiful—this thing between us that hadn’t existed forty-eight hours ago, now solidifying like wet cement setting fast.

He reached for my hand, lacing our fingers together. “We’ll deal with the ballet fallout. The snake. Whatever else.”

I nodded, the knot in my chest loosening just a little. Then I sighed, rolled over, and reached for the drawer.

The phone was still where I’d buried it last night, its black screen deceptively calm. I tapped the button, expecting the worst.

It didn’t disappoint.

Missed call: Jessa Lane

Text (6): Jessa Lane

1:07 AM –Vivi, please call me. I’m freaking out.

1:10 AM –That stunt on the bridge? What were you thinking?

1:15 AM –Are you okay? Are you high? I’m serious.

1:22 AM –I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to leave you, but you wouldn’t listen.

7:04 AM –We need to talk. Tonight. After work.

7:06 AM –Please. I’m not asking.

I stared at the messages, that last one pulsing louder than the rest.

Not asking.

Jessa never pushed like that. She was the more reasonable one. The calm after my storm. But this? This was something else.

Elias must’ve noticed the shift in my energy because he sat up slowly, his voice low and gruff. “Everything okay?”

I didn’t answer right away. Just stared at Jessa’s name like it might rearrange itself into something softer.

“She called,” I said finally. “Jessa. My friend from the harbor ... and the bridge. She texted a bunch, too.”

He waited.

“She wants to talk. Tonight. Says it’s important.”

His jaw worked, like he was chewing on the words. “You gonna call her back?”

I nodded, swiping to dial before I could second-guess myself.

Jessa answered on the first ring. “Vivi.”

Her voice was tight. Too tight.

“Hey,” I said, leaning back against the headboard. “Sorry I didn’t answer last night. I?—”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“I don’t care,” she cut in. “I just needed to know you’re alive.”

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to keep my tone light. “Thriving, even. Got suspended. Had incredible sex. Played with a venomous snake. All in all, ten out of ten.”

“Vivi,” she said sharply, the edge in her voice slicing through my sarcasm like a scalpel. “That bridge stunt could’ve gotten us both killed.”

I swallowed. “I had it under control.”

“You didn’t even tell me what we were doing until we were halfway up.”

“Would you have come if I had?”

“That’s not the point,” she snapped. Then quieter, almost pleading, “You scared me, Vivi. Not just for you—for me, too. And that’s not normal.”

A beat of silence stretched between us.

“I’m not exactly normal.”

“No,” she said, and something about her voice changed—got softer, sadder. “You’re not. Which is why we need to talk. Face to face. Tonight.”

I hesitated. “I don’t have work anymore, so ... whenever.”

“After my shift. I’ll text you the place.”

“You’re being weird,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” she said too quickly. “I just want to talk. Please?”

That word again.

I rubbed my temple. “Fine. Text me.”

“Okay.” A beat. “Vivi?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

My chest pinched. “I know.”

We hung up, and I stared at the phone for a long moment before setting it face-down on the nightstand.

Elias watched me, unreadable. “She knows something.”

“She thinks she knows something,” I muttered. “I’ll go. See what it is.”

He nodded once. “You want backup?”

A smile tugged at my lips. “You volunteering to sit there while my friend freaks out on me?”

“Depends,” he said. “Will there be a snake test?”

That got a laugh out of me—short, sharp, necessary. “God, I hope not.”

He reached over, brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. “You ever tell her the truth?”

“About what?”

“About why you’re always chasing cliffs?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I rolled onto my back, stared up at the ceiling fan spinning lazy circles above us. “She knows I’m wired different. She is, too. But she still thinks everything broken can be fixed with a therapist and a chamomile tea.”

“She wrong?”

“No.” I turned my head, met his gaze. “She’s just not right either.”

A beat passed. Then another.

“Where do you live when you’re not doing laps around my waist?” he asked, voice casual but curious.

“Over a bar,” I said, stretching out beside him. “Liquid Courage. On East Bay.”

His brow lifted. “You live over Liquid Courage?”

Something about the way he said it made me pause. Not just curious—knowing. Like maybe he’d already figured that out. Like maybe he’d already seen it.

“Third-floor walk-up, crooked windows, and a stairwell that smells like spilled tequila and bad decisions. It’s perfect,” I explained.

He grinned. “Fitting.”

“Everyone downstairs thinks I’m just the cranky ballerina who stomps around and throws out half-finished choreography at midnight.”

“Are they wrong?”

“Only about the choreography. I don’t choreograph—I unravel.”

Elias propped himself on one elbow, his gaze sweeping over me like a slow touch. “You’ve got the body for it,” he said, voice low. “Strong. Controlled. Every line deliberate—until it’s not.”

My breath hitched at the way he said it, like he’d studied me more thoroughly than anyone ever had. Like he saw not just the shape, but the discipline, the damage, the danger underneath.

I tucked the sheet higher, suddenly exposed in a way that had nothing to do with skin. His fingers trailed lightly along my arm.

“You have siblings?”

I snorted. “Unfortunately.”

He arched a brow.

“One older sister. Emmaline. Lives in Dallas. Married a preacher who sells protein powder on TikTok. They named their baby Chasten.”

He blinked. “That sounds illegal.”

“She once sent me a ‘modest is hottest’ sweatshirt for Christmas. I sent it back with a dildo tucked inside.”

Elias laughed, low and warm. “I’d pay money to see that reunion.”

“There won’t be one.” I shrugged. “She hated me before I ever gave her a reason to.”

He was quiet a moment, then asked gently, “What about your parents?”

I stilled.

He must’ve felt it—how everything in me snapped tight like a pulled muscle.

“No dad,” I said after a pause. “Not ever. Not even a whisper.”

“Your mom?”

I didn’t answer right away. Just stared out the window where the light had turned sharper, slicing across the floor like judgment.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“She’s still in New Orleans,” I said finally. “Hasn’t left the city in a decade. Paints pictures of women with no mouths. Says they’re saints.”

“Jesus.”

He didn’t push. Just let the silence settle between us like something sacred.

After a while, I spoke again, softer. “She used to sing to me, you know? Real soft. Almost like she didn’t want the world to hear. But it always felt like goodbye.”

Elias’s hand found mine again, his grip firm.

“You’re not her,” he said.

I nodded. “No. I’m worse.”

His jaw tensed, but he didn’t argue. Didn’t try to fix it. He just stayed.

And that? That mattered more than anything else.

The silence wrapped around us again.

Elias kissed the back of my hand, then sat up, rubbing a hand down his face like he was shaking something off. “I’ve got a few things to check on,” he said. “Nothing I can’t push if you’ve got ideas.”

I stretched out on my stomach, folding my arms under my chin. “No ideas. Just stolen

time until I have to meet Jessa.”

His gaze lingered on me like he wanted to say more, but instead he nodded. “We’ll make the most of it.”

16

ELIAS

Vivi’s scent clung to me. A ghost I didn’t want gone.

She was in the shower down the hall, water running behind the half-closed door of my suite’s bathroom, steam curling beneath it.

I sat at my desk, screens glowing, casting sharp shadows. Obsidian coiled in her corner, black eyes glinting like she knew my sins.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard, ready to dig into Jessa Lane. Vivi’s daredevil friend. But my mind was tangled in red curls, green eyes that burned through my walls.

My cock twitched, hard just thinking of her. For once, my head agreed, both screaming her name.

Jessa’s texts—urgent, cryptic, desperate—set my demon on edge. Vivi was meeting her tonight. I wasn’t letting her walk in blind.

I fired up a script, sharp and simple. Scraped public records, social media, anything on Jessa. Barista, Charleston native, no criminal record. Clean. Boring.

Except for her tie to Vivi. That made her anything but.

My thoughts drifted as the script ran. Vivi's laugh, throaty and warm, echoed in my head. The way she'd teased me about chaining her to my bedpost.

Fuck, I wanted her done with her shower. Sprawled on my sheets, body soft, marked from last night. Her mouth on me, pussy clenching my cock, fire burning me alive.

But more, I wanted tomorrow with her. Her waking in my bed, curls tangled, voice filling this cold suite with life.

The thought hit like a fist. Raw. Unfamiliar. I didn't plan tomorrows. Not for me. Work, sure—hacks, ops, Dominion Hall's chess game. But me? I lived in the now. Code. Control.

Vivi was changing that. It scared the shit out of me.

The script pinged. Jessa's digital footprint was sparse. Instagram posts of coffee art, blurry shots with Vivi, kayaking, laughing.

Nothing screamed danger. But the demon didn't trust clean.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I dug deeper, cross-referencing her phone number. A burner app, active last week, linked to an encrypted handle. Not odd for Vivi's circle, but it raised a flag.

I set a crawler to trace the handle. My fingers moved on autopilot. My mind was on her.

Vivi tonight, meeting Jessa. Her grin sharp, reckless, body moving like she owned the room. I wanted to be there. Watching. Shielding.

The ballet's suspension notice—her whereabouts are to be supplied to the authorities—burned in my gut. A threat I hadn't neutralized.

But Vivi wasn't for caging. She'd burn through the bars, laugh in my face. I'd love every second.

My cock throbbed. Her lips on me last night—slow, deliberate, tasting herself—flooded my senses. I shifted, adjusting myself, trying to focus. Trying not to think of my mouth on her pussy, burying my face in her.

Jessa's burner chat was a dead end. Encryption too tight to crack fast. I pulled her financials, skimming for red flags.

Venmo payments to Vivi for "tacos," "gas." Nothing suspicious. But my mind wasn't on numbers.

It was on Vivi's body. The way she'd ridden me, hips rolling, moans filling the room. I wanted her here, wanted to fuck her slow, feel her come apart, hear her whisper my

name. What a drug.

I leaned back, scrubbing my face. Tomorrow. The word circled, foreign, like hope. Like growth.

I saw us in my bedroom, her barefoot, stealing my coffee, laugh cutting the silence. On a beach, her running into waves, me chasing, both alive in ways I hadn't been.

Reckless. Stupid, maybe. Wanting a future in my world of shadows and secrets. But Vivi made it feel real. Reachable.

A knock snapped me out. "Yeah?" I called, voice rough, eyes on the screen.

Ryker stepped in, broad frame filling the doorway, dark hair mussed like he'd been sparring. "Seen Obsidian?" he asked. "She's AWOL from her tank. Noah's losing it."

I glanced at Obsidian in the corner, coils gleaming, and smirked. "Spent the night with us. She's fine."

Ryker's brow lifted, eyes flicking to the snake, then me. "I don't want to know, do I?"

"Nope," I said, tone light but final.

He snorted, shaking his head. "Fair enough."

He paused at the door. "You good, brother?"

I met his eyes, that unspoken understanding there. My brothers knew when to push, when to back off. "Yeah," I said, softer. "I'm good."

He nodded, gone, leaving silence heavy with Vivi's absence. That was the thing about my brothers—they knew when to let shit lie. Trusted I'd handle it.

And I would. For her.

I turned to the screen, pulling Jessa's social media. Scrolled her connections. A guy, tagged last month, arm around her, smile too sharp.

I ran his profile, fingers fast. My mind was on Vivi. The way she'd looked this morning, eyes soft but fierce, promising she'd come back.

I wanted her here. Wanted to bury myself in her, forget the alerts, the threats, the world outside.

The guy's profile was a bust. Tourist, passing through, no ties. I leaned back, frustrated, cock still hard, thoughts a mess of lust and longing.

Tomorrow again. Vivi in my bed, body pressed to mine, laugh filling the air. Driving through the Lowcountry, her feet on the dash, music blaring, no plans, just us.

A fantasy, but real. Something I could reach for. Growth. Or madness. With her, hard to tell.

The clock ticked closer to Vivi's meeting. I checked my phone. No new alerts. But the suspension notice lingered, a blade I couldn't dull.

I needed more on Jessa. Friend or threat? I pulled her work schedule, cross-referencing the coffee shop's roster. Off at six.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

My crawler pinged. A deleted X post from Jessa, night of the bridge stunt. Vague rant about “reckless friends.” Not damning, but enough to keep my demon edgy.

Vivi’s footsteps broke my focus. Bare feet on hardwood, emerging from the bathroom. My black T-shirt swallowed her frame, curls damp from a shower.

She looked like trouble. Like home. My cock stood at attention instantly.

“You’re staring, Cipher,” she said, grinning, voice a velvet blade.

“You’re making it hard not to,” I said, voice rough, standing to meet her.

She stepped close, hands sliding up my chest, scent wrapping around me. I kissed her, slow, deep, tasting her, needing her.

“You sure you don’t want me to come with you?” I asked, hands on her hips, anchoring her.

Her eyes were fierce. “I need to do this alone. Jessa’s my mess, not yours.”

I didn’t like it. Nodded anyway. “You’re coming back after,” I said, a demand, not a question.

Her grin widened, wicked, promising. “Oh, I’ll be back, Cipher. Don’t worry.” She leaned in, lips brushing my ear. “Keep the bed warm.”

The demon roared, wanting to drag her to the sheets, fuck her until she forgot Jessa,

forgot the world. But she moved, grabbing her phone, slipping into jeans that hugged her ass like sin.

I watched, mind spinning with tomorrows. Her in my life, every night, a future I'd never dared want. New, this longing, this hope. A crack in my armor I didn't want to seal.

I walked her through the house and out the front door. We waited at the gate until the cab arrived. Vivi turned, bag slung over her shoulder. "See you soon," she said.

Before I could answer, she stepped close. Her hand slid down my pants, fingers wrapping my cock. Three slow, smooth strokes, grip firm, eyes locked on mine, green and blazing.

My breath caught. Body tensed. No words, no fucking words.

She smirked, pulled free, kissed the hand that'd just been on my cock and sauntered to the cab. The driver gawked, jaw dropping as she slid into the backseat.

She blew me a kiss. The cab pulled away. I stood there, hard as steel, mind a mess of lust and awe.

Vivienne Laveau was a storm. I was caught in it, willingly, hopelessly. For the first time, wanting more than the moment.

I turned back to my suite. Silence heavy. Obsidian's eyes watching like she knew.

My screens glowed, Jessa's data waiting. All I could think was Vivi—her touch, her laugh, her fire.

Tomorrow was coming. For once, I was ready to meet it.

Before I settled in, I scooped Obsidian and returned her to her enclosure. She slithered through the coiled warmth of her habitat, unbothered, content. I watched the lid lock into place—a soft click, like a secret sealed.

17

VIVIENNE

The text came just as the cab turned off King Street, my phone buzzing with Jessa's name.

Meet at your place. Easier for everyone.

Everyone?

I stared at the message, brow furrowing. She didn't elaborate, didn't offer the usual soft emoji or nervous follow-up. Just those four words, flat and final.

But honestly? That worked for me.

Fine. Need to grab a bigger bag anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I slipped the phone into my back pocket and leaned forward to tap the driver's shoulder. "East Bay and Vendue," I said. "Just past the bar called Liquid Courage."

The driver nodded, and the rest of the ride passed in silence, the kind that felt too still, too expectant. Like a held breath before a storm.

When we pulled up, I saw them.

Reporters.

Three, maybe four of them, clustered near the bar's front entrance like vultures in overpriced shoes, holding out their phones like microphones, cameras already lifted.

My stomach twisted.

They'd found me.

I stepped out of the cab slowly, sunglasses low on my nose, chin high as if I hadn't just been suspended for "conduct unbecoming." As if I hadn't straddled a hacker in a mansion like he was both weapon and salvation.

One of them clocked me. "Miss Laveau! Vivienne! Is it true the board asked you to resign?"

Another chimed in, already filming. "Were you under the influence when you climbed the bridge? Is this your way of crying for help?"

Jesus.

I was halfway to growling something unprintable when the door to Liquid Courage swung open and a familiar voice shouted, “Back off. She’s with us.”

It was Reggie, one of the bartenders I’d known for years. Tattooed, six-foot-five, and meaner than a rattlesnake on tequila. Behind him, Cami popped her gum and crossed her arms, glaring daggers at the reporters.

“She’s family,” Cami said. “You want a quote? How about ‘get the fuck off our stoop?’”

I slipped past them with a grateful nod, the reporters still shouting questions behind me as the door slammed shut.

I hadn’t done the stunt for them.

God, no.

I wasn’t chasing internet fame. I wasn’t trying to go viral. I wasn’t looking to be the next glittery cautionary tale dissected on a podcast by strangers in hoodies sipping oat milk lattes.

Yes, maybe I’d done it for attention.

But not their attention.

Not for the vultures with ring lights and deadlines. Not for the think pieces about “unraveling artists” or the anonymous comments calling me a narcissist in a leotard.

I’d done it for the silence that came before the fall.

For the brief, perfect moment where I could breathe above the noise.

For the part of me that had always wondered if the world would catch me—or if I'd just disappear into it.

And I'd done it to see if he'd come. If Elias Dane, with all his control and composure, would step out of the shadows for me. If he'd see the chaos I carried and still decide I was worth reaching for.

Inside the building, the air smelled like tequila and sugar-sweat from last night's crowd. Music played low—Fleetwood Mac—and the lights were dim, familiar. Comforting.

Reggie jerked his head toward the back stairs. "Go on, Vivi. They're not getting past us. I promise. Your people are up there."

I mouthed thank you and took the stairs two at a time, heart pounding harder with every step. Not just from the scene downstairs, but from Jessa's message.

Easier for everyone.

Who the hell was everyone?

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I reached the third floor landing, kicked off my shoes, and pushed open my apartment door.

And froze.

There they were.

All of them.

Jessa stood just inside, arms folded, jaw tight.

To her left, Marisol, wide-eyed and visibly anxious, arms crossed like she was preparing for an ambush.

Lena, looking more “resting bitch face” than ride-or-die at the moment.

Teresa, shifting her weight and glancing at the floor sheepishly.

Madame Odette, matriarch of the Charleston Crescent Ballet, resplendent in her signature black. Her cane stood sentinel by her side, but it was the glare that threatened to take me down.

Emmaline, my sister, in a modest wrap dress that screamed Texas and judgment.

And next to her?

A middle-aged woman in tortoiseshell glasses, hair in a bun, holding a clipboard like

a shield. The kind of calm only years of therapy—or wine—could teach.

No one spoke.

Not at first.

Glasses and Bun cleared her throat. “Vivienne?—”

I held up a hand. “Stop.”

I scanned the room again, the arrangement suddenly too tidy, too deliberate. My favorite throw pillows placed just so. Candles lit. Bottled water on the table.

“Oh, my God,” I said, a dry laugh escaping. “This is an intervention.”

“Vivi—” Jessa started.

“No. Don’t you Vivi me right now.” I pointed at her, then at Emmaline. “And you? You live a thousand miles away and never call. What the fuck are you doing in my apartment?”

“We’re here because we love you,” Emmaline said smoothly, already on script. “And we’re concerned.”

“Concerned?” I barked. “About what?”

Glasses and Bun spoke up, her tone calm but clinical, like she was trying not to startle a wild animal. That’s when it clicked.

Of course. A therapist.

“This is about destructive behaviors,” she said evenly. “About patterns. Risk. Isolation.”

“Isolation?” I spun around to face them. “I’ve had more people in this apartment in the last ten minutes than in the last six months. You want to talk about isolation? Try growing up in a house where silence was a weapon.”

No one spoke.

Good.

Because I wasn’t done.

“You think I’m an addict?” My voice cracked, the laugh that followed brittle and cold. “You think this is about drugs?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“You push people away,” Jessa said quietly. “Your behavior is becoming riskier. You climbed a fucking bridge with no ropes and laughed about it.”

“It wasn’t about the bridge,” Lena whispered.

I turned to her, eyes narrow. “No? Then what was it about?”

“Maybe about control,” she said. “About needing to feel something to distract from what’s happening in your life.”

“And how would you know?”

Lena flinched, but didn’t look away. “Because I’ve done it, too,” she said. “Different methods, same goal.”

“I’m not you,” I snapped.

“No,” she agreed softly. “But maybe you’re closer than you think.”

And there it was—that quiet, awful truth, hanging between us. Lena knew the edge. Had danced on it for years.

She’d been the golden girl once, too. The darling of Crescent’s winter season, the one critics called “effortless,” even when her eyes were glassy and her hands trembled behind the curtain. It wasn’t until she collapsed during rehearsal—right there on the Marley floor, bones sharp under her leotard and pupils like pinpricks—that anyone knew the truth.

Prescription meds. Painkillers, mostly. But also benzos. Whatever she could get her hands on to make the noise stop.

It had taken a stint in rehab and a year away from dance before she clawed her way back. Clean now. For years, in fact. But I still caught her checking her own hands sometimes, like she was waiting for the tremor to return.

She spoke gently, without judgment. “You’re hurting. I can see it. And I know how easy it is to pretend the fall doesn’t matter if the drop feels like flying.”

The room went thick again, air heavy with unsaid things. I looked at each of them, their eyes swimming with pity, concern, accusation. The therapist scribbled something on her notepad like she had me figured out already—boxed and labeled and pathologized.

“This is fucking insane,” I muttered. “I’m not strung out. I’m not shooting up in alleyways. I haven’t even smoked weed since New Year’s Eve 2019. You know why? Because it makes me paranoid, and I don’t need help with that.”

Teresa tried to chime in—God knows why—but I shot her a glare that made her mouth snap shut again.

“You all want to pretend this is about some bridge stunt,” I said, pacing now, blood pounding in my ears. “Like I’ve gone off the rails. But where the hell were you when things were actually falling apart? When I was trying to hold everything together?”

Marisol looked away. Jessa’s lip trembled.

But Emmaline?

She stood there like granite, arms folded tight, mouth pressed into a line.

“Don’t do this,” I told her. “Don’t you dare.”

She didn’t blink.

“You said we wouldn’t?—”

“I changed my mind,” she said. Her voice wasn’t angry. It wasn’t calm. It was something deeper. Something cracked.

“I’m sorry,” she added. “But they deserve to know.”

The silence after that wasn’t a silence at all. It was a scream with no sound, vibrating beneath my skin, threatening to split me down the middle.

“No,” I whispered. “Don’t.”

She stepped forward.

“Emmaline, I swear to God?—”

“I’m doing this for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“No. You’re doing it to me.”

My voice broke. I felt it snap in half right there in the center of the room. Every wall I’d built. Every mask I’d glued into place. The fortress I’d kept people out of for years.

“Vivi,” she said softly, stepping around the therapist like the woman was just a piece of furniture. “You should tell them. They need to understand. You can’t keep burying it.”

I shook my head, fists clenched. “They don’t need to understand anything.”

“Vivi—”

“I said no!”

And just like that, I saw it in her eyes—pity, yes. But also fear. And heartbreak. And a lifetime of shared silence finally reaching its expiration date.

“You think I’m self-destructing?” I said, laughing bitterly through the burn in my throat. “You’re wrong. I’m already gone. That’s the part none of you seem to get. I’m not spiraling. I’ve already hit the ground.”

Madame Odette took a step forward then, her cane tapping sharply against the floor.

“You have not,” she said. Her voice cut like glass. “But you will, if you keep running from what’s chasing you.”

I turned to her slowly, trembling with rage—or grief. Maybe both. “And what, pray tell, is that?”

No one answered.

But I saw it.

I saw it in their eyes.

They knew.

Whether Emmaline had said it out loud or just let enough slip, I couldn’t be sure, but the damage was done. She’d unearthed just enough of my secret for them to smell the rot.

She didn’t say the words. Not exactly. She didn’t have to.

She dangled the truth in front of them—like a cracked door in a burning house—and let them draw their own conclusions.

And they had.

I could see it in every tilted head, every shift in posture, every look they tried not to give each other.

They didn’t know the details. But now they knew there were details to be known. And that? That was betrayal enough.

I backed up toward the door, needing air, needing space, needing anything but this.

“You think this is help?” I said, voice hoarse. “You think cornering me in my own

apartment and ambushing me with a goddamn therapist is love?”

“Vivi—”

“No,” I cut in, my gaze sweeping the circle. “This was never about love. This was about making yourselves feel better. About turning me into a project you can fix.”

Jessa took a step forward. “We just don’t want to lose you.”

“Maybe it’s too late,” I said. And then I opened the door and walked out.

I didn’t wait for them to follow.

I didn’t care if they did.

I stomped down the stairs like the building was on fire, breath tight, pulse thunderous in my ears. Every floor I descended peeled another layer off me—anger, humiliation, grief—until I hit the bar again, hollowed out and shaking.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

Cami took one look at my face and wisely said nothing. Just handed me a bottle of water and a set of car keys from behind the register. “Figured you’d need these.”

I blinked. “How did you?—?”

She smirked. “Love, I know a woman fleeing a crime scene when I see one.”

The joke didn’t land. Not with the way my chest ached. Not with the lump burning the back of my throat.

I took the keys, murmured something like thanks, and walked out into the evening. My SUV was parked a block down—silver, sun-warmed, and mercifully out of sight of the reporters still sniffing around the front.

I slid into the driver’s seat, shut the door, and let the silence wrap around me.

And then I pulled out my phone.

On my way back.

Everything okay?

I stared at his name—Cipher—just that one word, that alias, that armor—and felt something splinter in me all over again.

Define “okay.”

Did you pack to stay awhile?

I gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white.

No.

Understood.

That was all he said.

No questions. No pressure.

He knew. Somehow, he knew.

I dropped the phone in the passenger seat, started the engine, and pulled away from the curb.

Whatever that had been upstairs—ambush, betrayal, well-meaning nightmare—I was done with it.

For now, at least.

Let them keep their secrets. Their pity. Their carefully prepared monologues.

I was going back to the one person who didn't try to fix me. The one who saw the fire and didn't flinch.

And if the world wanted to burn around me?

He'd stand in the smoke. With me.

ELIAS

Vivi's footsteps echoed through Dominion Hall's marble halls, a rhythm that hit me like a pulse. I was at my desk, screens glowing with Jessa's half-cracked digital trail, but the second I heard her, my focus shattered. My cock twitched, already hard, her scent still burned into me from this morning. But something was off. The air felt heavy, like a storm brewing, and when she stepped into my suite, her green eyes glinted with a fire too sharp, too wild.

She dropped her bag, jeans hugging her ass like a sin, my black T-shirt slipping off one shoulder, exposing a bruise I'd left last night. Her curls were a damp, tangled mess, and her grin was wicked, but it didn't reach her eyes. My demon stirred, sensing a crack in her armor, a shadow she wasn't showing.

"You're back," I said, voice rough, standing to meet her. "How was Jessa?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

She didn't answer. Just stalked toward me, hips swaying, a predator in my own den. Her hands slid up my chest, nails grazing through my shirt, and she pressed her body to mine, heat seeping into me. "Miss me, Cipher?" she purred, lips brushing my jaw, her breath hot, teasing.

I gripped her hips, fingers digging in, my cock throbbing against her thigh. "Answer the question, Red."

She laughed, low and throaty, but it was wrong—edged with something brittle. "Jessa's Jessa," she said, dodging, her tongue flicking my earlobe. "Wanna fuck instead of talk?"

My gut twisted. She was deflecting, hard, her fire dialed to an inferno to burn away whatever had happened. I wanted to push, to crack her open, but her hands were already tearing at my belt, her lips crashing into mine, fierce and desperate. The demon roared, hungry for her, and I kissed her back, tongue plunging deep, tasting her need, her chaos.

She yanked my shirt off, nails raking my chest, drawing blood. "Fuck me, Elias," she growled, her voice a blade, her eyes blazing with a challenge that rivaled her bridge stunt. "Make it hurt."

I froze, just for a second, the intensity of her words hitting like a shockwave. This wasn't just sex. This was her screaming for escape, for obliteration, and my demon wanted to give it to her, to match her madness. I spun her, slamming her against the wall, the steel frame rattling, and ripped her T-shirt down the middle, exposing her breasts, nipples hard and begging.

“You want extreme?” I snarled, my mouth on her throat, biting hard, tasting salt and her. “I’ll give you fucking extreme.”

Her moan was raw, a sound that sank into my bones. I tore her jeans down, panties with them, her pussy glistening, pink and swollen, already wet for me. My fingers plunged inside, three at once, stretching her, fucking her hard, her walls clenching, slick and hot. She screamed, head thrown back, nails clawing my shoulders, blood trickling down my arms.

“More,” she demanded, voice hoarse, her hips bucking against my hand, her eyes wild, daring me to break her. I pulled my fingers out, slick with her arousal, and smeared them across her lips, her tongue darting out to taste herself, a sight that made my cock ache.

I lifted her, legs wrapping around me, and carried her to the bed, tossing her onto the black sheets like a sacrifice. I stripped my pants, cock springing free, thick and throbbing, and Vivi’s eyes darkened, her lips parting, hunger raw and unfiltered.

“On your knees,” I ordered, voice low, a growl that vibrated through her. She obeyed, crawling to the edge, her mouth closing over my cock, wet and warm, tongue swirling, sucking deep. I groaned, hands fisting her curls, guiding her, fucking her mouth with slow, brutal thrusts. Her moans vibrated around me, her nails digging into my thighs, and I was lost, drowning in her heat, her defiance.

I pulled out, her lips swollen, glistening with spit and pre-come, and flipped her onto her stomach, ass in the air, pussy dripping. I slapped her ass, hard, the sound sharp, her skin blooming red under my hand. She gasped, pushing back, begging for more, and I gave it, another slap, then another, her moans loud, unhinged, filling the room.

“You want to rival that bridge?” I rasped, my voice dark, my hand soothing the sting before sliding to her pussy, fingers circling her clit, fast and relentless. “I’ll fuck you

until you forget your own name.”

“Do it,” she snarled, her voice raw, her body trembling, her eyes locked on mine over her shoulder, green and blazing.

I thrust into her, hard and deep, filling her in one brutal stroke, her pussy tight, hot, a vice that drove me insane. She screamed, body arching, nails clawing the sheets, and I didn’t hold back, fucking her like I was trying to break her, hips slamming, bed shaking, the world reduced to her—her heat, her moans, her fucking chaos.

“Harder,” she demanded, voice breaking, her ass red from my hands, her pussy clenching around me. I grabbed her hair, pulling her head back, my lips at her throat, biting, sucking, marking her as mine. My other hand found her clit, rubbing hard, driving her to the edge, her screams echoing, raw and desperate.

I flipped her onto her back, her legs wrapping around me, heels digging into my ass. Her breasts bounced with every thrust, skin flushed, eyes wild, daring me to push further. I pinned her wrists, body covering hers, thrusts punishing, each one a claim, a vow. Her pussy was a furnace, dripping, pulsing, and I felt her tightening, her breath hitching, so close to the edge.

“Come for me,” I growled, my voice rough, my thumb pressing her clit, circling fast. “Scream my name, Red.”

She did, her orgasm hitting like a tidal wave, pussy milking me, body convulsing, her scream tearing through the room. “Elias!” she gasped, nails raking my back, drawing blood, and I followed, roaring, my release spilling into her, hot and endless, marking her inside and out.

But she wasn’t done. She pushed me onto my back, straddling me, her pussy still dripping, my come mixing with her arousal, slick and obscene. “Again,” she snarled,

her voice a blade, her hips grinding, taking me deep, riding me like she was chasing oblivion. I gripped her hips, bruising her skin, my cock hard again, throbbing inside her, her moans a rhythm that drove me feral.

She leaned down, lips crashing into mine, tongue plunging, tasting blood and lust. Her nails dug into my chest, carving welts, her pussy clenching, relentless, pushing us both past sanity. I slapped her ass, hard, the sound wet, her gasp a mix of shock and need, and she rode me faster, her breasts bouncing, her curls a wild halo, her eyes blazing with something darker than desire—pain, maybe, or grief.

I flipped her again, pinning her beneath me, thrusting deep, slow now, deliberate, wanting to feel every inch of her. Her pussy was swollen, sensitive, and she whimpered, her body trembling, oversensitive but craving more. I kissed her throat, her breasts, sucking her nipples, tasting her sweat, her heat, my hands spreading her thighs, exposing her fully.

“Elias,” she moaned, voice raw, her hands in my hair, pulling me closer, her pussy clenching, another orgasm building. I drove deeper, my cock hitting that spot inside her, her moans loud, desperate, filling the room.

I felt her come again, softer this time, a shuddering wave, her pussy pulsing, her breath hitching, and I followed, my release spilling into her, a slow burn that left me raw, exposed, hers. We collapsed, panting, slick with sweat and come, the air thick with sex and something heavier, something unspoken.

And then she did it. Vivi curled into a ball on the far side of the bed, knees to her chest, arms wrapped tight, her back to me. The fire was gone, replaced by a silence that hit me like a sledgehammer. My demon froze, stunned, the room suddenly too big, too cold. Her curls spilled across the pillow, but her body was a fortress, shut tight, and I had no idea what to do.

I reached for her, hand hovering, but stopped. She was untouchable now, not the woman who'd fucked me like she was defying death, but something fragile, something broken. My chest ached, a pain I didn't understand, and for the first time, I was lost. This—this quiet, this distance—was a threat I couldn't fight.

“Vivi,” I said, voice low, rough, but she didn't move, didn't answer. The demon snarled, wanting to pull her close, to demand answers, but I didn't. I couldn't. Whatever had happened with Jessa, whatever had cut her this deep, it was bigger than me, bigger than us.

I lay back, staring at the ceiling, my hand inches from her, not touching. The ballet's suspension, Jessa's texts, the authorities—it was all connected, a noose tightening around her, and I'd missed it. My screens glowed in the corner, Jessa's data waiting, but it felt useless now. Vivi was here, but she wasn't, and the weight of that crushed me.

I wanted tomorrow with her, wanted her fire, her chaos, but this—her curled tight, shutting me out—made tomorrow feel like a lie. I didn't know how to fix this, didn't know if I could. All I knew was her, and the demon, quiet now, was as lost as I was.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

VIVIENNE

The ceiling was still. White, blank, unmoving. I stared at it like it might rearrange itself into answers if I blinked enough times.

I didn't blink.

The sheets were soft, too soft, like they were mocking me. The kind of expensive softness that made everything else feel harder by comparison. I was curled on my side, knees to my chest, hair a tangled mess against Elias's pillow, but I hadn't moved in what felt like hours.

Elias was quiet, too.

He lay beside me for a while, his body heat radiating in steady waves, his hand ghosting near my arm as if he wanted to reach for me but didn't know how. As if the same man who could hack into secure servers and make a grown man cry with a look was suddenly helpless when it came to a woman unraveling beside him.

He exhaled. Once. Twice. His fingers drummed once against the mattress, then stopped.

Still, I didn't move.

Neither did he.

And in the silence that stretched between us, I could feel it—the aching desire to

connect, to bridge the chasm between us, and the impossibility of doing so.

Finally, he shifted, rolling to his back. “I don’t know what to do,” he said, voice low, raw. “You want to burn it all down, Red? Fine. But I can’t keep watching you disappear ... Inward, I mean.”

I didn’t answer.

Because I didn’t know either.

What was there to say? I was tired of screaming. Tired of being angry about things I couldn’t control. Tired of staring at myself in the mirror and wondering where the girl had gone—the one who used to dance for joy, not just to make a meager living.

“I’m not trying to fix you,” Elias said after a beat, voice roughened by restraint. “But I’m not going to let you fade either.”

I turned my face into the pillow, the scent of him strong there.

Then the bed shifted. I heard him sit up, stand, pace a few steps. His movements were purposeful now, sharper.

A beat of silence. Then:

“Get dressed,” he said.

I didn’t move.

“And wait here,” he added, a little softer now. “I’ll be back.”

I turned slowly to look at him. He was already tugging on a T-shirt, shoving his

phone into his pocket, his jaw set like he had a mission.

“What are you?—”

“Trust me.” He looked at me for a long second, then leaned down, pressing a kiss to my temple. “I’ll be right back.”

And then he was gone.

The suite door clicked shut, and I was alone again.

For a moment, I just lay there, staring at the spot he’d left, unsure whether to move or scream or curl tighter into myself.

Instead, I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling again.

Trust me.

I didn’t know if I could.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

But I wanted to.

Eventually, I sat up. My muscles ached. My skin still hummed from the rawness of everything—the sex, the fight, the grief I hadn't wanted to name. I pulled a hoodie from Elias's dresser and slipped it on. Then a pair of his sweatpants. Then socks. I braided my curls with shaking fingers and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the closed door like it might reveal his intentions if I glared hard enough.

And because waiting is a cruel sport, my mind went where it always does when it's unguarded.

Home.

If you could call it that.

It wasn't the place that haunted me, really. It was the people. The ones who'd made a thousand choices I never understood.

Emmaline, for one.

God, Emmaline.

Seeing her in my apartment today had shocked me more than the intervention itself. My sister was the kind of woman who knew exactly how many cents were in her checking account at any given time. She clipped coupons. She reused foil. She once declined a wedding because it was outside the city limits and gas was too expensive.

And yet, she'd shown up in Charleston.

That meant airfare. Time off. Maybe a hotel, unless she was crashing with one of my friends. It meant she'd rearranged her life—the brittle, carefully budgeted one—for me.

I didn't know what to do with that.

It would've been easier if she hadn't come at all.

I could've kept resenting her from a safe emotional distance. Could've kept pretending I was the only one who'd tried, the only one who'd broken herself to keep Mom afloat.

But Emmaline's presence today complicated the narrative.

And I hated complications.

Especially the kind that cracked open old wounds and whispered maybe you're not as alone as you think.

Maybe they do care.

Maybe love looks different when it's limping.

I swallowed hard, blinking up at the ornate ceiling again, wondering what the hell Elias was planning, and why—despite everything—I wanted him to walk back through that door more than anything else in the world.

Finally, the door opened with a soft click.

Elias stepped inside, slower this time. His expression wasn't unreadable—far from it. I saw it in the tightness around his mouth, the way his shoulders squared like he was bracing for rejection. But beneath all that was something softer. A question. An offering.

“Come with me,” he said gently, holding out his hand.

I stared at him.

And then—almost in spite of myself—I stood.

I placed my hand in his, and he curled his fingers around mine like it meant something. Like I meant something.

He led me down the corridor, past the suite and through a quiet wing of the mansion I hadn't seen before. Polished floors, gilded sconces, windows that framed the Charleston harbor like it was a painting.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my voice hoarse from disuse.

“You'll see.”

He opened a tall double door at the end of the hall, revealing a room bathed in warm light.

I stopped dead.

It was ... a boutique.

A fucking boutique.

Designer racks lined the space, organized by color and texture, the kind of selection you'd find in SoHo or Paris, not tucked inside the guts of a hacker's lair. Glass cases gleamed with accessories. Shoes sat like sculpture on mirrored shelves. There was a velvet fainting couch, for Christ's sake. A dressing area with silk robes hanging from hooks. And in the center of it all, a marble table glistened with chocolate-covered strawberries, flutes of champagne chilling in a silver bucket beside them, bubbles catching the light.

Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the harbor sparkled. Boats bobbed lazily in the distance. The lights from the pier twinkled like stars had dropped from the sky just for me.

I blinked, once. Twice.

This wasn't real. This was something out of a fever dream.

"Elias," I breathed. "What ... what is this?"

He didn't answer right away. Just watched me take it in.

"I know you couldn't pack a bag," he said finally. "I figured maybe ... you shouldn't

have to.”

I turned to look at him.

“I didn’t want you to feel like you needed anything,” he continued, voice lower now. “So I brought everything to you.”

My throat closed up.

“I wanted you to have options. Comfort. Luxury. Whatever would make you feel even one ounce better. You don’t have to prove anything to me, Red. Just ... let yourself have something.”

I didn’t move. Couldn’t.

He stepped closer. “Pamper yourself. Try things on. Eat the strawberries. Drink the damn champagne. You’re allowed.”

A lump swelled in my throat. How did he know?

“I don’t—” I shook my head. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Then start here,” he murmured, brushing a curl back from my cheek. “With something soft. Something you don’t have to fight for.”

He pulled a hanger from the rack—a backless silk slip in a shade that looked like liquid moonlight—and held it up.

“You’d look incredible in this,” he said, and it didn’t sound like a line. It sounded like reverence.

I stared at the gown. Then at him.

And then I took it.

Wordlessly, I slipped behind the folding screen and let the fabric slide over my skin. It was absurd, how beautiful it was. How I looked in it. Like someone else. Someone unbroken.

When I stepped out, Elias didn't say anything at first. Just looked at me like I'd stopped time.

Then: "Jesus, Red."

I flushed. "Too much?"

"Not even close." His voice was husky now. "You're ... breathtaking."

I looked away, heat rushing to my cheeks. "You planned all this. For me."

"I'd level a city for you," he said simply.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I stepped toward the strawberries, my fingers trembling as I picked one up.

Maybe this was ridiculous. Maybe it was indulgent and over the top and unnecessary.

But maybe being seen, truly seen, was rarer than silk and sweeter than champagne.

I took a bite. And I smiled.

The taste bloomed on my tongue—dark chocolate and ripe strawberry, decadent and impossible. Like something a girl like me shouldn't even dream about.

Because we didn't do decadence in my family. We did clearance bins and secondhand school uniforms. We did patched jeans and "maybe next Christmas." We did without.

Always without.

The Laveaus didn't splurge. We survived.

Mom clipped coupons so aggressively she once mailed in for a rebate that earned her seventy-three cents and a fridge magnet. Emmaline grew up learning how to stretch ground beef with lentils, how to calculate the per-ounce cost of shampoo, how to say "I'm fine" when she was anything but. And me? I learned early that if I wanted anything outside the bare minimum, I had to earn it myself.

That was part of why I chose ballet. Not because it was practical—God, no—but because it was beautiful. Because it was discipline turned into art. Pain made into

elegance. Suffering into something people clapped for.

I could never take my mother's pain away. Not really. But I could make her proud. I could be the daughter with her name in programs and reviews, the one who rose from duct-taped kitchen chairs to standing ovations in velvet theaters.

But even that came at a cost.

Shoes that wore through in weeks. Tuition we couldn't afford. Leotards that fit like armor because they had to. Every pirouette was a prayer that my body would hold up, that I could keep pretending I was weightless.

I'd worked double shifts at cafés to pay for classes. Sold old costumes to younger girls just to cover rent. Danced through injuries I couldn't afford to treat. Every time I'd laced up, I wasn't just chasing art—I was chasing survival. Chasing the idea that I could outrun poverty with perfect posture.

And now, here I stood, in a silk gown that probably cost more than my car. In a room Elias had set up just for me. With champagne chilled to the perfect temperature and strawberries that didn't taste like compromise.

And something inside me cracked.

It was small at first. A breath that caught the wrong way. A blink that came too slow.

Then it was everything.

My knees buckled before I could stop them. I sank onto the fainting couch, the silk pooling around my legs, and curled my hands into fists in my lap.

I didn't mean to cry.

But I did.

Not the polite, teary kind of crying either. No single, artful tear down the cheek. This was full-body, chest-heaving grief. The kind you can't package. The kind that rips you open from the inside and spills everything you've been holding back.

Elias didn't rush me.

He didn't speak.

He knelt instead, slow and careful, and placed one hand gently on my knee. Just that. No pressure. No demand.

Just warmth.

And it undid me even more.

Because I realized—I didn't know how to receive.

I didn't know how to accept without apologizing. Didn't know how to be cared for without trying to earn it. Didn't know what it meant to want something just because it was beautiful.

I'd only ever known how to survive.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

And suddenly, the idea of being allowed to want—to rest, to be held, to try on a dress because it made me feel like something other than tired—was too much.

I buried my face in my hands and sobbed like the little girl who once taped her broken ballet slippers back together with hope and electrical tape.

And Elias?

He stayed there on the floor beside me, fingers brushing over my leg in slow, steady circles.

Saying nothing.

But everything.

20

ELIAS

Vivi's sobs cut me open. Each one a blade, slashing something raw in my chest.

She was crumpled on the boutique's velvet couch. Silk gown pooling like moonlight around her trembling frame. Hands pressed to her face, hiding the grief spilling out.

I knelt before her. Hand on her knee. Steady but helpless. Shock rooted me.

This wasn't Vivi. Not the woman who'd fucked me like she defied death. Who

climbed bridges, laughed at danger.

This was a girl. Broken. Exposed. Her fire doused.

It lit something in me. A fierce, possessive need. Not to fuck her, but to hold her together.

My demon was stunned. Its hunger gone. Replaced by a primal urge to shield her.

The boutique's opulence mocked us. Designer racks, champagne flutes, strawberries on marble. Hollow against her tears.

I'd thought I could give her everything. But this—her unraveling—was uncharted territory.

I slid onto the couch. Careful not to crowd her. Hand still on her knee, thumb brushing slow circles.

Her sobs slowed. She stayed curled tight. A fortress of grief.

"Vivi," I said, voice low, rough. Barely a whisper.

She didn't move. Didn't look at me. Breath hitching.

The demon was quiet. I didn't know what to do. So I did the only thing I could.

I wrapped my arms around her. Pulled her close, her body small against mine.

She didn't resist. Just sank into me. Her face pressed to my chest, tears soaking my shirt.

I held her. Tight. Like I could absorb her pain. Make her feel safe.

Her body shook. Silent now, but heavy. I didn't let go.

Minutes passed. Maybe hours. Time blurred in the warmth of her against me.

Her breathing steadied. Slow, ragged, but calmer. Still, I held her.

Possessiveness burned. Not for her body, but her soul. I wanted to protect her. From the world. From herself.

The boutique's glow faded. Harbor lights twinkled outside, indifferent to her pain.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I pressed my lips to her hair. Breathed her in.

She stirred. Shifted slightly. Her voice came, soft, cracked. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do,” I said, voice rough. “You’re mine, Red. All of you.”

She didn’t answer. Just stayed pressed to me, her hand curling into my shirt.

Finally, she spoke. Voice barely above a whisper. “My family ... we were always saving.”

I listened. Held her tighter. Let her words spill.

“Skimping was religion,” she said. “Mom clipped coupons like they were scripture.”

Her voice trembled. “We reused foil. Patched jeans. Watered down apple juice.”

I knew that life. Echoes from my own childhood. Before the billions.

“Sullivan’s Island wasn’t always rich,” I said, low. “Dad worked odd jobs. We ate what we caught.”

She nodded against me. “Mom painted. Never sold. Said it was for her saints.” Her laugh was bitter. “Emmaline learned to budget before she could read.”

I brushed a curl from her face. “You learned to survive.”

“More than that,” she said. “I learned to want. And to know I couldn’t have.”

Her words hit hard. I knew that hunger. The ache of reaching for more.

“We had hand-me-downs,” I said. “Shared one bike. Fought over who got the flat tire.” She lifted her head. Eyes red, but steady. “You get it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I do.”

She leaned back. Still in my arms. “Ballet was my way out. Not just surviving.” Her voice softened. “Every pirouette was a fuck-you to poverty.”

I tightened my grip. “You made it beautiful.”

She snorted, soft. “Beautiful’s expensive. Shoes, classes, leotards. I worked doubles.”

I knew that grind. “I fixed radios for cash. Anything to keep us afloat.”

Her eyes met mine. A flicker of understanding. Shared scars.

“Mom never came to my shows,” she said. “Said she couldn’t afford the gas.”

My chest ached. “Dad came to one of my games. Fell asleep in the stands.”

She laughed, small, real. “At least he showed.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Until he didn’t.”

Her hand found mine. Fingers lacing. “Your mom left. Mine stayed but ... wasn’t there.”

I nodded. The weight of it heavy. Our pasts mirrored, jagged and sharp.

“Emmaline was the fixer,” she said. “Kept Mom fed, bills paid. I was the dreamer.”

I brushed my thumb over her knuckles. “You’re more than that.”

She looked away. “Dreamers don’t last. They break.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“You’re not broken,” I said, voice firm. “You’re fire.”

Her eyes flickered. Doubt, but something else. Hope, maybe.

“I worked for everything,” she said. “Every costume, every class. Nothing was free.”

I pulled her closer. “I know.”

“Even love,” she whispered. “I had to earn that, too.”

The words gutted me. I’d felt that. Love as a transaction, always out of reach.

“Not with me,” I said, voice rough. “You don’t earn it. It’s yours.”

She looked at me. Eyes wide, searching. Like she wanted to believe but couldn’t.

“My dad’s billions,” I said, slow, deliberate. “They’re not just mine. They’re ours.”

Her breath caught. A small sound, but heavy.

“My riches are your riches,” I said. “You’ll never have to skimp again.” I cupped her face. Held her gaze. “No more patched jeans. No more lentils ... unless you still like them.”

Her lips parted. Eyes glistening, not with tears now, but something brighter.

“You don’t have to worry,” I said. “Not about money. Not about surviving.” I leaned

in. Forehead to hers. “You’re mine, Red. I’ve got you.”

She didn’t speak. Just looked at me. And there it was—a flicker in her eyes.

Hope. Small, fragile, but real.

It was enough. A spark I’d fan into a flame.

My job now was to prove it. To show her she could have more than survival.

I held her tighter. Arms wrapping her fully, pulling her into my lap.

She sank against me. Body soft, pliant. Her head on my shoulder. We stayed like that. Silent. The boutique’s glow dimming, harbor lights twinkling outside. Her breathing slowed. Steady now, but fragile. I didn’t let go.

Holding her was everything.

Possessiveness burned. Not for her body, but her heart. I wanted her safe. Whole.

I thought of tomorrow. Her in my bed, curls on my pillow, laugh filling the air.

I’d build her a world where she didn’t have to fight for every scrap. Where she could want, and have, without fear.

Her hand rested on my chest. Fingers curling into my shirt.

I kissed her hair. Soft, a vow. “I’ve got you,” I whispered again.

She didn’t answer. Didn’t need to. That flicker of hope in her eyes said enough.

It was my job to make it real. To prove she could trust me, trust us.

The demon was quiet. Not gone, but content. For now, this was enough. Vivi was mine. And I'd burn the world to keep her whole.

21

VIVIENNE

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

The morning light was soft, filtered through the gauzy curtains in Elias's suite. I realized now that even his fortress had seams of gentleness. Places where the world could get in.

I lay still for a moment, watching the rise and fall of his chest. He slept like a man who had finally put down his weapons. One arm thrown above his head, the other curved loosely in the space where my body had been just moments ago. He looked peaceful.

I did not feel peaceful.

I felt raw. Peeled back. Like if he opened his eyes right now and looked at me the way he had last night, I might shatter under the weight of it. So, I moved quietly.

I eased out of bed, careful not to wake him. My jeans were still on the chair where I'd left them, but the T-shirt I'd arrived in—his—was a casualty of the night before. Torn down the front, stretched and ruined. No way I was wearing it again unless I wanted to look like the poster girl for emotional reckoning.

I smirked despite myself and padded over to his dresser. The top drawer slid open with a soft groan, revealing a neat row of T-shirts, all blacks and grays, soft from wear. I chose one that smelled like him—clean, dark, and a little dangerous—and pulled it over my head.

It hung low on my thighs, swallowing me whole in the best possible way. I slid into my jeans underneath, the denim stiff against skin still marked by his hands. The fabric grounded me, reminded me of who I was outside of this room.

I didn't look at the gowns still hanging nearby. I'd felt guilty even trying them on, like I was faking a life that didn't belong to me. Pretending I could be polished or perfect or ... more.

In the quiet hush of morning, I crept through the halls of Dominion Hall, down the back stairs, through the heavy door Elias had programmed to open with my fingerprint.

My stomach twisted at that.

It was one thing to give a girl champagne and strawberries. It was another to encode her into your life like she belonged there.

Like she might stay.

The drive home wasn't long. Charleston hadn't quite woken yet. The streets were wet from a late-night rain, and the scent of salt and brick clung to everything. My tires hissed softly on the pavement, a rhythmic reminder of the world outside Elias's moneyed cocoon.

Money.

God.

My skin prickled remembering what he'd said last night.

"My riches are your riches."

He'd meant it. I could tell by the way he'd looked at me when he said it—like he was offering oxygen. Like he didn't understand why I wasn't already breathing it in.

And I wanted to. But guilt sat in my throat like a stone.

Because I knew what that kind of money could do. How it could fix things, patch holes, pull people back from the brink. I'd spent years pretending I didn't care about it, spinning poverty into poetry, sacrifice into strength. But that was a lie. A necessary one. Because the truth was, money had always been the thing we didn't talk about. The thing that made everything harder.

And now I was sleeping with a man who had more of it than God.

What did that make me?

A dancer with broken dreams and a bleeding heart, suddenly standing on the edge of a gold-plated offer she couldn't afford to take.

But I had a problem.

A real one. And no matter how many hours I worked, no matter how many ways I stretched my budget or talked myself out of needing help—I couldn't fix it alone.

It was my mother.

More specifically, it was the disaster back home swallowing her whole.

Our mother was slipping away, piece by piece. The official diagnosis was dementia. A cruel, creeping thief. She lived in a memory care facility outside New Orleans now, the kind of place that smelled like lemon disinfectant and lost time. It wasn't fancy, but it was safe. Structured. She needed that. Needed round-the-clock care to keep her from wandering into traffic or forgetting how the stove worked or who she was.

But last month, she'd been scammed. Some predator with a soothing voice and a fake

badge had convinced her to wire away every last cent of her savings—said her Social Security number had been compromised, that her pension was in danger, that if she didn't act fast, she'd lose everything. So she acted. Fast. Desperately. And now? She had nothing.

And the facility didn't do charity. They gave us until the end of the month. After that, if we couldn't pay, she'd be discharged. No extensions. No exceptions. Evicted like a tenant behind on rent.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

She couldn't come live with Emmaline. Not with the baby there. Not when Mom had episodes that turned violent, lashing out in confusion, once throwing a ceramic angel across the room because she thought it was watching her sleep. But that wasn't the only reason. Emmaline's apartment was up a narrow flight of stairs, no elevator, no extra bedroom, no budget for a nurse. And if we're being honest? Emmaline didn't have it in her. She was barely holding herself together. Adding a baby and a mother with a fading mind to the mix would crack her in half.

And me?

I was here. In Charleston. Drinking champagne in silk. While everything I loved burned down without me.

The guilt was so loud, it made my ears ring.

I climbed the narrow stairs above Liquid Courage and unlocked the door to my apartment with shaking fingers. The wood groaned as I stepped inside.

Quiet.

Too quiet.

Then I heard it. A soft snore.

I frowned, toeing off my shoes as I crossed the room.

There, curled up in my bed like she belonged, was my sister.

Emmaline's face was slack with sleep, one hand tucked beneath her chin, hair fanned across my pillow. Her suitcase sat in the corner, half-unzipped. A battered tote bag slumped beside it.

I stood frozen in the doorway, heart thudding.

I didn't know whether to feel comforted or invaded.

She hadn't told me she was staying. But maybe she hadn't meant to. Maybe she hadn't known where else to go.

I wrapped my arms around myself and sank down onto the edge of the sofa, staring at the woman in my bed who had once braided my hair and told me stories when Mom was too tired to pretend.

Emmaline. The responsible one. The fixer.

She looked younger in sleep. Softer. Like the years hadn't carved so many sharp edges into her spine.

And all I could think was: I could make this better.

I could ask Elias. One call. One word. One surrender.

But what would that cost? What part of me would I be selling?

The memory of the silk dress still clung to my body like it was mocking me. Beautiful. Expensive. Not mine.

I stared at the woman sleeping in my bed and thought, What if it's not about earning anymore? What if it's about choosing?

Even then, I didn't know the answer.

All I knew was that the weight of love—real, complicated, broken love—was heavier than any guilt money could buy. The weight of it didn't just press on my chest—it hollowed me out from the inside, like something gnawing through bone.

All this time, I'd told myself my recklessness was freedom. That my cliff dives and rooftop parties and tequila-drenched decisions were rebellion. That the rush, the chaos, the danger—they made me feel alive.

But maybe that wasn't it.

Maybe I was just trying to outrun reality. Outrun the calls from Emmaline I let go to voicemail. The voicemails I couldn't bring myself to listen to because I already knew what they said.

Mom's slipping. Mom's in danger. Mom will be out with no place to go if we don't do something.

Maybe every wild thing I did was just me trying to forget that my mother—the woman who once danced in the kitchen with powdered sugar on her nose—couldn't even remember my name some days. That she looked through me now, not at me. That her face, once so animated, now sagged with confusion more often than recognition.

And no matter what I did—no matter how fast I ran, how high I climbed, how hard I tried to disappear—I couldn't escape that.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I couldn't fix her. And I hated that. Even worse? I couldn't fix her money problems. Shouldn't a good daughter be able to come up with the money?

So I chased the next distraction. Poured gasoline on my own grief and called it adrenaline. Because if I was moving fast enough, maybe the guilt couldn't catch me.

But it did.

It caught me when I watched Elias sleep, soft and unguarded, and realized he was offering me more than sex or safety. He was offering sanctuary. A life raft I hadn't asked for but desperately needed. A future with insulation. With rescue.

It caught me when I stepped back into my apartment and saw Emmaline curled up like a child in my bed, exhausted from carrying a burden she never asked for. A burden I should've been sharing.

It caught me now, as I sat on the edge of the sofa, arms wrapped around myself like they might hold me together.

I didn't know what scared me more—that I couldn't fix any of it alone ... or that I didn't have to.

Because if I took Elias's help, if I said yes to his billions, I'd be admitting that I couldn't do it all myself. That I needed saving. That my independence, the thing I'd bled for, was maybe never strength at all—just fear dressed up as pride.

And I didn't know who I'd be without that fear.

I glanced at Emmaline again.

She shifted in her sleep, brow creasing like even her dreams weren't safe anymore.

And I knew—deep down, where the truth lived—that this wasn't about a silk dress or a glass of champagne. It was about choosing to stay. Choosing to stop running. Choosing to fight, not just for survival, but for something better.

Maybe that started with asking for help. Maybe it started with one call. Maybe it started with love that didn't need to be earned. Just accepted.

But before I could sit with that truth—before I could let it root itself inside me—I panicked.

The idea of accepting help, of letting someone like Elias see the cracks and not flinch, felt more dangerous than any rooftop stunt I'd ever pulled. More terrifying than the thought of losing everything, because it meant giving up the one thing I still had control over: my story.

And I wasn't ready to rewrite it.

I stood suddenly, blood rushing to my head. My skin itched with the need to move, to run, to do something reckless enough to drown out the noise in my chest.

I crossed the room in quick strides and shut the bathroom door behind me before I could second-guess it. The water in the shower took forever to warm, so I stepped into the icy spray and let it jolt me awake, shivering as it dragged me back to the surface.

Five minutes. No more. Just long enough to wash off the silk and guilt and lingering traces of Elias's touch.

Then I was out, toweling off with a ragged breath, tugging on ripped jeans and an old gray tank top like armor. No makeup. No perfume. No softness. Just the girl who ran when things got too real.

When I opened the door, Emmaline was sitting up in bed, blinking blearily.

“Hey,” she said, voice scratchy from sleep. “You’re back.”

“Yeah,” I said quickly. “Just for a second. I’ve got somewhere to be.”

Her brow furrowed. “Now?”

I nodded, already grabbing my phone and bag. “Work thing.”

It wasn’t a lie. Not really. I did need to work—at staying distracted. At not unraveling.

I kissed her on the top of the head as I passed. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

She looked like she wanted to protest, but I didn’t wait.

I was down the stairs before she could say another word. Outside, the air was thick and heavy, pressing down on my skin like a warning.

I hit Jessa’s contact and raised the phone to my ear, pacing in the alley behind the bar.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

She picked up on the second ring. “You’re alive. That’s good.”

“Barely,” I muttered. “You working today?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I need you. After. Something high. Something fast.”

A pause. “Are we talking skydiving again or illegal street racing?”

“I don’t care. Just promise me something stupid. Something dangerous.”

Jessa sighed. “You sound like you need a full exorcism, not a thrill ride. I thought you were mad. After the meeting?—?”

“Just do this with me. Please.”

She hesitated, and for a minute I wondered if she’d refuse. “Okay,” she finally said reluctantly. “I get off at six. Meet me at the church parking lot off East Bay. We’ll take it from there.”

“Thanks.”

“You sure you don’t want to talk instead?”

“No.”

She didn't press.

Just said, "See you then," and hung up.

I slid the phone back into my pocket and stared up at the sky, already trying to figure out what version of myself I could become next. The fearless one. The fun one. The broken one in too-tight jeans and a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Because being the girl who needed saving?

I wasn't ready for her yet.

22

ELIAS

Vivi's absence hit like a void, heavy as the silence that filled my suite after she slipped away. I wasn't surprised she'd left.

Her sobs, her curled-up form, had cracked something in me. I knew better than to chase her now. She needed space, a moment to breathe outside my world.

Every instinct screamed to follow. To find her, hold her, keep her safe. But I stayed put. There was work to do, and I'd be ready when the call came to pick her up from whatever chaos she'd stirred.

I sat at my desk, screens casting a cold glow across the room.

Vivi's lingering aura clung to my skin. A ghost that made my chest ache and my cock stir despite the hour. I longed for her, not just her body but her laugh, her defiance.

The flicker of hope in her eyes when I'd promised her my riches haunted me. But longing wouldn't bring her back faster. Code would keep me sane until she needed me.

I started with Jessa Lane. Vivi's texts confirmed she was meeting her, and Jessa's urgent messages—We need to talk. Tonight—still set my demon on edge.

I fired up a script to rescan Jessa's digital footprint, deeper this time. Social media, phone records, anything I'd missed. My fingers moved across the keyboard, steady but restless.

My mind was half on Vivi. I imagined her striding through Charleston's wet streets, curls catching the light. I wanted to be there, shadowing her, keeping reporters and authorities at bay.

But I stayed. Buried myself in work. Trusted she'd call when she was ready.

Jessa's profile came up clean. Barista, Charleston native, no criminal record. Instagram showed coffee art, blurry shots with Vivi kayaking, laughing.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

The burner app I'd flagged earlier nagged at me. I dug into her recent activity, cross-referencing her number against encrypted chats.

A new thread popped up, dated last night, with a handle I didn't recognize—ShadyLady. Vague, coded messages about a “meet” and “high stakes.”

My gut twisted. Vivi was probably with Jessa now, planning something reckless. I didn't know what.

I set a crawler to traceShadyLady. My thoughts drifted to Vivi's grin, sharp and wild, daring the world to break her.

The crawler needed time, so I shifted to Vivi's family. Emmaline and their mother, the threads she'd unraveled last night, her voice cracked with their poverty's weight.

I understood that life. Sullivan's Island before my father's billions, when we'd shared bikes, ate fish we caught and PB&Js made by the oldest brothers. Vivi's words echoed:Skimping was religion.

I pulled up Emmaline's records. Public data first. Married, Dallas, one kid named Chasten. Financials were tight—preacher husband, modest income, no savings.

Her Venmo history showed small payments to friends, labeled “groceries” or “help.” Emmaline was stretched thin, her presence at the intervention screaming desperation, not judgment.

My mind wandered to Vivi, curled in my arms last night, tears soaking my shirt. I

wanted to hold her now, feel her heartbeat, promise she'd never fight alone.

But she was out there, running. I was here, digging for answers she might not want. I shook it off, focusing on her mother.

Public records were sparse. New Orleans, memory care facility, no assets. Vivi had mentioned a scam, a predator draining her mother's savings, risking eviction.

I hacked the facility's billing system. Overdue balance: \$12,000, due by month's end. Pocket change for a Dane, but a fortune for Vivi's family.

I could pay it. One wire transfer, done. Cover the costs for the rest of her mother's life. But Vivi's pride, her fierce independence, stopped me. She'd see charity as debt, not a gift.

Her mother, from what she'd said, was the same—stubborn, surviving on grit. I needed another way.

I pulled up the scam's details, piecing together Vivi's words. A phone call, fake badge, wire transfer to an offshore account. Classic Social Security fraud, preying on the vulnerable.

My spiders—custom scripts for hunting—could trace it. I set them loose, targeting the account's digital footprint, following the money through encrypted ledgers and shell companies.

The stolen sum wasn't much. Nothing to me, everything to Vivi's mother. I could replace it, but I wanted justice. Wanted the bastard who'd done this to bleed.

As the spiders crawled, I scrubbed a hand over my face. Vivi's laugh haunted me, small but real, when we'd shared stories of patched jeans and hand-me-downs.

I wanted her here, body pressed to mine, voice filling this sterile suite. I pictured tomorrow—her waking in my bed, curls tangled, stealing my coffee, fire back in force.

The thought was a lifeline. A hope I'd never dared hold. But she was out there, with Jessa, chasing something "stupid, dangerous."

I checked my phone. No messages, no calls. I could track her if I wanted, but she'd know. She'd reach out when she needed me. Until then, I'd stay busy, keep the demon at bay.

Jessa's scan pinged. TheShadyLadyhandle linked to a dark web forum, low-level, script kiddies trading exploits. Nothing concrete, but the timing—last night, post-intervention—felt too close.

I set a deeper trace. My fingers moved faster, mind lingering on Vivi. The way she'd looked in that silk gown, breathtaking, like she belonged in my world.

I wanted to give her that—beauty, ease, a life without scrimping. But the more I dug into her family, the more I felt I was missing something.

Emmaline's records offered no clues. Pious social media posts about faith and family, nothing hinting at the intervention's betrayal.

I hacked her email. A thread with the facility caught my eye—Emmaline pleading for an extension, citing "unforeseen circumstances."

No mention of the scam, but desperation was clear. Her bank statements showed a \$500 withdrawal, sent to an unlisted account. A bribe? A payment?

It didn't add up. The nagging sense of missing something grew sharper.

My spiders pinged. Initial scam results. The offshore account bounced through three jurisdictions, but a burner phone number surfaced, active in New Orleans last month.

I set a script to triangulate its activity. My thoughts drifted to Vivi's mother, her paintings of mouthless saints, her mind slipping away.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

Vivi had carried that weight alone, her fire a shield against grief. I wanted to carry it for her, prove she didn't have to fight solo.

But charity wouldn't cut it. I needed to dismantle the scam, return what was stolen, give her justice, not pity.

The scam felt too precise. Not random, but targeted. Or was I making that up?

I pulled Vivi's mother's records again, digging into her past—employment, associates.

A former art teacher, no criminal ties, no enemies. But a name in her old address book—Calvin Reed, listed as “friend”—flagged a hit.

Low-level con artist, arrested twice for fraud, last known in New Orleans. The connection was thin, but it was something.

I set my spiders to chase it, mind racing with possibilities. Vivi's face flashed—eyes red but steady, that flicker of hope when I'd made my promises.

I wanted to see that again. Wanted to build a world where she could dream without fear.

But she was out there, with Jessa, chasing danger to drown her pain. I checked my phone again. Nothing. The ache in my chest deepened.

I longed to follow. To find her, hold her like last night, her body soft, grief spilling

into me. But I stayed, buried in code, waiting for her call.

TheShadyLadytrace pinged. A partial hit. The handle posted about “high-risk games” in Charleston tonight, mentioning a “church lot” off East Bay—Jessa’s spot.

My blood ran cold. Vivi was walking into something big. Something I couldn’t see.

The missing piece loomed, a shadow I couldn’t grasp. I set a final script to crack the chat’s encryption, fingers trembling—not from fatigue, but need.

I leaned back, screens blurring as Vivi’s laugh echoed. I saw her tomorrow, in my suite, barefoot, fire back, hand in mine.

But today, she was running. I was here, digging, missing something critical.

The ballet’s suspension, authorities, hackers—it was connected. Had to be. I couldn’t be making that up. Could I? I was failing her, failing to see the whole picture.

My demon stirred, restless. I pushed it down, focusing on code, on work, on the call that would come.

I’d be ready. I’d find her, hold her, prove she was mine—not just her body, but her heart, her future.

Until then, I’d chase ghosts, waiting for the storm that was Vivi to crash back into my world.

The heat hung thick in the air. Charleston in the summer was a swamp masquerading as a city, and tonight, it felt like the air itself didn't want to let go.

I pulled into the church parking lot at 6:15 on the dot, tires crunching over loose gravel. The lot was mostly empty except for a few faded pickup trucks and a battered Jeep I recognized instantly—Jessa's.

She was already leaning against the hood, hair piled on her head in a messy twist, boots scuffed, jean shorts showing off thighs that didn't give a damn about approval. She had two sandwiches in hand, wrapped in wax paper like they came from someone's grandmother's kitchen.

"You brought food," I said as I parked and climbed out.

"You looked like a hurricane last time I saw you. Figured you forgot to eat."

She held one out and I took it, surprised to find my hands shaking.

We stood there for a moment, silent, chewing in sync. The sun hadn't set yet—still hung high and angry behind the veil of clouds. It painted everything in a gold-tinged sweat. The brick buildings across the street shimmered in the heat, windows open, fans turning lazy circles in the distance.

"You okay?" she asked eventually, mouth half full.

I shrugged. "Define okay."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“Breathing. Not bleeding.”

“Then sure. I’m fucking thriving.”

She gave me a look but didn’t push. Jessa never did until she had to.

We ate in silence again, the sandwiches going down easier than I expected. My stomach had been a tight fist for days, but suddenly it was grateful. And that pissed me off. Because I didn’t want to feel grateful. I didn’t want to feel anything.

I wanted to run until the world went quiet again.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked, crumpling her wrapper and chucking it into the backseat.

“Rooftops,” I said.

Jessa blinked. “You serious?”

“I’ve never been more serious.”

“Vivi, rooftop running in?—”

“It’s summer. It won’t be dark for hours. We’ve got visibility.”

“We’ve also got onlookers. And phones. And cops. The last time you did something this reckless, you made national news.”

“So let them watch.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Is that what this is? You want another headline?”

I laughed, sharp and joyless. “No. I want to feel something other than trapped.”

Jessa crossed her arms. “What happened?”

“Everything,” I snapped, then softened. “Nothing. I just ... I can’t sit still. Not tonight. Not with all the thoughts circling like vultures.”

“Elias?”

I looked away.

“You’re trying to show him something,” she said quietly.

I didn’t answer.

She sighed. “Fine. Let me guess. Start at the East Bay parking garage, jump to the old icehouse, hit three rooftops on the way to Broad Street, then down the fire escape behind the florist?”

I grinned. “You remember.”

“I’m not the one who shattered her ankle trying to leap a four-foot gap after a bottle of rosé.”

“That was years ago. I’m stronger now.”

“You’re sadder now,” she said bluntly. “And angry. That’s not the same as strong.”

I flinched. Because she wasn't wrong.

“Are we doing this or not?” I asked.

She studied me, long and hard. Then finally, she nodded. “Yeah. Let's dance with gravity.”

By 6:50, we were on the roof of the parking garage, the wind whipping hot around us. Charleston unfolded below like a storybook gone sideways—church spires, rainbow row, tourists sweating through linen shirts.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

The city buzzed beneath our feet, loud and oblivious.

Jessa adjusted her boots, then handed me a pair of gloves. “Try not to break yourself this time.”

I slipped them on. My heart was already pounding, but it wasn’t fear. It was anticipation.

“On three?” I asked.

She smirked. “On stupid.”

We took off.

The first run was easy. The garage to the icehouse was child’s play. I’d done it before. My muscles remembered even when my mind screamed what the fuck are you doing?

We landed hard but clean. Boots scraping rooftop tar.

The next jump was trickier—a lean two-story building that once held a jazz club and now housed God knew what. The alley below was narrow, the kind that looked like it had stories. I didn’t look down.

I sprinted and flew.

And for a second—one glorious, breathless second—I wasn’t Vivienne Laveau with a

crumbling family and a bankrupt heart. I was weightless. Infinite.

Jessa landed beside me with a grunt. “You’re insane.”

“I’m alive.”

We kept going. Building to building. Rooftop to rooftop.

Onlookers below began to notice. Fingers pointed. Someone shouted. A man with a beard and a Bluetooth headset pulled out his phone and started recording.

Jessa glanced down and cursed. “We’re gonna end up on the internet.”

“Let them post,” I said. “Let them stitch me into some dumb TikTok reel with music and slow-mo edits. Let them try to explain me in comments.”

“What are you hoping for?”

I didn’t answer.

Because I was hoping he’d see it.

That Elias would look up from his fortress of screens and data and know—know that I couldn’t be caged. Know that I wasn’t a princess waiting to be rescued.

But also, maybe I wanted him to come get me again. Not to stop me. But to stand at the edge with me. To prove he could keep up.

Another leap. This one miscalculated. My boot hit wrong and I skidded hard, shoulder slamming the rooftop edge.

“Vivi!” Jessa grabbed my arm, yanking me upright. “You okay?”

I winced. “Fine. Just bruised.”

“We should stop.”

“No.”

She stared at me. “You’re chasing something you can’t catch.”

I stared back. “So are you.”

We were both quiet after that.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

The last jump was the one that scared me. Not because it was the biggest. Not because the building was sloped. But because I remembered what it felt like the last time I leapt from that ledge.

I'd been twenty. Furious. Untouchable.

That night, I'd stood on the edge and thought—what if I just didn't? What if I let the fall win?

Now I stood there again, knees bent, arms loose, sweat dripping down my spine.

Jessa came up beside me. "You don't have to prove anything, you know."

"I do," I said. "To myself."

"To Elias?"

I didn't answer.

Because I didn't know anymore.

I took the jump.

The landing was messy, pain rippling up my calves, but I stuck it. I turned to grin at Jessa.

She didn't move.

Just stared at me.

“You’re not okay,” she said. “And this isn’t going to fix it.”

I swallowed hard. “I know.”

Then she jumped, too.

We collapsed on the rooftop together, side by side, breath coming fast and uneven. The sun finally dipped, shadows stretching long and soft over the brick and iron of the city.

Below, sirens wailed somewhere in the distance. A reminder that the world kept spinning, even when we tried to outrun it.

“Next time,” Jessa said between gulps of air, “we do something normal.”

“Like what? Karaoke?”

“Or bowling. Maybe with bumpers.”

I laughed. Really laughed.

And it hit me how long it had been since that sound came from somewhere real.

“Deal,” I said. “But only if there’s cheap beer.”

“Obviously.”

We lay there, sweat cooling, city humming.

The breeze tickled the sweat on my collarbone as we lay sprawled across hot tar and gravel. My lungs burned, but my mind was quieter than it had been in days.

“Can we talk?” Jessa asked after a long pause. Her voice had softened—less bravado, more ache.

I turned my head to face her. “About what?”

“Last night.”

My breath hitched.

She sighed, propping herself on one elbow. “I wasn’t trying to ambush you. I swear to God, Vivi. I didn’t want it to go down like that.”

“You mean with a therapist and six pairs of eyes looking at me like I was a grenade?”

Her mouth tugged downward. “Yeah. I mean that.”

I looked back at the sky. Clouds smudged across it like bruises.

“I was worried,” she said. “You were doing shit that scared me. The bridge stunt, namely. It wasn’t about control. It was about not wanting to find out through some news report that you’d finally gone too far.”

I didn’t answer right away. I traced the edge of a pebble with my fingertip, feeling its warmth from the sun.

“I’m not on drugs,” I said finally.

“I know.”

“It’s not pills or booze or anything like that. I just ...” I swallowed. “I just needed the silence. The high. The second before you land, when nothing else matters.”

She nodded. “I get that.”

“I wish you hadn’t done it, though,” I admitted. “The intervention. It made me feel like a suspect in my own life.”

“I know,” she said. “And I’m sorry. But I’d do it again if it meant keeping you breathing.”

That sat between us for a beat, a line of truth neither of us stepped around.

“I’m still mad,” I said.

“That’s fair.”

We sat in it. Let it hurt. Let it heal.

The breeze stirred around us, hot and restless.

Jessa picked at a scab on her knee, the quiet stretching long enough that I thought maybe that was it. Maybe we’d leave it there—two women on a rooftop, tethered together by adrenaline and old loyalty, saying just enough to keep the silence from crushing us.

But then she looked up.

“You know, if you’d just talk to us ... like really talk to us ... maybe we wouldn’t have had to guess.”

I frowned. “About what?”

“Everything,” she said, throwing her hands up. “The stunts that got more and more dangerous. The way you looked like you hadn’t slept in weeks. I mean, you think we were trying to control you? We were trying to figure out what the hell was going on

because you wouldn't let us in."

My jaw clenched. "That's the thing. Letting people in doesn't make things better. It just gives them a front-row seat to the train wreck."

"Or maybe it gives them a reason to stand in front of it and pull the brakes."

I let out a dry, hollow laugh. "Cute metaphor. But no. No good ever came from dragging people into family shit they can't fix."

Jessa studied me for a moment. "So it is family stuff."

I didn't answer.

She kept going anyway. "I figured. I mean, I wondered last night what Emmaline was talking about—what she almost said."

My head snapped toward her. "She didn't?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

Jessa shook her head slowly. “No. She just ... left it hanging. We could tell there was something, but she clammed up.”

I exhaled sharply, something breaking loose in my chest. “Huh.”

“What?”

“I just assumed she’d tell everyone. She always plays the martyr card, the ‘I did everything right’ routine. I figured the moment she had a reason to paint me as the family fuck-up, she’d go for it.”

“Well ... maybe she’s better than that,” Jessa said gently. “Maybe she’s grown up. Or maybe she just realized that wasn’t hers to say.”

I didn’t have a response. Because part of me—the part that had been braced for betrayal—felt suddenly disarmed. And I hated it.

Hated that Emmaline might actually be handling this better than I gave her credit for. Hated that she’d come all the way to Charleston not to expose me, but to try—however messily—to hold me up.

It was easier when I could make her the villain. Harder when she was just a tired, worried sister trying to keep everything from falling apart.

I rubbed the back of my neck, an old ache flaring beneath my skin.

“I don’t know how to talk about it,” I admitted, so low it barely counted as a

confession. “I don’t even know where I’d start.”

“Start with the truth,” Jessa said. “Whatever it is.”

I looked out at the skyline, sun glaring off windows like a dare. “Yeah, well. Some truths don’t come in words. They come in actions. In screaming from rooftops.”

She looked at me for a long beat, and I thought she was ready to call it a night. Then she nodded. “So, let’s scream.”

And that was how we ended up deciding on one last jump.

The one we’d never dared before. The one that would change everything.

I raised a brow. “You serious?”

She nodded again, her mind made up.

“There’s one more jump I’ve always wanted to try”, I said. “Never had the guts. It’s new. Unmarked.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not talking about the Tremont Hotel, are you?”

I didn’t answer.

“Vivi, no.”

I stood, walked to the edge of the building, and pointed. The Tremont rose across the street, all brick and concrete, with a maintenance platform half-extended from the fifth floor. Between us was a chasm—at least a fifteen-foot drop into alley shadows if we missed.

“No one’s ever made it from here,” Jessa said.

“Exactly.”

She exhaled, hard. “Jesus.”

I turned, my grin feral. “You coming or not?”

She stood slowly, brushing off her hands. “You’re gonna kill me one of these days.”

I laughed, and it sounded wild, unhinged, a little too close to desperate. “Not tonight.”

We paced back a few yards, then stopped. The platform loomed ahead—dangerous, unsanctioned, perfect.

“You take the lead,” she said, adjusting her gloves.

Page 74

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I nodded.

The adrenaline started to simmer in my veins again. That delicious, terrifying spark that made everything else fade.

One breath in.

One out.

I ran.

The air screamed past my ears as I leapt, body suspended in a second that stretched impossibly long. I reached, legs extended, heart beating in my throat.

For one terrible second, I knew I wasn't going to make it.

Then—my hands caught the metal rail.

My feet slammed into the platform.

I staggered. Wobbled. Cursed.

But I didn't fall.

I turned, heart in my mouth.

“Jessa!”

She was already running.

“Wait—”

Too late.

She leapt, arms flung wide, form perfect.

Until it wasn't.

Her foot slipped on takeoff.

Her trajectory dipped.

My stomach plummeted.

“Jessa!”

She hit the edge of the platform—fingertips grasping metal.

Her body swung violently, momentum dragging her downward.

I dropped to my knees, lunged for her.

Our eyes locked.

“Hold on!” I screamed, reaching over the edge.

She tried.

God, she tried.

But her grip slipped.

Her mouth opened?—

And then she was gone.

Falling.

24

ELIAS

The truth sliced through me. Jessa Lane was ShadyLady.

Her dark web chats, the “high-risk games” planned for the church lot off East Bay, lined up too perfectly with something Vivi might do—but I didn’t yet know what she and Jessa had gotten into tonight.

My spiders had cracked the encryption, tying Jessa’s burner app to ShadyLady’s posts, confirming she was no mere friend but a player in this chaos. I needed to warn Vivi before Jessa’s betrayal dragged her down.

I leaned back, screens casting a cold glow across my suite. Vivi’s absence was a wound. I longed to hold her, protect her from this, but she was out there, running, and I was here, piecing together a trap closing around her.

How to tell her? Vivi trusted Jessa, relied on her chaos to quiet her demons. This would break her. I needed ironclad proof and a way to soften the blow. A private confrontation, just us, where I’d show her the data and make her see.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard, ready to dig deeper, when the door swung open, Atlas's heavy footsteps breaking the silence.

His broad frame loomed, dark eyes brooding. "Cops called," he said, voice clipped. "They've got Vivi."

Panic clawed my throat. "What?" I stood, chair scraping, heart pounding. "What happened?"

"Downtown, in custody." Atlas's calm clashed with my storm. "No details, just ... a dead girl. Somebody named Jessa."

The world spun. Jessa. Dead. Vivi arrested. Images flashed—Vivi's rooftop grin, Jessa's coded chats. Her stunts had gone too far, and now Jessa was gone, Vivi caught in the fallout.

"What else?" I demanded, voice shaking. "What did they say?"

"Nothing more," Atlas said, frustration in his eyes. "It's bad, Elias. About to hit the news."

I nodded, mind racing, panic and rage colliding. Vivi's face burned in my memory—her eyes red, that flicker of hope I'd sworn to protect. I had to save her, but first, I needed answers.

As I turned to shut down my computer, my screen flared, and I froze.

ShadyLadywas active. Posting images now.

I clicked, breath catching.

The first photo loaded, and my blood iced: a top down angle of Vivi's red curls on a platform, reaching for Jessa's shocked face, her body falling. Vivi's face was hidden, but I knew her—her frame, her desperate tension. Jessa's eyes screamed terror, moments before her death.

I stood stock still, pulse hammering.

Someone had captured that instant, an angle no bystander could've caught. Drone? Hidden camera?

More images loaded: Vivi's silhouette against the skyline, Jessa taking a running start. A broken doll on the pavement.

ShadyLadywas taunting, but Jessa was dead—her account shouldn't be active.

Then it hit me: code injections, subtle, masking an outsider's control. The account was hijacked, and only one force had this reach: Department 77.

25

VIVIENNE

The concrete was cold beneath my thighs. Not cold like winter. Cold like consequence. Like the echo of something once full, now hollowed out.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I didn't cry. I didn't scream. I just sat there, in shock.

Long after the yelling stopped. Long after the paramedics took her away. Long after the cop with the too-tight belt and too-loud voice said, "You need to come with us now, ma'am."

Ma'am.

I almost laughed.

They hadn't cuffed me right away. Maybe they thought I'd break if they touched me too hard. Maybe they just didn't see a threat in a girl with shaking hands and a bloodstain on her tank top that wasn't hers.

But later—downtown—they did. They patted me down, took my phone, and told me I could call someone "after processing." I didn't know who I would've called anyway. Emmaline? Elias?

Jessa would've known who to call. But Jessa was gone. And it was my fault.

They put me in a holding cell on the second floor of the sheriff's station. A metal bench, a bolted toilet, a flickering light overhead. I sat in the corner, arms wrapped tight around my legs like I could fold myself small enough to disappear. My body still trembled from the impact of that final jump, and the one after it—Jessa's fall—played on repeat every time I blinked.

Her scream hadn't been loud. Just a breath ripped from her lungs. But I heard it. God,

I heard it.

And her eyes. I couldn't stop seeing her eyes.

Hold on, I'd shouted.

She tried.

She didn't.

The cell was quiet. Too quiet. No drunk women shouting. No crying. Just me and the buzz of fluorescent lights that felt like a punishment.

Somewhere past midnight, the steel door clanked open.

I didn't look up right away.

"Vivienne Laveau," a voice said, low and rough.

My head snapped toward the sound.

He stepped into the light—tall, lean but built like he'd wrestled more than his fair share of chaos. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows, forearms corded with muscle and the kind of weariness that didn't come from paperwork. He didn't look at me right away. His gaze swept the room instead—methodical, practiced. Like a man who never trusted what was in plain sight.

I sat up straighter. "Who are you?"

"Deputy Norton," he said, voice low, worn smooth by years of bad news. He finally looked at me. "Eric."

I waited for more.

“Your name flagged something in the system,” he added. “Connections like yours don’t go unnoticed.”

“Connections?”

“The Danes,” he said simply. “That family casts a long shadow in this state.”

I didn’t know if I was supposed to feel comforted or exposed.

He stepped closer to the bars. His voice was lower now. “Tell me what happened.”

I laughed. It came out jagged. “Which part? The stunt? The fall? Or the fact that my best friend is dead and everyone thinks it’s my fault?”

He didn’t flinch. “All of it.”

I exhaled through my nose. “We were running rooftops. It wasn’t a suicide attempt. It was ... a stupid thrill. She brought sandwiches. We planned it like we used to. Like before.”

“And then?”

“And then she fell.”

I didn’t elaborate. I couldn’t.

“She slipped,” I added after a beat, my voice a whisper now. “She was laughing two seconds before. And then?—”

My chest tightened, panic threading up my throat. I pressed my fist to my mouth.

He studied me. “Your statement matches what they saw on camera. Footage from a rooftop bar across the way caught part of it. No signs of foul play.”

“But?”

“But your name’s on a report connected to a high-risk group.”

My blood iced. “What?”

Norton didn’t blink. “Handle name was ShadyLady. You’re not listed as the poster, but the posts reference a meet. Same location. Same time.”

I shook my head. “That wasn’t me. I don’t even know what that is.”

“Someone does.” His voice didn’t accuse, but it didn’t coddle either. “And they made damn sure you were in the blast zone when things went sideways.”

I pressed my back against the cold wall, nails digging into my skin. “Jessa wasn’t—she didn’t have enemies. We weren’t playing a game. We were just—” I broke off. The words sounded pathetic now. Reckless. “It was just something we used to do. Back before everything started falling apart.”

He nodded like he expected that. Then added, almost offhand, “You know you weren’t supposed to be off the radar after the bridge stunt.”

I swallowed hard. “My whereabouts were supposed to be reported.”

“Exactly. Part of the terms of your suspension from the ballet. Mandatory check-ins.”

I went quiet.

He studied me. “That stopped happening the minute the Danes got involved. Quiet strings pulled. Certain departments told to back off. Ruffled more than a few feathers.”

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t.

Because I knew what he was really saying.

Someone had protected me. Covered me. Kept me from being flagged as a risk. And someone else had tried to make sure I looked like one anyway.

I swallowed. My throat felt like it had been sandpapered. “I’m not part of anything. I didn’t post anything. I didn’t kill her.”

“I believe you,” he said.

I blinked. “You do?”

“Yeah,” he said simply. “You’re grieving. Not faking. People faking don’t flinch when the words come out wrong. They try to control it. You’re not controlling anything right now.”

A tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it. It hit my knee and sat there, trembling.

He didn’t say anything else for a moment. Just leaned back, arms folded, watching me like someone trying to decide whether I was a live wire or a victim.

“But belief doesn’t change protocol,” he finally said. “Right now, you’re being held until your story checks out completely. Cameras will help. Witnesses might help.”

I wiped at my face with the back of my hand. “What happens to me?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

He leaned in, the lines around his eyes sharpening. “On who else starts asking about you. On what else they find.”

“You mean the FBI?”

He paused.

“No,” he said. “I mean the people watching the FBI.”

A chill rippled down my spine.

“I don’t understand,” I whispered.

He nodded. “You’re not supposed to.”

My stomach curled inward, tight and nauseous. I looked away, eyes blurring against the sterile cinderblock.

“You said my name got flagged?”

He nodded once. “System pinged you when the arrest was processed. Not normal procedure. Certain tags do that. I check them when they come in.”

“And you just happened to be nearby?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” he said.

“Then what do you believe in?”

His gaze held mine. “Justice. When I can find it.”

I exhaled, shaky and slow.

“You know Elias?” I asked.

“I do,” he said. “And if he hasn’t already found out you’re in here, he will. I spoke with one of his brothers.”

My heart kicked at the sound of his name.

“I don’t want him seeing me like this.”

“Then you picked the wrong night to climb a rooftop.”

I didn’t argue. Couldn’t.

Norton shifted, pulling something from his pocket. “I can’t get you out tonight. But I can make sure no one touches you while you’re here. That your paperwork doesn’t go missing. That no stories get rewritten on your behalf.”

He held out a napkin, folded into quarters.

“You need anything,” he said, “write it down. Pass it through the door. I’ll make sure it gets seen.”

I took the napkin with numb fingers.

“And Vivienne?” he added, turning to go.

I looked up.

“You didn’t kill your friend. But someone was there when it happened. That’s not random. That’s design.”

He stepped out, the door groaning shut behind him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I sat there, holding that napkin like it might save me.

And I let the tears come.

Because I wasn't just grieving now.

I was afraid.

The tears came slow at first—silent and shapeless—but they didn't stop. They dripped down my cheeks and soaked into my tank top, and I didn't wipe them away. I let them fall. Let them remind me I was still human. That I hadn't gone entirely numb.

But the fear that settled over me wasn't just about jail. Or being alone. Or even being blamed.

It was about the truth—that the one person who'd always known how to talk me down, talk me through, was gone. Jessa, who could read my moods before I even spoke. Jessa, who would've known what to say. She'd have grabbed my hand, made a joke, stolen my keys, and ordered greasy fries on the way to the hospital or court or whatever fresh hell I'd gotten myself into.

And now, all I had was a napkin with a name and no one to call.

Or maybe ... maybe there was someone.

Not someone who could fix this. But someone who used to make it all feel a little less

broken.

I stood slowly, pressing my hands to the wall for balance.

A guard passed the bars, his boots echoing down the corridor.

“Hey,” I called, voice rasping. “I want my call.”

He didn’t stop.

“I want my one phone call,” I repeated, louder this time.

He paused, turned, looked me over like I’d finally remembered I was a person. “You processed?”

“Yes.”

He said nothing for a second, then nodded. “Five minutes. That’s all you get.”

He led me to a small, sterile room that reeked of bleach and regret. A metal stool sat bolted to the floor beside a grimy wall-mounted phone. I lowered myself slowly, picked up the receiver with trembling fingers, and dialed the only number I still knew by heart.

The memory care facility in New Orleans answered on the third ring.

“Saint Cecilia’s,” came a soft voice. “Evening shift, this is Martha.”

My throat tightened. “I’m—uh. I’m calling for Maureen Laveau. I’m her daughter.”

“Hold on,” the woman said, tone shifting. “She’s not usually up this late.”

“Please. Just for a minute.”

A beat of silence. Then muffled footsteps. A door opening.

Shuffling sounds.

Then her voice.

“Hello?”

It was barely above a whisper. That same delicate, singsong cadence that used to tell bedtime stories and yell at carpool lines. Only now, it wobbled. Like a thread coming undone.

“Hi, Mama,” I said.

Silence.

Then, slowly: “Who is this?”

“It’s me. Vivi.”

More silence.

“I had a daughter named Vivienne,” she said finally. “She was a dancer. Fierce little thing.”

My heart cracked down the middle. “That’s me, Mama. I’m your Vivienne.”

“Oh,” she said, like she’d dropped a teacup and didn’t know whether to mourn it or just sweep up the pieces. “I thought you were taller.”

I pressed a hand to my mouth, a sound caught somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

“Mama,” I whispered, “I’m in trouble, and I’m scared.”

“Oh, honey,” she said, distant now. “Don’t tell me about trouble. I lived through hurricanes and decades of being misunderstood.”

I smiled despite the burn in my chest. “I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“It’s not what it used to be,” she said softly.

Neither of us were.

“Mama,” I said, voice trembling now, “Jessa’s gone.”

There was a pause.

Then: “Jessa ... she was your friend, wasn’t she? The one with the loud laugh?”

I nodded even though she couldn’t see me. “Yeah. That’s her.”

“I always liked her,” she said.

“She’s dead,” I said. Just like that. Just two words that didn’t make sense together.

“Oh, baby ...”

And that’s when I realized she was crying. Quiet, small cries that didn’t quite know where they belonged.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I don’t know how to make it better anymore.”

I curled over the phone, sobbing now. “I don’t either.”

There was another pause. “Vivi?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to go.”

My stomach dropped. “Go where?”

“When the money runs out.”

Fresh grief knifed through me. “You’re not going anywhere,” I whispered.

“They told me I had until the end of the month. But I get confused. Maybe that already passed.”

“No,” I said. “No, it hasn’t.”

The sound of a door opening echoed faintly on her end.

“They’re telling me I have to hang up,” she said. “But I want you to come brush my hair again. Remember how you used to?”

“I remember.”

“You had little fingers. So careful. You were always so careful.”

I closed my eyes. “I’ll come, Mama. Soon.”

“I’ll wait,” she said.

Then the line went dead.

I held the phone to my ear long after the click, listening to the hum of emptiness, to the absence of a mother I’d already lost in pieces.

The guard knocked once on the glass.

I stood slowly and walked back to my cell without a word.

The napkin Norton had given me was still there on the bench.

I looked at it.

Then sat down beside it and cried like a child who just wanted her mother to come find her in the dark.

26

ELIAS

Vivi's arrest was a blade in my gut, Jessa's death the twist that made it bleed. I tore through Charleston's streets, the SUV's engine roaring as I raced to the police station, my mind a storm of panic and rage.

The images Shady Lady had posted—Vivi's red curls on that platform, Jessa's terrified face—burned in my memory, proof of a hijacked account and a shadowy force orchestrating this nightmare. I needed to get Vivi out, to hold her, to shield her from the fallout of her friend's death and the trap closing around her, around all of us.

The station loomed ahead, a squat brick building under a bruised sky. I parked, grabbing my laptop bag, stowing my pistol in the glove box. Inside, the air was thick with stale coffee and decades of perps. The desk sergeant, a wiry man with a mustache, barely looked up. "Name?"

"Elias Dane," I said, voice tight, leaning in. "Here for Vivienne Laveau."

He typed slowly, eyes narrowing. "She's in holding. You her lawyer?"

"No, but I need to see her. Now."

He snorted, unimpressed. "Take a seat. Someone'll get to you."

I bit back a curse, my demon snarling, but arguing wouldn't help. I found a corner in the waiting area, cracked open my laptop.

If they were giving me the runaround, I'd use the time to track ShadyLady. Vivi was caged, and every second she spent in there was a failure I couldn't stomach. I had to unravel this, find Department 77's hackers, and stop them before they hurt her more.

My spiders were still crawling, chasing ShadyLady's trail through the dark web. The account's activity—posting real-time images of Jessa's fall—didn't add up. Jessa was dead, her burner app tied to ShadyLady, but the posts continued, taunting with a precision no amateur could manage.

I dug into the forum's logs, searching for the source. The photos' metadata pointed to a server in D.C., a hub I'd seen before. Department 77 had gone quiet after a battle with my family recently, one that somehow dodged national news. They'd been biding their time, waiting in the shadows, and now they were back, using Vivi to get inside Dominion Hall.

Well, fuck that. They thought they could play her like a pawn, exploit her fire to crack our defenses? I'd send a message of my own.

My brothers and I had fought off threats before, but this was personal. Vivi was mine, and no one touched her without paying a price.

I had an idea.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I was a world-class hacker, top-tier, but there were a handful globally in a league of their own, the Michael Jordans of code. One name stood out: PhantomZero, a ghost who'd once crashed a nation's banking system for kicks. If anyone could outmaneuver Department 77, it was them.

I opened an encrypted channel, my fingers steady despite the panic gnawing at my chest. The message was simple: Need a deep trace and sabotage. Department 77.

I sent it, knowing the cost would be steep.

Seconds later, a reply pinged back: Fifty million. Quarter upfront. Deliverable in 48 hours.

Ridiculous, but worth it to protect Vivi, to dismantle the trap around her. I typed two words—DO IT—and transferred 25% to the provided account, a numbered vault in the Caymans. PhantomZero would get to work, and I'd have answers soon.

I closed the laptop, my pulse still racing, when footsteps approached. Deputy Norton stepped into the waiting area, his frame taut with authority, sleeves rolled to reveal corded forearms. His eyes, sharp and weathered, locked on mine, but his expression gave nothing away. I stood, pocketing my phone, ready to demand Vivi's release, but he spoke first.

"She's not coming out tonight, Dane," Norton said, voice low, unyielding. "Processing's taking longer than expected. And the governor called."

I stepped into his space, close enough to see the stubble on his jaw, my voice a growl.

“If you think you’re keeping her in there, you’ve got all the Danes to worry about.”

Norton didn’t flinch, but his eyes flickered, weighing me. He wasn’t a lightweight—his stance, his calm, screamed professional—but he knew he was out of his depth. The Dane name carried weight, and I wasn’t bluffing. Atlas and the others would tear this place apart if I gave the word.

Norton raised a hand, placating, his tone softening. “Easy, Dane. It’s fine, as long as she doesn’t leave town. I’ll push the paperwork through.”

I held his gaze, my demon barely leashed. “Make it fast.”

He nodded, turning to go, but paused, glancing back. “One more thing. Tell your girlfriend to stay off the internet. Some pretty graphic images from Ms. Lane’s death are making the rounds out there.”

My blood ran cold, theShadyLadyphotos flashing in my mind—Vivi’s desperate reach, Jessa’s fall. Norton’s words confirmed they were spreading, a public crucifixion to break her further.

I didn’t respond, just watched him disappear down the hall, my fists clenching as I fought the urge to follow, to demand more. Vivi was in there, grieving, caged, and I was stuck out here, waiting, failing her again.

I sank back into the chair, my laptop closed but my mind racing. The shadow group—Department 77, I was sure of it—had played this perfectly. Jessa’s death, Vivi’s arrest, the hijackedShadyLadyaccount posting images to frame her—it was a calculated strike, not just against her but against me, against Dominion Hall. They’d used her to draw us out, and I’d missed it, too focused on her to see the bigger game.

My demon snarled, possessive, protective, but rage wouldn’t free her. I

needed PhantomZero's trace, needed to infiltrate Department 77's network, needed Vivi safe in my arms.

The waiting area was a blur of fluorescent light and distant voices, the clock ticking too slowly. I thought of Vivi's face last night, her eyes red but steady, the hope I'd sparked when I promised her a new life.

She'd trusted me, let me hold her, and now she was alone, carrying Jessa's death, the weight of guilt I couldn't yet lift. I had to tell her about ShadyLady, about the hijacking, but how? Her grief would be a buzz saw, and I didn't know how to wield the truth without cutting her deeper.

My phone dinged, an encrypted ping from my spiders, likely more on ShadyLady's trail, but I didn't check it. Norton would be back soon, Vivi with him, and I needed to be ready—to hold her, to promise her we'd fight this together. The images were out there, spreading, and I'd shield her from them, from the world's judgment, from Department 77's reach.

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, staring at the floor, my resolve hardening. They'd used Vivi to get to me, but I'd turn their game against them. PhantomZero would deliver, and I'd burn Department 77's shadows to ash.

27

VIVIENNE

The door buzzed. A sound so small, so simple—just metal unlatching from metal—but it broke something in me.

I stood slowly, knees stiff from hours on the concrete bench, my whole body hollowed out and bruised from the inside. The guard didn't say a word. Just nodded. I

followed him down a hall that smelled like bleach and resignation and stepped out into the humid Charleston night like I was trespassing.

Then I saw him.

Elias.

He leaned against his SUV like he had all the time in the world, arms folded across his broad chest, that controlled kind of stillness that always made my pulse do strange things.

I stopped walking.

His eyes locked on mine. No smile. No fury. Just seeing me. Like he always had. Like the rest of the world could blur and he'd still pick me out of the static.

"I'm a mess," I said, voice barely above a whisper.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“I’ve seen worse,” he replied, stepping forward. “But I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you like this.”

I laughed, but it cracked on the way out. “You mean broken?”

“I mean real.”

He stood in front of me now, close enough to feel the heat radiating off his chest. His hand hovered like he wanted to touch me but wasn’t sure if I’d shatter.

“I’m ready to face things,” I said. “Not just tonight. Everything. My mom, the fallout, the wreckage. I don’t want to be the girl who runs anymore. Life’s too fucking short.”

“I know,” he said quietly.

I met his eyes. “Jessa’s gone. And I don’t know what’s next. But I know I can’t keep jumping off rooftops and pretending that’s living.”

His hand finally touched me—just a brush of knuckles along my jaw. “You don’t have to keep falling just to prove you can survive the landing.”

Something unspooled in my chest.

I pressed my forehead to his. “Don’t rescue me,” I said, breath trembling. “Just stay.”

“I’m not here to rescue you,” he whispered. “I’m here to walk beside you. Or behind you. Or to just sit still until you’re ready to move.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist, and he held me—strong and silent, his breath steady at the top of my head.

After a long beat, I pulled back and glanced up at him, one brow lifting. “I know what you’re thinking.”

He smirked. “I’m always thinking.”

“You’re wondering if this emotional unraveling means I’ll take it out on you in bed.”

His grin widened, slow and wicked. “Only if you’re wondering it.”

“I’m not.”

“You sure?”

“I just got out of jail, Elias. My friend just died. My libido is on a spiritual retreat in another dimension.”

He gave a small, playful shrug. “I’m not only interested in your libido.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Liar.”

He leaned in, voice low and teasing. “I do like your brain.”

I snorted. “You’ve never once asked what books I like.”

“I know what books you like. You keep them stacked in crooked piles with half-finished coffee mugs. You dog-ear corners like a heathen and mutter to yourself when you read something beautiful. I like that about you.”

I stared at him, stunned.

“You’ve never been to my apartment,” I said slowly.

He didn’t even blink. “Doesn’t mean I haven’t seen it.”

My eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

He smiled, just a hint of wicked behind it. “Security footage. You live above a bar with external cameras and a very hackable network.”

“That is so creepy.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“It’s protective,” he countered, stepping closer. “I like knowing where you are. That you made it home. That you fell asleep on your sofa with a book in your lap and a candle still burning.”

I blinked. “You’ve watched me sleep?”

He tilted his head, unapologetic. “I’ve watched over you. There’s a difference.”

My heart should’ve objected. It should’ve pulled the emergency brake. Instead, it kicked once, hard and fast.

“Okay,” I said finally. “That was hot.”

“I know.”

We drove in silence, hand brushing hand on the center console. When he parked in front of Liquid Courage, I hesitated.

“You sure you’re up for this?” he asked.

“No,” I said honestly. “But I’m doing it anyway.”

We climbed the stairs to my apartment. My key slipped once in the lock, but I got it on the second try.

The door creaked open to the sound of soft breathing.

Emmaline was curled on the sofa, a thin blanket draped over her shoulders. Her eyes blinked open as I stepped inside.

“Vivi?”

“Yeah.”

She sat up quickly, blinking through sleep. “You okay?”

I nodded. “This is Elias. I asked him to come with me.”

She glanced at him, something unreadable passing across her face, then stood.

“I waited all day,” she said, voice still groggy.

“I know.”

“I heard about what happened to Jessa, and that you were in jail. I thought about calling the governor.”

“I think Elias beat you to it.”

He held up both palms. “Technically, I only threatened the police chief.”

A flicker of a smile crossed Emmaline’s lips. Then she turned serious. “Did you call her?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“She thought I was taller,” I whispered. “She doesn’t remember me.”

Emmaline’s face crumpled just a little, then she reached for my hand.

Elias stepped back, giving us space. He didn’t speak. Just watched. Like a soldier standing guard outside a cathedral.

I sat down beside Emmaline, suddenly so tired I could barely sit upright.

“She said she doesn’t want to go,” I said. “She knows they’re kicking her out. Even if she doesn’t remember when.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“I tried to buy us time,” Emmaline whispered. “But they want the full balance. In cash. No payment plans. They say we’ll just continue to be behind with no hope of catching up.”

I nodded.

“Do you have a plan?” she asked.

“I don’t,” I said honestly. “But I think I’m done pretending I don’t need help.”

Emmaline stared at me. “Does that mean?—”

“It means I’m not too proud to ask Elias for a loan. Or maybe a miracle. Or maybe just a nap before I fall apart again.”

Elias stepped forward. “You don’t have to ask. You just have to let me.”

The apartment was too small for all this grief, but somehow, in that moment, it didn’t feel so crushing.

It felt like maybe something was beginning to shift. And I let myself hope that it might shift in our favor.

Emmaline's gaze cut to him, sharp and assessing. “Do you have the money?”

Elias didn’t flinch. “Yes.”

Just like that. No hesitation, no caveats. Just a quiet truth that filled the room like thunder.

Her brows lifted. “I don’t mean a few hundred bucks. I mean thousands.”

He gave a small nod. “That won’t be a problem.”

She stared, blinking slowly, like she couldn’t quite compute that kind of answer. “Wait. Who are you exactly?”

“My brothers and I own Dominion Hall,” he said simply. “And a few other things. Namely, Dominion Defense Corporation. The short version is that I have enough money to fix this. And I want to.”

Emmaline blinked again, then turned to me. “This is the guy?”

“This is the guy,” I said softly.

Elias’s voice gentled. “I’m not offering this to make things complicated. I’m offering because you’re Vivi’s family. And because this shouldn’t fall on either of you alone.”

Emmaline’s mouth pressed into a line. “What’s the catch?”

“There isn’t one,” Elias said. “But I do have an idea. If it’s too much, say so. No hard feelings.”

She crossed her arms but said nothing.

Elias glanced at me, then back at her. “What if we moved her here? Your mom. To Charleston. I’ll cover the transport, the care, the transition into one of the best memory care centers in the state—less than ten minutes from here. Private suite, full

staff, all of it.”

Emmaline sucked in a sharp breath. “That kind of care costs?—”

“I know what it costs. I already had my people run numbers.”

I looked up at him. “You did?”

He shrugged. “I like having a plan.”

“But Emmaline and her family are in Dallas,” I said. “They can’t just uproot?—”

“I was getting to that,” he said calmly. “I’ll move your whole family here if that’s what you want. I’ll buy a house. Help your husband start a new church or partner with one that fits your values. Provide anything he needs to establish roots. Whatever you need.”

Emmaline blinked, speechless.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

Then she asked quietly, “Are you religious?”

“No,” Elias said. “But I believe in faith. And I believe in making sure people like you have the freedom to live it.”

There was a long silence.

She looked between us, then tilted her head. “So what is this? Some kind of long-game seduction?”

“Em,” I warned, but Elias just smiled.

“No seduction necessary,” he said. “Vivi already said yes to something bigger than a night. And I’m not letting go.”

I turned toward him slowly. “I did?”

He raised a brow. “Didn’t you?”

I swallowed. My pulse was skittering against my ribs. “Yeah. I guess I did.”

“I’m not in this for the thrill,” he said. “I’m in it for you. Whatever that looks like. Mess and all.”

Emmaline narrowed her eyes. “Vivi, is this a fling you’re going to regret? Or is this one of those all-in, no-return kinds of things?”

I looked over at Elias, and for once, I didn't feel uncertain.

"I think I've been falling for him since the day I saw him huddled over Teresa's computer in the Charleston Crescent Ballet Company's office," I said.

Elias smirked. "Same. That day was it for me."

"And I think," I added, "I'm finally ready to stop pretending I don't want more."

The silence that followed wasn't awkward. It was solid. Grounded. Like something real had settled into the cracks between us.

Emmaline sank slowly onto the sofa. "Okay," she said finally, voice soft. "I'll have to talk to my husband, of course, but okay. We've been dreaming of a chance to start fresh. We didn't know how it would come about."

She wasn't saying she trusted Elias. Not yet. But she was saying she trusted me.

And that meant everything.

I sank down beside her, our shoulders touching. Elias stayed standing, a quiet presence with promise in his posture.

There were still hard conversations to have. Legal hoops. Logistics. Maybe some disbelief when our mom saw a new city outside her window.

But for the first time in a long time, I believed something could be different.

We stayed like that for a long moment. Three people in a too-small living room, trying to reassemble our lives from the scraps.

Then Elias shifted. “I can have a car ready by morning,” he said. “We’ll fly to New Orleans on my jet. I’ve got a contact who can help smooth the paperwork—expedite the discharge, make sure there’s no red tape.”

Emmaline turned to him, still a little stunned. “You’re serious?”

He nodded. “Completely.”

I hesitated, something cold creeping up the back of my neck. “Norton said I wasn’t supposed to leave Charleston. Not yet. That there could be legal trouble if I did.”

Elias’s gaze sharpened, protective. “I know. And I’ll take care of it.”

“How?” I asked, not quite ready to believe anything could be that simple.

“I’ve already made some calls,” he said calmly. “By morning, your travel restriction will be officially paused. Temporary exemption, documented and signed. I know the language they need to hear. And I know the people who answer the phones.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“And if that’s not enough?” I asked quietly.

He met my eyes. “Then we play a different kind of game. I’ve got lawyers on standby. The kind who don’t flinch at messy. If someone tries to turn this into something it’s not—tries to use Jessa’s death to pin something on you—I’ll be ready. I’m building a firewall around you.”

The words settled over me like armor I didn’t ask for but desperately needed.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” he said, voice low and steady. “You’re not going through this alone. Not one second of it.”

I smiled, then reached for Emmaline’s hand again. “So, we get Mom here first. Settled. Safe. Then we’ll figure out the rest. One step at a time.”

She nodded, eyes glassy but grateful. “Okay.”

“I’ll call Saint Cecilia’s at first light,” I added. “Let them know we’re coming.”

Elias slid his phone into his pocket. “We’re not staying here tonight. I’ll take you both back to Dominion Hall. It’s safer there, in case any reporters or worse come poking around.” He glanced at Emmaline. “You’ll have one of the guest suites. Pack your things now, so you’re ready to fly in the morning.”

He looked over at me like maybe he’d overstepped, but I just arched a brow. “Are

you trying to seduce me with logistics?”

He grinned. “Is it working?”

“A little,” I admitted. “But only because I’m too emotionally wrecked to play hard to get.”

Emmaline groaned softly, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes. “I can’t believe you two are flirting in the middle of a crisis.”

“Maybe that’s how we cope,” I said.

Elias nodded. “It’s either banter or destruction with us. Sometimes both.”

Emmaline glanced between us again, but this time, there was a softness in her gaze. She didn’t say anything, but I knew that look. It was the one she used to give me when I came home from ballet with a bruised knee and refused to cry—quiet admiration for the fight, even when she didn’t understand it.

She stood. “I need a shower before we uproot our entire lives.”

“Take your time,” I said. “Tomorrow starts early.”

She disappeared into the bathroom, the door clicking softly shut behind her.

Elias and I stood there for a moment, alone again in the hush of dim light and old walls. The bar below had gone quiet. The city seemed to be holding its breath.

He looked around the apartment, taking it in like it was a sacred space.

“I always wondered what it looked like in here,” he said.

“And now?”

“It suits you.”

“Messy and overworked?”

“Lived-in,” he corrected. “Beautiful in the way that matters. Like someone poured their soul into every inch.”

I smiled, but it trembled at the edges. “I don’t know what tomorrow will be.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “We’ll figure it out.”

“You say that like it’s easy.”

He reached for me then, fingers brushing my cheek. “It’s not easy. But it’s right.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I leaned into him—into the quiet promise behind his voice. “Don’t let me fall apart tomorrow.”

“I won’t,” he said.

Elias tilted his head down, lips ghosting near my temple. “And if you do, I’ll be right there. Holding the pieces.”

I nodded against his chest, letting myself breathe for the first time since the rooftop. Since the scream.

Jessa’s death wasn’t done with me. Not even close. There’d be a funeral. An obituary with a photo that didn’t do her justice. A church bulletin and a closed casket and people whispering about what really happened on that rooftop. I’d have to face her family. Her sister, who’d always eyed me like I was the bad influence. Her father, who once told Jessa I’d either break her heart or get her killed. I wondered if they’d look at me like I’d delivered both. I didn’t know if they’d even want me there. But I’d go. I had to. I’d stand in the back pew, if that’s all they’d give me, and I’d grieve her out loud. Because she mattered. And because guilt like this doesn’t go away just because someone says it wasn’t your fault.

“I think I love you,” I whispered to Elias.

“I know,” he said. Then, after a beat: “I think I love you, too.”

There wasn’t fire in it. Not tonight. Not yet.

There was just warmth. Steadiness. The kind of love that doesn't need permission to exist—it just does.

And as I stood there in the quiet, knowing the hardest days were still ahead, I also knew something else.

I wouldn't be facing them alone.

28

ELIAS

Vivi's weight against me in the SUV was a quiet anchor, her hand brushing mine on the center console as we drove through Charleston's humid night. Emmaline sat in the back, her breathing soft, exhaustion already pulling her under.

The police station's fluorescent glare faded behind us, but the weight of Vivi's arrest, Jessa's death, and those Shady Lady photos—Vivi's desperate reach, Jessa's fall—burned in my mind. Department 77 had played us, hijacking Jessa's account to frame Vivi, to pressure Dominion Hall, but I'd struck back, hiring Phantom Zero to dismantle their network. Now, I just needed to get Vivi and her sister safe, then watch the battle unfold.

We pulled into Dominion Hall's gates, the fortress's stone and glass a stark contrast to the city's soft decay. Vivi stirred, her green eyes heavy but steady, meeting mine with a trust that made my chest ache. Emmaline blinked awake, her guarded expression softening as she took in the compound's sprawling grounds.

I led them inside, the marble halls cool and silent, guiding Emmaline to a guest suite with a wide bed and harbor views. She nodded gratefully, her suitcase thudding to the floor, and was asleep before I closed the door.

Vivi's room—my suite—was next. She sank onto the bed, curls spilling across the black sheets, her body folding into itself like it had in the boutique.

“You don't have to stay,” she murmured, voice hoarse from grief and the station's weight.

I knelt beside her, brushing a stray curl from her face. “I'm not going anywhere, Red. Sleep. I'll be close.”

Her eyes flickered, a ghost of her fire, and she nodded, pulling the blanket over herself. Her breathing slowed, deep and even, within minutes.

I stood, watching her for a moment, the woman who'd cracked my world open, now fragile but unbroken. Jessa's death, the viral images, Department 77's trap—they'd hurt her, but she was still here, and I'd make sure she stayed safe.

The ops room called, a fortified bunker beneath Dominion Hall's main structure, its walls lined with servers and screens. I locked the door behind me, the hum of cooling fans a steady pulse.

My laptop booted, connecting to the encrypted channel I'd opened with PhantomZero. The \$50 million deal—\$12.5 million already paid—was a gamble, but if anyone could gut Department 77's network, it was this ghost, a hacker who made my skills look pedestrian. I needed their reply, needed to know the battle was on, but first, I had to shore up Dominion Hall's defenses.

Department 77 wasn't just a shadow; they were a hydra, and when PhantomZero struck, they'd hit back. I ran diagnostics on our firewalls, patching possible vulnerabilities, encrypting data streams, and rerouting traffic through dummy servers. Our network was a fortress, but I added layers—traps to snare intruders, alerts to flag breaches. If they came for us, they'd find a labyrinth, not

a door.

My fingers moved fast, code flowing like a second language, but my mind lingered on Vivi, her quiet strength in the apartment, her whispered confession of love. I'd protect her, protect us, no matter the cost.

A ping broke my focus. PhantomZero's reply loaded, a secure link to a private stream. I clicked, and six screens flared to life, each a window into their attack on Department 77's network.

It was like watching a maestro conduct chaos, and I was enraptured.

Imagine a city under siege, six armies hitting from different gates, each with a unique strategy. That was PhantomZero's work—synchronized, relentless, breathtaking. I leaned forward, eyes darting between screens, my pulse quickening as the battle unfolded.

Screen one showed a brute-force assault, a digital battering ram slamming Department 77's main server with millions of login attempts, overwhelming their authentication systems. It was like throwing a thousand punches, not to land one but to tire the opponent.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

Screen two was subtler, a phishing net casting fake emails to agency operatives, tricking them into clicking malicious links that installed backdoors. Picture a con artist slipping keys into every lock, waiting for one to turn.

Screen three ran a DDoS attack, flooding their network with junk data, clogging arteries like a heart attack. It was chaos, servers choking, unable to respond.

Screen four exploited a zero-day vulnerability—a flaw in their software no one knew existed—slipping malware inside like a thief through a cracked window.

Screen five was social engineering, scraping employee data to guess passwords, a quiet pickpocket lifting wallets in a crowd.

Screen six was the wildcard, a custom script probing for weak points, like a scout mapping enemy trenches.

Department 77's defenses held, their walls absorbing the brute force, their system catching some malware. I clenched my jaw, dread creeping in. Their network was a steel vault, redirecting traffic, isolating breaches.

I thought the worst—PhantomZero had met their match.

But then I saw it, the brilliance of their strategy. The attacks weren't meant to win alone; they were a symphony, each move distracting, weakening, creating cracks for the others to exploit.

Screen two's phishing net snagged a junior operative, his click opening a backdoor.

Screen four's malware spread through that breach, corrupting files like a virus in blood. The DDoS on screen three slowed their response, servers lagging as screen five's password guesses landed, unlocking admin access. Screen six's probe found a hidden database, and PhantomZero pounced, weaving through the chaos like a dancer in a storm.

I held my breath as the vault began to crumble.

It was a back-and-forth, Department 77 scrambling, patching holes, but PhantomZero was relentless. They were in, piece by piece dismantling the agency's network.

Screen one's brute force cracked a secondary server, exposing internal comms. Screen five's admin access let them rewrite permissions, locking out operatives. The malware on screen four deleted backups, erasing years of data like burning a library. I watched, heart pounding, as PhantomZero carved through their defenses, each move a masterstroke, each screen a battlefield falling to their command.

The final stop was the bank accounts.

Screen six shifted, displaying a ledger—Department 77's financial backbone, hidden behind layers of encryption. PhantomZero's script danced, cracking codes like a safecracker's fingers on a dial.

One by one, accounts drained, funds siphoning to numbered vaults. The deal was PhantomZero kept half of anything they found; the rest went to Dominion Hall.

Numbers flashed—hundreds of millions, many times their \$50 million fee. I grinned, adrenaline surging, as the last account emptied, the agency's wealth gutted in minutes.

The battle felt like a sprint, but my watch showed hours had passed—four, nearly five.

I leaned back, exhilarated, my mind still racing with PhantomZero's brilliance.

I typed a quick message: Masterful. Balance incoming.

I sent the remaining \$37.5 million, a small price for this victory.

Department 77 was on its knees, their network in ruins, their funds ours.

I fired off an update to my brothers: Dept 77's down hard. Investment paid off. Stand by for next moves. Atlas, Marcus, Noah, Charlie—they'd know we'd struck a blow, one that bought us more time, maybe even delivered the knock-out blow.

I powered down, the ops room's hum fading as I stood, muscles stiff but mind clear. Contentment settled in, a rare warmth.

I'd fought for her, for us, and won, at least for tonight.

The hall was quiet as I climbed to my suite, the harbor's lights flickering through the windows. Vivi lay in bed, her breathing soft, curls spilled across the pillow. I slipped in beside her, the mattress dipping under my weight, and pulled her close, her warmth grounding me.

She stirred, murmuring, but didn't wake. I pressed my lips to her forehead, a silent vow.

Department 77 was wounded, but not dead, and Vivi's grief—Jessa's death, her mother's crisis—still loomed. But tonight, I'd carved out a victory, a step toward keeping her safe.

My eyes grew heavy, contentment pulling me under, and I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, Vivi's heartbeat my only anchor.

29

VIVIENNE

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

The car ride to the Charleston airport was quiet but charged, like the hush before a curtain rises. A dark SUV with windows so tinted they might as well have been black slid through the morning traffic like it didn't belong to this world.

Elias sat beside me, legs spread, one hand resting on my knee. Emmaline was in the back, her Bible clutched in one hand and a leather tote in the other like she was going to war but hadn't yet decided if she'd bring mercy.

We pulled up to a private gate—no signs, no lines, no announcements overhead. Just a crisp man in a navy suit with a tablet in his hand and a smile that said he knew our names before we ever introduced ourselves.

“This way, Miss Laveau,” he said, and I almost looked over my shoulder to see if someone else was behind me.

The jet waited on the tarmac, long and gleaming, white with a subtle midnight-blue stripe like someone had painted elegance onto velocity. Stairs extended as we approached, a gold-trimmed welcome mat catching the rising sun. I'd never boarded a plane without the chaotic clatter of boarding groups and overhead bins and crying children. This? This felt like slipping behind the velvet rope into a different life.

Elias wore a charcoal jacket, no tie, black slacks tailored to a body that didn't need tailoring. His whole presence hummed with quiet dominance and freshly pressed confidence.

I wore black leggings, boots, and an oversized cream sweater that hit mid-thigh. My hair was up in a twist I barely remembered putting in, sunglasses perched uselessly

on my head. I didn't look like I belonged here.

But he did.

And somehow, because he wanted me here, I did, too.

Emmaline wore a linen shirt-dress the color of weathered bone, cinched at the waist with a belt that might've been our grandmother's. Her hair was braided, face bare, but she walked like someone with a mission from God—and maybe she had one.

Inside the jet, the air changed.

Cream leather seats arranged in club-style configuration with mahogany accents. Wide windows, gold-rimmed trays. A bar along one side with crystal bottles of amber and top-shelf clarity. The flight attendant, impeccably dressed in navy and gold, greeted us with a voice smooth as honey.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Dane. Miss Laveau. Miss ...?”

“Mrs. DeSoto,” Emmaline said, slipping into her married name like it was armor.

“Can I offer you coffee, tea, fresh juice? Mimosas?”

“Coffee, please,” I said, voice still sleep-soft.

The attendant nodded and vanished like she'd been conjured.

I took a seat beside Elias, watching the tarmac through the window as the steps were pulled away and the engines began to hum. We hadn't even lifted off, but the cabin felt like it was already flying—clean lines, golden morning light, the weightless luxury of knowing you didn't have to hustle for overhead space.

Elias looked ... different. Not in the way he was dressed. In the way his shoulders had dropped a few inches. His fingers rested lazily on the armrest, his posture relaxed like someone who'd been bracing for a hit and found it didn't come.

I turned toward him, one brow raised. "You're in a good mood."

He glanced sideways, smirk tugging at his mouth. "Can't a man enjoy a little morning serenity?"

"You can. But that's not what this is."

He didn't deny it. Just reached for his coffee and took a slow sip.

"Well?" I prompted.

His eyes met mine, rich and clear and smug in the best kind of way. "You. Mostly."

I smiled, but he wasn't done.

"But also ... let's just say something I set in motion finally paid off."

I narrowed my eyes. "Elias."

"I had someone working on a problem," he said carefully. "A serious one. Something that could've jeopardized Dominion Hall, and you, by proximity."

"And?"

“And it’s handled.”

Just like that.

I studied him, this man who had secrets like shadows and skills that could reroute entire systems without blinking. “So you’re telling me you took down a threat before takeoff and now you’re drinking your coffee like it’s Sunday brunch?”

“Would you rather I be pacing in the galley?”

“No,” I said. “But I wouldn’t mind details.”

He leaned back, fingers toying with the edge of his cup. “Let’s just say an enemy underestimated what I’m willing to do to protect what’s mine.”

I swallowed, heat crawling up my neck. “And I’m what’s yours?”

His voice dropped a note. “You were the second you walked into Teresa’s office like you were on fire.”

I didn’t have a comeback.

Because there were truths that didn’t need to be debated. They just needed to be lived.

The jet lifted, engines roaring to life. I watched the city shrink beneath us, spires and streets fading into geometry. Elias reached for my hand. And I let him hold me steady

while the ground disappeared beneath my feet.

The flight was smooth, silent, and swift. There was no turbulence, no flight attendant rattling off seatbelt instructions, no fussy baby in row seventeen. Just the low hum of luxury and the steady hand of Elias resting against mine like he was tethering me to the sky.

By the time we descended into New Orleans, the sun had risen higher, painting the sky in smears of coral and pale gold. A sleek black town car waited on the tarmac, its windows just as dark as the SUV in Charleston. The moment the wheels touched ground, the jet's stairs were lowered, the car doors opened, and a uniformed driver stood with one hand on the door and the other pressed to his earpiece.

"Mr. Dane," the driver said. "Welcome back."

Elias simply nodded.

We were ushered into the back seat like visiting royalty. Emmaline and I sat side by side, but it was Elias's presence that filled the car, that made the plush leather seats and gleaming console feel like part of something much bigger. He didn't need to announce his status. It followed him—quiet, certain, absolute.

The memory care facility sat just off a sleepy boulevard lined with ancient oaks and crumbling brick. Saint Cecilia's looked more like a Southern estate than a medical building—high columns, wrought-iron balconies, ivy crawling up whitewashed walls. But beneath the beauty was the sharp scent of antiseptic, and a too-calm quiet that always made me uneasy.

The director was already waiting at the door, clipboard in hand and a half-smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. Elias stepped forward to greet her, shaking her hand with the kind of practiced calm that could broker international treaties or, apparently, buy

your mother out of a memory care contract.

“I’ve brought the full transfer packet,” the woman said briskly, flipping pages as we stepped inside. “The discharge papers, her medical records, and a full accounting of the final bill.”

Elias took it, skimmed the top page, then passed it to an assistant—who I hadn’t even noticed was trailing behind us until she stepped forward in perfect silence, tablet in hand.

Was she from Charleston? How did she even get to New Orleans? I had so many questions.

“I’ll wire the balance,” Elias said. “Now.”

The director blinked. “You—now?”

He looked up. “Is that a problem?”

She faltered, then shook her head. “No, of course, not. It’s just that most families?—”

“We’re not most families,” he said, his voice all steel and silk.

We found her in the solarium, where they said she liked to sit when the sunlight was softest. Maureen Laveau was wearing a pale blue housecoat and white slippers. Her hair was neatly combed, her hands folded in her lap.

She didn’t look up when we entered. Just stared through the glass at a tree heavy with blossoms.

“Mama?” I said gently, heart in my throat.

She turned slowly. Her eyes were glassy but clear. She squinted, as if we were far away. “Are you one of the nurses?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“No,” I whispered. “It’s me. Vivi.”

She blinked. “Vivi. That’s a pretty name.”

Beside me, Emmaline let out a quiet breath.

“We’ve come to take you home,” Emmaline said, stepping forward.

Maureen’s mouth turned down. “This is my home.”

“No, Mama,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “We’ve found a new place. It’s beautiful. You’ll love it.”

Her eyes darted. Confused. Frightened.

“I don’t want to go,” she said suddenly, her voice rising. “I don’t know you. I don’t know where I’m going!”

An orderly appeared in the doorway, tense. “Sometimes transitions can be hard,” she said to us gently. “It’s not unusual for patients to become agitated when there’s disruption to their routine?—”

“I said no!” my mother cried, her voice cracking. “You leave me alone!”

I froze.

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to reach her. I felt sixteen again,

standing outside her locked bathroom door, listening to her cry without ever knowing why.

Then Elias stepped forward.

“Vivi,” he said softly. “Sing to her.”

I blinked. “What?”

“She doesn’t know where she is. Doesn’t recognize your face. But she might recognize your voice.”

Emmaline looked at me, her eyes already filling. “You remember what she used to sing to us when we couldn’t sleep?”

I nodded. ““You Are My Sunshine.””

Elias didn’t say another word. Just stepped back and let us take the lead.

I knelt beside her. Emmaline did the same.

And then, in a trembling voice that cracked on the first word, I began.

“You are my sunshine ... my only sunshine ...”

Emmaline joined me, her alto grounding my whisper.

“You make me happy, when skies are gray ...”

My mother’s eyes fluttered. Her lips moved.

“You’ll never know, dear ... how much I love you ...”

A tear slid down her cheek.

“Please don’t take ... my sunshine away.”

Silence fell like a hush in church.

Then, softly, my mother reached for my hand. “Vivienne?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I nodded, my throat tight. “Yeah, Mama. It’s me.”

“You always sang so off-key,” she whispered, smiling now, like the clouds had parted in her mind.

I laughed, sobbed, nodded again.

And when she reached for Emmaline next, it was like something holy moved through the room.

Elias didn’t say a word. Just stood in the doorway, watching, his eyes darker than usual. When my mother’s head drooped gently onto my shoulder, content, I looked up at him.

He’d saved us.

Not just with his money, but with his heart. His clarity. His impossible calm in the face of everything I couldn’t fix.

In that moment, I knew something else, too.

I hadn’t just fallen in love with Elias Dane. I’d fallen into him. And he was exactly where I wanted to be.

The rest of the day moved like a montage I wasn’t quite awake for—packing up what few belongings my mother had, signing papers I barely registered, watching Elias handle logistics with the precision of a man used to commanding outcomes.

He shielded us from the hard edges—coordinating with his assistant, with the jet crew, with the Charleston facility—all while keeping one steady hand on my back, like he knew I needed the ground to stay beneath me.

By the time we arrived back at the tarmac, the sky had begun to soften with dusk. The jet was waiting—glowing under the floodlights like something out of a dream. And as we stepped up the stairs, I saw the delivery bags lined neatly near the galley.

“What’s this?” I asked, glancing down.

Elias gave me a small smile. “From Léon’s.”

I blinked. “Léon’s? The oyster place?”

He nodded. “Figured you wouldn’t want to leave New Orleans without one last taste.”

I pressed a hand to my heart. “You remembered?”

“I remember everything that matters.”

Inside, the cabin was already warm with the smell of fresh po’boys, chargrilled oysters, and something sweet I hadn’t dared to hope for.

“Banana cream pie?” I asked, peeking into one of the boxes.

Elias smirked. “The last slice. Don’t make me fight you for it.”

We ate in soft silence as the jet rose into the clouds—my mother nestled under a blanket, head resting against Emmaline’s shoulder, murmuring something about gardenias and music and a name we didn’t recognize. Emmaline’s hand never left

hers.

When we landed in Charleston, another sleek black SUV waited for us at the hangar. Elias guided us in like we were cargo more precious than gold. I could tell he'd planned every detail—there was no chaos, no confusion. Only assurance.

“Is it ready?” I asked as we drove toward the new facility.

Elias nodded. “Everything’s in place. They’ve been briefed. Room’s fully furnished with her favorite colors, even a replica of that floral painting she loved at Saint Cecilia’s. Custom-built memory board. Soft lighting. Private nurse assigned around the clock.”

I swallowed, trying not to cry again. “That sounds ... too good.”

“It’s what she deserves,” Elias said. “It’s what you both do.”

We pulled up to the new place, and for a second, I thought we were at a luxury resort.

The front was all glass and wood, designed to feel like nature rather than a hospital. A koi pond curved beneath the entryway, and ivy grew deliberately over the modern brick façade. Inside, there were no harsh lights, no plastic chairs. Just soft jazz playing from hidden speakers and a scent of fresh lilies in the air.

My mother’s room was more like a boutique suite than a medical space. Pale greens and soft blues on the walls. A sitting area with armchairs that looked like they’d been lifted from a Southern manor. French doors opened to a small private patio with potted herbs and a garden bench.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“She won’t feel like she’s being stored away,” Elias said quietly, watching my reaction. “She’ll feel like she’s being seen.”

I couldn’t speak. I just reached for his hand and squeezed.

“I’ll stay the first few nights,” Emmaline said, placing a small overnight bag on the chair by the window. “Until she’s settled.”

Elias nodded. “There’s a guest room next door. Yours. You’ll be comfortable.”

She looked at him then—truly looked. “Have you thought any more about what we talked about? About relocating us?”

Elias leaned back slightly, but his tone was gentle. “I was about to ask you the same.”

Emmaline hesitated, glancing toward the hallway where a nurse was guiding our mother in for the night.

“I think we’d like to visit,” she said. “Spend a little more time here first. But ... Dallas hasn’t felt like home in a long time.”

“I’ll arrange the trip,” Elias said without missing a beat. “You, your husband, the baby. I’ll fly you here whenever you’re ready. You’ll have a house to stay in, a driver if you need one, and meetings set up with local congregations if your husband wants to explore church opportunities. No pressure. Just options.”

Her eyes shimmered. “You don’t even know us.”

“I know Vivi,” Elias said. “And that’s enough.”

I looked over at him, something molten and quiet settling deep inside my chest.

He didn’t love loud. He loved completely.

He didn’t promise the world. He just quietly rearranged it until it fit you better.

And as I stood in the doorway of my mother’s new room—watching her drift off to sleep under a roof we could finally afford—I knew I was witnessing the beginning of something rare.

Not just healing. Not just safety. But a future I never thought I’d get to have.

And Elias Dane had given it to me without ever asking for anything in return.

Which is why, this time, I was going to offer it myself.

All of me.

No walls. No masks. No exits.

Just the real, raw truth of who I was.

And everything I was ready to become.

30

ELIAS

The quiet of Dominion Hall wrapped around us, a stark contrast to the chaos of the

past days. Maureen was settled in her new suite at the memory care facility, her room a haven of soft blues and greens, her first night marked by a rare, fleeting smile as Vivi sang to her. Emmaline had taken the guest room, her overnight bag unpacked, her resolve to stay until her mother adjusted a quiet strength that mirrored Vivi's.

They were safe, for now, and as I led Vivi back to my suite, the weight of Jessa's death, the viralShadyLadyphotos, and Department 77's shadow felt distant, drowned out by the fire in her eyes.

We were alone, the marble halls silent, the harbor's lights flickering through the windows like a promise. Vivi walked beside me, her cream sweater slipping off one shoulder, her black leggings hugging curves that drove me to distraction. Her curls were loose, framing a face still raw from grief but alight with something new—resolve, trust, a hunger that matched mine.

I stopped at the suite's door, turning to her, my voice low, rough with need. "I want you, Vivi. Right now."

Her green eyes locked on mine, blazing with a desire so fierce it stole my breath. "You think I don't want you just as bad?" she said, her lips curving into a wicked grin that promised chaos.

She stepped closer, her body brushing mine, heat radiating through the thin fabric of her sweater.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

My cock hardened, adrenaline surging, and I knew we wouldn't make it far before we tore into each other.

We stumbled into the suite, the door slamming shut as I pushed her against it, my hands fisting her sweater, yanking it over her head. Her breasts bounced free, no bra, nipples tight and pink, begging for my mouth. I growled, ripping her leggings down, the fabric shredding under my fingers, exposing her black thong, already soaked. She kicked the leggings off, her nails clawing my shirt, buttons popping as she tore it open, her hands raking my chest, leaving red welts that stung with delicious fire.

“Fuck me, Elias,” she gasped, her voice raw, her legs wrapping around my waist as I lifted her, pinning her to the door.

Her pussy pressed against my cock through my slacks, the friction maddening, her hips grinding with a desperation that matched mine.

I was fascinated by her body—every curve, every scar, the way her thighs flexed, the sweat beading on her collarbone. She was a storm, wild and untamed, and I wanted to drown in her.

I bit her neck, hard, tasting salt and skin, her moan vibrating against my lips. My hands gripped her ass, bruising, spreading her cheeks as I ground into her, the thong a flimsy barrier.

She clawed my shoulders, her teeth sinking into my earlobe, a sharp sting that made my cock throb.

“Harder,” she demanded, her voice a snarl, her eyes wild, daring me to break her.

I carried her to the bed, tossing her onto the black sheets, her body bouncing, legs spread, pussy glistening through the thong.

I stripped my slacks, cock springing free, thick and pulsing as I watched her.

She propped on her elbows, beautiful breasts heaving, her grin feral. “You gonna stare or fuck me?” she taunted, sliding the thong aside, fingers circling her clit, slick and swollen, a sight that drove me feral.

I lunged, pinning her wrists above her head with one hand, my other tearing the thong off, the fabric snapping.

Her pussy was bare, pink, and dripping, and I didn’t wait, thrusting my cock into her in one brutal stroke, filling her to the hilt.

She screamed, body arching, walls clenching tight, a vice that made my vision blur. I didn’t hold back, fucking her hard, hips slamming, the bedframe rattling, each thrust a claim, a vow.

Her moans were loud, unhinged, filling the room, her nails digging into my forearms, drawing more blood.

“Deeper,” she growled, legs locking around me, heels digging into my ass, urging me on.

I released her wrists, gripping her hips, lifting her to meet each thrust, my cock hitting that spot inside her that made her eyes roll back. Her breasts bounced, sweat slicking her skin, and I leaned down, sucking a nipple, biting hard enough to make her gasp, her pussy pulsing around me.

She was a vision—wild, raw, every inch of her body a map I wanted to memorize.

I flipped her onto her stomach, pulling her ass up, spreading her cheeks to see her pussy, red and swollen, my come already mixing with her arousal. I slapped her ass, the sound wet, her skin blooming red, her moan a mix of shock and need.

“Again,” she begged, pushing back, and I gave it, another slap, then another, her pussy clenching with each hit.

I thrust in, deeper, my hands bruising her hips, fucking her like the world was ending, adrenaline pumping, our bodies a collision of need and fury.

“Elias!” she screamed, her voice breaking, her body trembling as I reached around, fingers pinching her clit, rolling it hard, driving her over the edge.

Her orgasm hit, pussy milking me, body convulsing, her scream tearing through the room. I roared, my release exploding, filling her, hot and endless, marking her inside and out.

But we weren’t done. She spun, straddling me, her pussy still dripping, taking me deep again, riding me with a ferocity that stole my breath.

Her nails carved into my chest, welts rising, her hips slamming down, each thrust a jolt of pleasure-pain.

I gripped her thighs, bruising, fascinated by the way her muscles flexed, her skin flushed, her eyes locked on mine, green and blazing.

She leaned down, biting my lip, drawing blood, her tongue licking it away, a primal act that made my cock throb inside her.

“You’re mine,” she snarled, her voice raw, her pussy clenching, another orgasm building. She slid up and down proving her ownership.

I flipped her onto her back, spreading her legs wide, hooking them over my shoulders, thrusting deep, my cock hitting her core.

Her pussy was swollen, sensitive, and she whimpered, oversensitive but craving more.

Page 96

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

I fucked her slow now, deliberate, each thrust a conversation, her moans soft, desperate. My fingers found her clit, circling, stroking, driving her to the edge again.

She came, a shuddering wave, her pussy pulsing, her breath hitching, and I followed, my release spilling into her, a slow burn that left me raw, hers.

We collapsed, panting, slick with sweat and come, the air thick with sex and adrenaline.

Vivi lay beside me, her body soft, sated, her breathing ragged but steady.

I traced her hip, fascinated still by the curve of her, the marks I'd left, the way she glowed even now. She turned, her eyes meeting mine, a lazy grin spreading.

"Fuck, Elias," she murmured, voice hoarse. "That was ..."

"Yeah," I said, my own voice rough, a smile tugging at my lips. "You're incredible."

She laughed, low and warm, her hand resting on my chest. I pulled her closer, contentment settling in, but I had one more thing to say.

"I've got a surprise for you," I said, voice soft, my fingers brushing her cheek.

Her grin turned wicked, her hand sliding down, wrapping around my softening cock, giving it a playful tug.

"This the surprise?" she teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

I chuckled, catching her wrist, kissing her palm.

“Not that. How about an overnight flight? Just us, somewhere exciting. Tomorrow night.”

Her eyes widened, genuine excitement flaring.

“Hell yes,” she said, her voice bright. Then she tugged my cock again, smirking. “As long as I can bring this along for the ride.”

I laughed, pulling her into a kiss, deep and slow, the promise of tomorrow burning between us.

Jessa’s death, Department 77’s threat, the viral images—they’d wait.

Tonight, we’d won, and Vivi was mine, body and soul, ready for whatever came next.

31

VIVIENNE

The sun poured through the tall windows like it had something to prove. I blinked against it, my head nestled into the crook of Elias’s shoulder, our bodies tangled beneath black sheets.

He was already awake, fingertips tracing patterns on my bare back. We hadn’t spoken yet. We didn’t need to. His touch was its own kind of morning prayer.

For a while, I just listened—to his steady breathing, to the seagulls beyond the glass, to the quiet that didn’t feel lonely anymore.

But then his voice broke the silence, rough from sleep. “You ever been to L.A.?”

I lifted my head. “What?”

His lips quirked. “Los Angeles. Ever been?”

I shook my head. “No. I mean, I always wanted to. But I figured I’d go when I had a movie to star in or a scandal to clean up.”

“Well, pack a bag,” he said. “We leave tonight.”

I blinked. “What?”

He sat up, stretching those absurdly perfect arms behind his head, like this was just a normal Tuesday. “I told you I had a surprise.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“I thought that was the sex.”

He grinned. “That was a bonus.”

I wrapped the sheet around me, suddenly wide awake. “Elias, what’s in L.A.?”

His smile faded into something softer, more serious. “The men who scammed your mom.”

I froze. “What?”

“The ones who drained her account.” He leaned forward, cupping my face in his hands. “I found them, Red. Two of them, at least. They’ve resurfaced. Different names, same playbook. And they’re running their scam again, targeting a new crop of vulnerable families.”

My heart thudded against my ribs. “How do you know?”

“Because I’ve combed through transaction histories, flagged email chains, and network metadata that nobody else bothered to follow. Because I’ve got contacts at a cybersecurity firm in Burbank who owed me favors. And because I know what it looks like when predators get comfortable.”

I stared at him, the reality of it settling over me like a weighted blanket. “You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack,” he said.

I exhaled, slow and shaky. “Why?”

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you doing this? Going all-in like this? You’ve already done more than I ever could’ve asked for.”

He was quiet for a long moment. Then: “Because I know you. And I know you’ll never stop craving adrenaline. You’ll always have fire in your veins. But this—this is a way to use that fire. To build something instead of burn everything down.”

I felt my throat tighten.

“You don’t have to choose between passion and purpose, Vivi,” he said. “We can chase both. Together.”

And just like that, the earth shifted beneath me.

Because he was right.

I couldn’t erase the years I’d spent dancing on rooftops and running from my past. I couldn’t pretend I’d ever be someone content to live quietly behind a picket fence. But for the first time, I saw a way to turn that energy into something useful. Something healing.

“I want to make them pay,” I whispered. “For what they did to her. And to every other family they’ve destroyed.”

Elias’s smile was fierce now. “Then let’s start with that.”

I felt the tears sting before I could stop them. “You’re not scared of who I am?”

“Not even a little,” he said. “You’re the bravest woman I’ve ever met. And I’ve met my share of warriors.”

I curled into him then, the sheet forgotten, our skin bare and honest. “This changes everything,” I murmured.

“No,” he said, brushing a kiss against my temple. “This begins everything.”

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of packing and planning. Elias made calls while I scribbled down questions I wanted answers to. Flight manifests, aliases, old court records—we compiled it all.

But not before I saw my mom one more time.

We stopped by the facility that morning, the sky barely brightening, dew still clinging to the flowers outside her window. Her nurse met us in the hallway and said she’d had a calm night, that she’d woken humming and asking about gardenias.

When I walked into her room, she was sitting up in bed, wrapped in a soft throw, her eyes tracking the sunlight as it spilled across the pale blue walls. She looked so small, so fragile—but peaceful.

She didn’t remember who I was at first. Not until I sang the first line of “You Are My Sunshine.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

Her head tilted. Her lips parted. And then she whispered, “Vivi.”

That was all I needed.

I sat with her for a little while, brushing her hair the way I used to when I was little, letting the rhythm of it calm us both. We didn’t say much. We didn’t have to. She smiled, and I smiled back, and something unspoken passed between us.

When I kissed her goodbye, she reached for my face, her thumb brushing beneath my eye. “You’ve always been brave,” she said, her voice soft. “Even when you didn’t know it.”

My heart simultaneously shattered and healed all at once.

Emmaline hugged me tight before we left. She didn’t ask for details. Just kissed my cheek and whispered, “Go make it right.”

I carried that with me as I stepped onto Elias’s jet.

I wasn’t just leaving to chase down con men.

I was leaving to become the kind of daughter and sister my family believed I already was.

And as the jet lifted off that evening—Charleston falling away beneath us and Los Angeles drawing closer—I felt something stir in me.

Not just rage. Not just grief. But purpose.

And I knew, no matter what happened next, I wouldn't run anymore.

I'd hunt.

With Elias beside me and justice in my blood, I was ready.

Let them come. Let the world tremble. We had work to do.

The jet leveled out above the clouds, the sky outside turning lavender with the approaching dusk. Inside, the cabin lights dimmed to a golden hue, soft jazz playing beneath the hush of engines and altitude. I sat curled on one of the leather club chairs, my knees tucked under me, sipping champagne from a flute I hadn't asked for but somehow still ended up with. Elias sat across from me, a laptop open on the table between us, the screen displaying records, maps, threads of the lives we were about to unravel.

He looked up, caught me staring, and raised an eyebrow. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

I smirked. "Depends. Are you thinking about becoming members of the mile-high club?"

His grin turned devilish. "I mean, it's not noton my mind."

I laughed and set the flute down, stretching my arms over my head. "Tempting. But I'm honestly too amped up to be distracted. I've got adrenaline surging like I'm about to leap off a rooftop again. I want to sink my teeth into this case. And then ..." I trailed off, letting the sentence hang.

He leaned back, clearly entertained. “Then?”

“Then I’m going to give you a night to remember in L.A.,” I said, voice low and promising. “Maybe somewhere with a view. Outdoors. Possibly semi-public.”

Elias nearly choked on his drink. “Jesus, Red. You trying to kill me before we land?”

I shrugged, unbothered. “Just keeping things interesting.”

His gaze lingered on me a beat longer. “You always do.”

There was heat in the air between us now—banked, but undeniable. It pulsed like a second heartbeat.

I raised a brow, the corner of my mouth lifting. “So ... should we talk logistics?”

Elias leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, eyes locked on mine. “Of?”

I sipped my champagne slowly. “The outdoor sex. Semi-public. L.A.’s a big city. Lots of options.”

He grinned. “You want rooftop or beachfront?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“Both have merit,” I mused, pretending to weigh pros and cons. “Rooftop has the skyline, the danger, the thrill of heights. Very on-brand.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “But beach has that whole moonlight-on-your-skin thing. Wet sand, crashing waves, you riding me while trying not to get caught ...”

“God,” I muttered, my thighs clenching. “Why is that somehow hotter when you say it?”

“Because I mean it.”

I bit my lip. “We could start on a rooftop and end on the beach. A two-part experience.”

He smirked. “You know I’m going to be scouting locations the second we land, right?”

“I assumed you already had.”

“Oh, I’ve got ideas,” he said, voice low and promising. “There’s a private garden terrace at the top of a friend’s hotel in West Hollywood. Keycard access only. Panoramic views. No cameras.”

I inhaled sharply. “Add it to the list.”

“There’s also a waterfall trail in Topanga that no one hikes after dusk.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’ve really thought this through.”

He leaned closer, his hand drifting up my calf beneath the cashmere throw. “You inspire long-range planning.”

I laughed softly, drunk on the way he looked at me. “Just so we’re clear—this trip is about justice and vengeance.”

“Absolutely,” he said, his palm now resting warm on my thigh. “With occasional breaks for strategic field research.”

My heart beat faster, the tension between us winding tighter. “Strategic, huh?”

“You have no idea,” he said, his voice velvet and gravel and pure promise.

I didn’t. But I knew one thing for sure. Los Angeles was never going to see us coming.

I shifted in my seat, the mood softening as my thoughts turned inward. “You think I’ll ever go back to ballet?”

He tilted his head, thoughtful. “Do you want to?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I miss it, but I’m not sure I miss the politics, the perfection, the way it demands your entire identity. It’s like ... ballet only ever wanted the version of me who didn’t screw up. Who didn’t fall. And that girl doesn’t exist anymore.”

Elias nodded slowly. “You know I can get your suspension lifted.”

I blinked. “What?”

He met my gaze evenly. “I’ve already spoken with someone on the board. Told them what happened. Told them what you’ve been through. They’re not heartless. They just needed someone to remind them how human greatness actually works.”

I swallowed hard. “And what if I don’t want to go back?”

“Then don’t,” he said simply. “But I wanted you to have the choice. Not the shame.”

Emotion welled in my throat, thick and unexpected. I looked out the window, at the impossible stretch of sky, and tried to find the words.

“Thank you,” I whispered finally.

He rose then, walked the few steps between us, and knelt beside my chair. His hands came to rest on my thighs, his touch grounding.

“You don’t owe me anything, Vivi. I’m not here to fix you or direct you. I just want to walk beside you while you figure out who you want to be now.”

I leaned forward, brushing my lips against his.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“Then buckle up,” I whispered, my mouth ghosting his, “because this version of me? She’s not going to be tame.”

His smile was slow and certain. “Good. I didn’t fall in love with tame.”

Outside, the sky stretched on, endless and unyielding.

And we flew toward our next reckoning, hand in hand, fire in our blood.

32

ELIAS

Los Angeles sprawled beneath us, a glittering maze of ambition and decay, its skyline sharp against the dusk as our jet touched down. Vivi sat beside me, her green eyes fixed on the city, a mix of resolve and fire in her gaze. We’d come to hunt the con men who’d scammed her mother, two predators hiding under new names but running the same cruel game.

My cybersecurity contacts in Burbank had pinned them to a nondescript office in Van Nuys, and tonight, we’d end their reign.

Vivi’s fearlessness, her hunger for justice, burned brighter than ever, and I was ready to deliver it, to stand beside her as she reclaimed what was hers.

The town car wove through L.A.’s traffic, the air thick with heat and exhaust. Vivi’s hand rested on my thigh, her touch a quiet placeholder, her black dress clinging to

curves that still drove me wild.

I'd traced their trail—Calvin Reed and his partner, now operating as “consultants” for a fake investment firm, preying on the elderly with promises of security. My spiders had cracked their email chains, bank records, and aliases, leading us to a strip mall office where they'd set up shop.

Vivi's silence wasn't fear; it was focus, a predator's calm, and I admired her for it.

We parked a block away, the office's neon sign flickering in the twilight. I checked my phone—PhantomZero's latest trace confirmed Department 77 hadn't retaliated yet, their network still in shambles, but I wasn't naive. They'd come later, another way, and we'd stop them for good. For now, though, this was about justice, not shadows.

I turned to her, voice low. “You sure you want to be there for this?”

Her eyes met mine, unflinching. “I need to see it, Elias. They took more than money from her. They took her dignity.”

I nodded, respecting her steel. “Stay close. It'll be quick.”

We slipped into the office through a back door I'd hacked open, the lock's digital panel no match for my script. The space was cheap—fluorescent lights, fake plants, a desk littered with burner phones.

Reed and his partner, a wiry man with a cheap suit, were packing files, unaware. Vivi's presence was a shadow beside me, her breathing steady, her fearlessness a quiet force. She wasn't afraid of the violence to come, and that steadied me, her strength a mirror to my own.

I stepped forward, my Glock drawn but low, voice cold. “Hello, Calvin Reed.”

Reed froze, his partner scrambling for a drawer, but I was faster, slamming his wrist to the desk, the crack of bone echoing. He screamed, collapsing, and Vivi didn’t flinch, her eyes locked on Reed, who raised his hands, sweating.

“Who the fuck are you?” he stammered.

“Someone who knows what you did to Maureen Laveau,” I said, advancing. “And every other family you bled dry.”

Vivi stepped into the light, her voice sharp. “You took her savings. Her trust. You’re not getting away with this.”

Reed’s eyes darted, calculating, but I didn’t give him a chance. I grabbed his arm, twisting until his shoulder popped, a sickening snap that dropped him to his knees. His scream was raw, and I drove my boot into his knee, shattering cartilage, ensuring he’d never walk without pain.

Vivi watched, her face hard but unshaken, her acceptance of the violence a testament to her fire. She wasn’t here for mercy—she was here for justice, and I’d deliver it. I was happy to.

The partner lunged, a knife flashing, but I caught his wrist, snapping it backward, the blade clattering to the floor. I smashed his face into the desk, blood spraying, and crushed his other hand under my heel, bones crunching.

He’d never hold a phone to scam another soul.

Vivi’s gaze didn’t waver, her strength a quiet roar, and I felt a surge of pride. She was my equal, unafraid, unyielding.

“You’ll never con again,” I said, voice low, standing over them as they writhed. “If you try, I’ll find you. And next time, you won’t be so lucky.”

I zip-tied their wrists, leaving them for my contacts to handle—anonymously tipped to the feds with enough evidence to bury them for years.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

Vivi's hand found mine, her touch warm, steady, as we left the office, the night air cool against our skin.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion, but her eyes burned with life, with purpose.

We didn't speak as we drove to West Hollywood, the city's pulse matching ours. The hotel terrace I'd promised was ours—keycard access, no cameras, a private garden high above L.A.'s glitter, jasmine vines curling around iron railings, the skyline a sea of lights.

Vivi's dress shimmered under the moon, her curves a siren's call, and I pulled her close, our lips meeting in a kiss that was sweet, not brutal, a slow burn of love and need.

"You're fearless," I said, voice rough, my hands sliding to her hips, lifting her dress to reveal lace panties, her skin soft under my fingers.

She smiled, her hands unbuttoning my shirt, tracing the welts she'd left, her touch gentle but electric. "Only with you," she murmured, her lips brushing my chest, her tongue flicking a nipple, sending a jolt to my cock.

I lifted her onto the stone ledge, the city sprawling below, her legs wrapping around me.

My cock strained against my slacks, and she reached down, freeing it, her fingers wrapping tight, stroking slow, teasing the tip with her thumb, pre-come slicking her

touch. I groaned, fascinated by her confidence, the way she played with me, her eyes locked on mine, green and glowing.

“Vivi,” I rasped, my hands sliding under her dress, cupping her breasts, thumbs circling her nipples through the lace.

She tugged my cock harder, guiding it to her panties, rubbing the head against her clit, the lace wet, her moan soft and sweet. I pushed the fabric aside, her pussy warm and glistening, and slid a finger inside, curling, her walls clenching, her breath hitching.

She stroked my cock in rhythm, her grip firm, her other hand cupping my balls, rolling them gently, a dance that made my knees weak.

“More,” she whispered, her voice a plea, her lips kissing mine, slow and deep.

I lifted her, laying her on a cushioned chaise, the jasmine scent mingling with her arousal. I stripped her dress, her panties, leaving her bare, her body a canvas of curves I adored.

She spread her legs, stroking my cock, guiding it to her entrance, teasing, rubbing the head against her folds. Her hands roamed, her touch a sweet torment. I thrust in, slow, savoring her tightness, her moan a melody that grounded me.

“Elias,” she gasped, her hips meeting mine, her pussy pulsing, her fingers never leaving my cock, tugging, stroking, driving me wild.

I kissed her breasts, sucking gently, my hands lifting her hips, angling deeper, her moans soft, her body trembling.

She came, a quiet wave, her pussy clenching, her fingers tightening on my cock, and I

followed, my release spilling into her, warm and endless, our bodies entwined, sated.

We lay there, her head on my chest, the city humming below, her hand lazily stroking my cock, soft now but stirring under her touch.

“You’re insatiable,” I murmured, kissing her hair, her laugh a warm vibration.

She looked up, eyes bright, and I knew—this was us, sweet and fierce, forever.

I laughed, pulling her close, the future burning bright. Jessa’s death, Department 77, the images—they’d wait.

Tonight, we were whole, and as I held her, I hoped, God willing, this would be our life until my last breath.

EPILOGUE

VIVIENNE

It was early fall in Charleston, though the city didn’t seem to notice. The humidity still curled my hair the minute I stepped outside, and the air still smelled like salt and moss and a storm that hadn’t yet made up its mind. The trees along the Battery were just beginning to bronze at the edges, but summer hadn’t truly loosened its grip.

Not that I minded.

Everything else had shifted.

I had shifted.

My mother was settled now, her days marked by familiar routines and soft music, by

Emmaline's visits and the scent of gardenias planted just outside her patio door. She didn't always know who I was, but she smiled when I sang. That was enough.

Emmaline had made her decision. She and her husband were officially moving to Charleston with the baby. Elias had found them a historic house not far from the waterfront—white clapboard, blue shutters, wraparound porch. He coordinated the renovations, the movers, even the baby's new daycare, like it was just another mission to execute. He never called attention to it. He just quietly made sure the people I loved were safe.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

And Jessa's funeral had come and gone.

It had rained that day.

I stood in the back row of the church, as promised, wearing black and holding a single magnolia. I hadn't expected her family to acknowledge me, not after everything. But her sister approached me after the service, eyes rimmed red.

"She believed in you, you know," she said, her voice shaking. "Even when we didn't."

I handed her the magnolia, and I let myself cry—not in guilt, but in grief. My friend was gone, and nothing would bring her back. But I could honor her.

So I did.

I created a fund in her name—The Jessa Lane Initiative—a partnership between Dominion Hall and a national digital justice organization. It offered grants for women rebuilding their lives after online betrayal—revenge porn victims, whistleblowers silenced by smear campaigns, and those manipulated into shame or silence through digital coercion.

Elias made the first donation in her name. I made the second.

Maybe it wasn't enough. But it was a beginning.

As for ballet ... I didn't go back. Not in the way they wanted. I turned down the

board's offer to lift my suspension, thanked them kindly, and walked away with my spine straight and my head held higher than it had ever been on stage.

I still dance—sometimes in the studio Elias built for me in a sunroom overlooking the harbor, sometimes barefoot in the living room at Dominion Hall, music low, moonlight pouring through the windows. Not for an audience. Not for perfection. For myself.

Because I finally understand: ballet doesn't get to define me.

I do.

And this morning—this bright, humid, breathless Charleston morning—Elias was up to something.

He'd woken me before dawn, kissed my bare shoulder, and told me to dress comfortably.

Then he blindfolded me.

Which, honestly, wasn't even the strangest thing he'd done this week.

"You're enjoying this too much," I said, fingers clutched around the armrest as the SUV rolled down a road I couldn't see.

"I am," he admitted, chuckling. "But only because I know what's waiting."

We reached the airport within the hour, and when the blindfold came off, I blinked at the sunrise gleaming off his jet.

"Another secret mission?" I asked.

He only smirked. “Something like that.”

The flight was short. Smooth. No folders this time. No dossiers or burner phones. Just us.

And when we landed, I knew before the pilot said a word.

New Orleans.

I hadn’t been back since the day we moved my mom out. My chest ached before I even stood.

A car waited on the tarmac—sleek and black, because, of course, it was—and Elias held my hand the entire drive.

He didn’t speak until we stopped.

“Come with me,” he said.

I stepped out and froze.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

We were standing in front of my childhood home.

The paint was fresh now. The porch swing had been repaired. Someone had coaxed the old hydrangeas back to life.

“How—” I breathed.

“I bought it,” Elias said softly. “Quietly. Off-market. I knew it mattered to you.”

I turned to him, stunned. “Why?”

“Because this house watched you become who you are. And because I wanted to give a piece of that girl back to the woman you’ve become.”

Tears blurred my vision as he stepped back, reached into his pocket, and dropped to one knee.

The ring was stunning—an antique oval diamond set in a halo of rubies. But it wasn’t the stone that made me gasp. It was the engraving I saw inside the band when he turned it toward me.

You are my fire.

“I love you, Vivienne Laveau,” he said, voice steady. “Exactly as you are. Untamed. Unapologetic. Fierce as hell. I don’t want to quiet your wildness—I want to walk beside it. I want to keep doing what we’re doing. Helping people. Making the world a little safer for the ones who get left behind. But more than that, I want to build a life

with you. One that honors your past and fights for your future.”

I sank to my knees. My hands framed his face.

“Yes,” I whispered, before he even asked. “God, yes.”

He slid the ring onto my finger. It fit like it had always belonged.

And in that moment, I understood something I hadn’t before.

I’d always thought my need for adrenaline made me broken. Reckless.

But it didn’t. It made me hungry. Hungry for justice. For truth. For a life that meant something.

Elias had simply given me a new way to chase it.

With purpose. With balance. With love.

I would always be a little wild. But I wasn’t lost anymore. And with my mother safe, my sister by my side, and Elias with me for whatever came next?—

I was finally, fully, home in the world.

We sat together on the porch swing, the one that creaked when I was twelve and still did now, and let the moment stretch. The city hummed around us—heat rising off the pavement, cicadas buzzing like gossiping old women, someone’s saxophone crooning from a block away.

Elias brushed a thumb over the back of my hand. “So,” he said casually, “should we live here?”

I blinked, surprised by the question. Then I laughed. “You’re serious?”

He raised a brow. “You love this place.”

“I do,” I said softly. “But it’s a memory, not a plan.”

We were quiet for a beat, then I added, “I think we stay at Dominion Hall for now.”

Elias nodded, not a trace of disappointment on his face. “Then that’s what we do.”

“I haven’t even gotten to know everyone there very well,” I said, glancing down at the ring still catching sunlight on my hand. “It still feels like your place. Not ours.”

He turned to face me, earnest. “They love you, Red. They do. You’ll get to know them. You’ll see. And when we’re ready, we’ll build something of our own. Not because we have to, but because we want to.”

A breeze swept through, warm and forgiving, rustling the hydrangeas like they were nodding in agreement.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:49 am

“And you’re sure,” I asked, searching his face, “that you don’t need a version of me that’s more ... predictable?”

He leaned in, kissed my forehead, then my cheek, then the spot just below my ear that always made me shiver.

“I didn’t fall in love with predictable,” he murmured. “I fell in love with you.”

And just like that, every version of myself I’d ever been—ballet prodigy, adrenaline junkie, grieving daughter, woman reborn—settled into place.

Whole. Unhidden.

He pulled me closer, eyes dancing with something devilish. “You know,” he said, nodding toward the house, “we could keep this place just for wild sex when we visit.”

I choked on a laugh. “Just for that?”

“Well, and maybe beignets.”

I swatted his chest. “You’re incorrigible.”

He grinned. “You love that about me.”

“I do,” I said, threading my fingers through his. “And you’re not wrong. This place deserves some new memories.”

He stood, tugging me up with him. “Come on, Red. Let’s go christen your childhood bedroom. Think we can do it on a single mattress?”

I raised a brow. “That’s a little twisted, don’t you think?”

His mouth brushed my ear. “Exactly.”

I didn’t need more convincing.

We walked up the steps, through the door, and into the future we were choosing—messy, meaningful, a little wild.

And we made our first memory.