

*Engaging a dominatrix is certainly one way to  
have a meet-cute*

# PRINCIPLE— —DECISIONS

Thea Belmont



# CHAPTER 1

## DOMINATRIX

PROFESSOR VIVIENNE CARTER LEANED BACK in her chair and stared at the embossed black lettering on the bright red business card:

*Selene*  
*Dominatrix*

On the reverse side was a phone number and email address.

The card had slipped out of the book she had just purchased as a favor to her sister, Hattie, who worked at the bookstore. If Hattie wasn't so awkward around any mention of sex, Vivienne might have suspected her of having slipped the card into the book. No, the woman advertising her services had likely decided that the newest racy bestseller would be an excellent place to advertise her business.

It had been some time since Vivienne had engaged in any sexual relationship. Since her brother, Robert, and his wife had died, Vivienne's life was consumed with raising her niece, Claudia. Hattie coparented by making sure the home was clean and the family had a meal to gather around, but the bulk of Claudia's upbringing rested on Vivienne's shoulders. Between that and a full teaching and publishing workload at the university, she had little time to date.

And the few times she had dated, she'd inevitably found herself frustrated by the changes to her routine. It was easier to end things before they became complicated.

At least if she engaged a dominatrix, she wouldn't have to manage the emotional baggage of a lengthy relationship. She'd have her needs taken care of without having to consider someone else's.

Someone knocked at her office door, pulling her from her thoughts.

"One moment," Vivienne said and stuffed the card into her desk drawer. She should throw it away, but not just yet. "Come in."

The door opened. Her sixteen-year-old niece stood leaning against the doorframe, school bag slung over her shoulder. She was the very picture of her brother, with her round face and hazel eyes, though she had her mother's golden hair. Robert, like Vivienne, had had red hair. "Are you ready to head home?"

"In a moment," Vivienne said and closed her laptop. "How was school?"

"Fine."

"Nothing happened today?"

"Well," Claudia began, bouncing on her toes, "Principal Rothschild went on a warpath against Coach Myers. That was pretty cool."

"Rothschild? Isn't Mitchells your principal?"

"No, he left over the summer. It was in the news bulletin."

"Oh." Vivienne didn't usually read the news bulletins. That was Hattie's area. Parent-teacher meetings were hers. "Why did your new principal go on this alleged warpath?" she asked as she packed up her day planner and ungraded papers.

"Coach Myers told Luca that he couldn't join the football team. So Bec and I complained to Principal Rothschild, and she told him off in the middle of tryouts. It was pretty awesome that she did that."

Luca was one of Claudia's oldest friends. He had recently come out as a trans boy. He'd always been athletic, so Vivienne suspected the reason the coach had barred him from the team had nothing to do with a lack of skill. "It's definitely a way to make enemies," Vivienne said. "Take it from me, Claudia. Public humiliation may force someone to obey for a moment, but they'll look for opportunities to take revenge."

Claudia pressed her lips shut, her excitement fading. "I thought it was cool that she called him out for his transphobia."

“And the best place to do that is in a formal setting,” Vivienne said as the two of them stepped into the hall. Vivienne switched off the light, then shut and locked the door. “In a position of leadership, especially one so newly forged, it’s better to think about the long-term goals for a stable work environment. Sowing discord will only turn the other teachers against her.”

“Well, the students love her,” Claudia said.

Vivienne sighed. Her niece had missed the point entirely. But she was only sixteen and thought the world revolved around her. She didn’t understand that students would come and go, but the teachers remained, and if Principal Rothschild wanted to keep her job, it would be in her interest to have their support.

“How did your classes go?” she asked, shifting to a safer topic as they walked to the parking lot.

Claudia began discussing her recent grades in English and history, described the study group she’d formed, then fell silent.

“Did you not receive your French essay results today?”

Claudia flushed and fiddled with her bag. “I...passed.”

Vivienne stopped to look at her niece. “Define ‘passed.’”

“C-plus?”

Vivienne pressed her lips together, biting back her anger, and watched Claudia squirm under her scrutiny. “Perhaps I should switch to speaking French at home, then?”

“No, I hate it when you do that. Look, this essay doesn’t count much towards anything. I’ll bring up my grade with the next essay at the end of the month, and then I’ll be back to being an A-minus student.”

“Yes, well, unless you want your allowance to drop—”

“Come on! That’s not fair. It’s not like we live in France. I don’t even see the point of taking this stupid class.”

“Language is important, Claudia. When you travel, you can’t just assume everyone speaks English. By the time I was your age, I already spoke Italian and French fluently and I could read and understand Latin. By my twenties, I’d learned Mandarin and German.”

“I know, but...I don’t even know if I want to travel.”

“Of course you do,” Vivienne said. “Everyone travels, or they end up like your Aunt Hattie, working in a bookstore with no idea of how the world works.”

Claudia fell silent. When they arrived at the car, she climbed into the passenger seat, set her bag on her lap, and buckled her seatbelt, her face a stony mask.

Vivienne sighed. Claudia had always been fond of Hattie, defending her anytime Vivienne criticized her. Only last night, the three of them had argued after Hattie announced that she would be working full-time at the bookstore and not just helping out. Hattie had a bachelor’s degree; how could she be content with a retail position?

They drove in silence, Claudia’s bad mood taking up space in the car. As soon as they arrived home, Claudia unbuckled her seatbelt and fled without waiting for Vivienne to turn off the engine, racing up the steps to the porch and into the house.

Vivienne watched her disappear. Her niece would likely remain in her room until dinner. She considered following to explain how disrespectful her actions were, but it had already been a long day. She didn’t want another argument with her family.

Vivienne climbed the porch steps. Hattie sat in a rocking chair with a book on her lap, sipping a glass of iced tea. She greeted her sister with a smile that accentuated the wrinkles on her face. “Evening, Viv. How was your day?”

“Busy,” she said, her tone sharp.

Hattie looked away, a flush rising to her cheeks.

Vivienne softened, thinking to apologize, but the thought was snuffed out when a door slammed upstairs.

She walked through the kitchen to her home office, set her bag down, and pulled out her laptop and the student papers, preparing for the evening’s work. Midway through her preparations, she looked at the clock. Nearly dinnertime.

She pushed back her chair and went out to the kitchen. Hattie had come in from the porch and was at the stove, sautéing onions. A pot of vegetables simmered on another burner.

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“Shall I set the table?” Vivienne asked. Usually, it was Claudia’s job to set the table for dinner, but she could do the dishes afterwards instead, given her sullen mood.

“Oh!” Hattie looked back at Vivienne, startled. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“And yet you knew I was home, so I don’t understand why you jump all the time.”

“Oh, well...” Hattie returned her attention to the cooking. “So what did you think of Jonathan’s bookstore? Quite the business, hmm? And the café has been so busy lately!”

Vivienne set down the plates to keep from saying what she really thought. “It’s...good that you’re happy.”

Hattie glanced at Vivienne over her shoulder and smiled.

Vivienne smiled in return, and it was enough to release the knot in her chest. Perhaps they could make it through dinner without another argument.

“Have you started reading *In Her Control* yet? People are saying it’s a real page-turner.”

Vivienne tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. She’d only gotten as far as the first page when the card had fallen onto her desk. *Dominatrix*. Something about that embossed lettering sparked an almost-forgotten flame inside her. She shivered, remembering how it felt to have rope twisting around her wrists, remembering the various forms of BDSM she had engaged in with different partners, both on the receiving and giving end.

It had been at least two years since she’d done anything other than masturbation. The dating pool in the Oakdale area was so small that, inevitably, everyone knew everyone else. And given her position, casual sex would only lead to complications. But a dominatrix would be discreet. And it would just be scratching an itch, after all.

“Viv?”

She looked up.

Her sister was looking at her quizzically.

“Pardon?”

“I asked if you had started the book.”

“Oh. Only the first few pages or so. I’ll get to it on the weekend,” Vivienne said.

Hattie stepped forward, her hand raised toward Vivienne’s forehead. “You’re looking a little flushed. You’re not coming down with the flu, are you? You’re always working yourself ragged.”

“I’m fine,” she said, waving her sister’s hand away. “I’ll go tell Claudia to wash up, shall I?”

“I suppose. Dinner will be ready in a moment.”

## CHAPTER 2

### GROUND RULES

THE WEEK'S CLASSES WERE EXHAUSTING. Teaching first-year undergrads reminded Vivienne why she'd avoided teaching them for the past two years. Many students failed to attend classes or, worse, reeked of cheap vodka and pot as they sat in the back of the room wearing sunglasses—as if she didn't know what that meant. *Please.*

If she was going to teach, Vivienne wanted engaged students, responding to questions rather than staring blankly at her. Third-year students were used to her method of teaching, having completed her prerequisite courses. They knew how to conduct themselves, reminding Vivienne why she continued to teach.

She sat rigidly at her desk, hands curled into fists. Never again, she vowed. Even if Elijah threatened to cut her third-year courses entirely, it would be an empty threat because Janice usually taught the first-years, leaving Vivienne to unteach them everything in their second year.

Perhaps educating the first-year students herself was the lesser of two evils.

She needed a drink.

No, she needed a cigarette, but she'd have to leave her office for that, and she still had fifteen minutes of office hours left. Although usually, the only students who came through her office doors were there to beg for extra credit because they were failing.

Fuck it. She needed a cigarette.



Opening her desk drawer, she reached in to pull out her cigarette case. She stopped at the sight of the red business card.

*Selene*

Vivienne picked it up.

What she needed was relief. It didn't have to be sex; it just had to be *something*.

Last night, she'd drained the batteries of her favorite vibrator, and despite rolling through three orgasms, desire still prickled under her skin.

Before she could change her mind, she picked up her phone and dialed the number. If the dominatrix was someone she knew, she'd end the call immediately. Her office line was private—they wouldn't be able to call her back.

With the first ring, Vivienne's heart pounded in her chest. Was it a good idea to engage the services of a dominatrix? Wouldn't it be better to stop at the store and pick up some...

"Good afternoon. How can I be of service?"

Vivienne hesitated, her mouth suddenly dry. The husky voice was that of an older woman. Firm. Confident. And no one she knew.

"Hello?"

"I"—Vivienne bit her lip—"found your business card."

"Oh? And which business card is that?"

Which business card? Perhaps the town didn't have enough clientele to sustain the services of a dominatrix, and the woman had a primary job that paid the bills. "The red card."

"Mm. Remind me of the services listed on that card," the woman said in a voice that was almost a purr.

Vivienne shivered, glancing at the door of her office to make sure it was closed. "You know perfectly well."

"I do, but you need to say it."

"Why do I need to say it?"

"If you want this service, you need to say the word."

Vivienne adjusted herself in the chair, tugging nervously at her skirt.

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“Go on and say it, and I promise to stop teasing.”

Vivienne gulped and shut her eyes. “Dominatrix,” she whispered.

As soon as she said the word, she was filled with panic. She shouldn’t have done this from her office. Any student wandering the hall might overhear. She should have called the woman from her car or from home. Or not at all. What did she need a dominatrix for anyway? She should have picked up new batteries instead.

“Good girl. You’ve called the right woman. My name is Selene. I have an opening for tomorrow evening. Say...six o’clock?”

“Six?”

“And do be on time. Tardiness will be punished.”

Vivienne scoffed. She had never been late in her life. “I’ll be on time.”

“Good. Now, I’ll need a name for the booking.”

“A name?” Of course she needed a name.

“Just a first name. Don’t worry. I promise absolute discretion.”

“Vivienne,” she answered, her heart beating faster. She should have chosen a pseudonym, but it was too late now.

“Vivienne.” The woman breathed out her name. “Do you know the address?”

“No, I do not.”

Selene gave her the address with instructions to use the back entrance. “The session will be forty-five minutes. However, we’ll need to run through some housekeeping matters first, so expect to be there for an hour.”

“What sort of housekeeping matters?”

“Just a few ground rules. This needs to be enjoyable for both of us. The first rule is no alcohol beforehand. It tends to dull the senses, and I need you aware of your tolerances.”

“That’s the only rule?”

“Well, I expect you to be showered before arriving; that’s common courtesy. I do have facilities, however, in case you need to clean up before you leave.”

Vivienne squeezed her thighs together, anticipation growing inside her. The woman was having an effect on her already. “Fine.”

“Mm. Well, I need to run, but I look forward to meeting you tomorrow, Vivienne. I can’t wait to play with you.” And she hung up.

Vivienne looked down at the phone. It was booked. She was booked for tomorrow.

What the fuck was she doing?

She began to agonize over her choice of clothes. Should she wear something formal or informal? Should she dress up in leather and lace? Did it even matter what she wore, so long as her lingerie was acceptable? Did that even matter?

Vivienne had never engaged a sex worker. She’d been to informally organized orgies and attended a few sex parties, but this was different. It had been a long time since she’d felt butterflies in her stomach.

\* \* \*

From the moment Vivienne had her coffee at eight on Saturday morning, the clock on the wall ever-so-slowly ticked the hours away. At last it was four o’clock. Time to change into appropriate evening wear.

“A rather late meeting,” Hattie said as Vivienne slid her coat on. “You know, if it’s a date, you can tell me.”

“It most certainly is not a date,” Vivienne said firmly. The last thing she needed was her sister’s curiosity piqued. “I’ll be home after seven.”

“All right. Shall I have dinner ready for seven thirty, then?”

“If you wish.” She checked her appearance one last time before picking up her handbag from the table. It held only her phone, wallet, and makeup, in case the woman left marks. “But don’t wait for me.”

She passed Claudia in the foyer and paused.

Her niece shifted her dreamy expression to neutral. “You’re going out?” Claudia asked.

“A meeting regarding some funding, I’m afraid. I’ll be home for dinner.”

Claudia nodded but didn’t move. She tapped her fingers at her sides as she shifted her weight.

“Was there something else?” Vivienne asked. She loathed it when Claudia danced around a topic.

“Bec and Luca are having a sleepover tomorrow night. Could I stay over at Bec’s? Mr. Walter will take us to school the next day.”

Vivienne pursed her lips. She suspected that her niece was planning to wander off and see young Henry Riley. Not that that was so unusual for a girl her age. Vivienne had often snuck out when she was sixteen. “If you have your homework done by then.”

Claudia beamed. “I will,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

Vivienne waved her off. She considered gently reminding her niece to take protection, then decided against it. Vivienne had given Claudia a pack of condoms when she began dating Henry (much to Claudia’s embarrassment) and had revisited the sex talk, making sure Claudia understood consent and equality in sex. Claudia knew she could ask for advice. But more importantly, she had a good head on her shoulders.

“I’ll see you later tonight,” Vivienne said.

“Enjoy your meeting.” Claudia bounced away.

After Vivienne got in her car, she sat for a minute to consider the night ahead. Her stomach fluttered as she buckled her seatbelt and started the engine. The address that Selene gave her was in the business district.

As she pulled into the dark alley, she became briefly concerned that she was being conned somehow. At the same time, she doubted the longevity of such a con—it was far easier to rob someone at an ATM.

The building was a two-story brick house with ivy climbing its walls, nestled between an auto repair shop and a mattress store, both closed for the night. The top-floor lights were on. A shadow moved behind the window curtain, as if someone were walking around in the room.

She was fifteen minutes early. She parked, then looked into the rearview mirror to fix her hair before she stepped out, locking the car behind her. As she reached the door at the top of the stairs, she hesitated. What the hell was she doing? Was this why she had pulled out enough cash for two weeks’ worth of groceries? Yet, as she stood at the door of the house, her spine prickled with anticipation.

She rang the doorbell before she could change her mind.

There was the sound of steps walking downstairs, then a shadow shifted through the window's opaque curtain. An outside light flickered on, and the door opened.

The woman—Selene?—looked Vivienne up and down, a smile breaking out on her red lips. “Oh, aren't you just divine.”

Vivienne drew in a sharp breath. The woman was nothing like she had expected. When she thought of a dominatrix, she pictured a plain, pale woman wearing red lipstick and dressed in PVC or leather. But Selene was striking in a burgundy blouse and a pencil skirt. Her thick, wavy hair was dark against the soft brown of her skin, making her blue eyes all the more prominent. The sudden rush of desire made Vivienne want to be kissed by her, to be pinned against the wall, curling her hands into the dark mane of hair.

Selene let out a short laugh, her eyes sparkling, as if she were reading Vivienne's thoughts. “Usually, I would make some snide comment about where my eyes are, but I like you.”

Vivienne straightened, reaching into her handbag to mask her embarrassment. “Selene, I take it?” she asked, pulling out the business card. “I found this in a book.”

Vivienne had the sudden feeling of being a mouse in the sights of a cat. Selene reached out and dragged her fingers along the edge of the card until she was touching Vivienne's hand.

“I had a feeling someone special would find this. Well...come inside,” Selene said, stepping aside and gesturing for Vivienne to enter. “I'll give you a tour.”

Selene led her down a hall where several paintings were displayed. Vivienne didn't recognize any of the artists' names scrawled in the corners.

Reaching an open doorway, the woman turned to face Vivienne. “Here we have the kitchen. After a session, you will sit here with a cup of coffee or tea until I'm certain you're able to drive home safely.” She turned toward another door and flicked a switch before opening it to reveal a small, well-maintained garden inside high, brick walls. The branches of a large shade tree sheltered a variety of flowers. Grass lined the stone-path walkway. “This is the garden, if you want to do any

outdoor sessions. There's an outdoor shower too," she said, pointing to the side of the house.

Vivienne looked around, uncertain if she should mention now that she wasn't comfortable in an outdoor setting. But before she could open her mouth, Selene had turned off the lights and gone back inside.

"Follow me," she said, glancing back at Vivienne with a half smile, and led her up a flight of narrow stairs. At the landing, she turned to face Vivienne. "You need to switch off your phone before we begin."

"Of course." Vivienne pulled out her phone and switched it to airplane mode.

"While I don't mind photo sessions, they need to be negotiated in detail beforehand," Selene said and turned to mount the rest of the stairs.

"I don't think that will be necessary."

Without responding, Selene continued down the hall, pointing out the bathroom, then leading Vivienne to the bedroom. As she opened the door, Vivienne's stomach tightened.

She wasn't sure exactly what she had expected—maybe something like a dungeon with shades of black and red—but the expansive bedroom was warm, almost straight-out-of-a-furniture-catalog nice, and with a feeling of home to it. It had ambient light, a queen-sized four-poster bed, and more paintings on the walls. A dresser of dark red wood was placed under the single window, and a full-length mirror hung in one corner. A sheepskin rug was laid out on the floor by the bed.

If it weren't for the hook hanging from the ceiling and a partially opened wardrobe revealing an array of kink tools, Vivienne would have thought this was the woman's actual home or, at the very least, a midrange bed and breakfast.

"How does this work?" Vivienne asked. "Forgive me for being candid, but this is my first time engaging the services of...this profession."

"No need to ask forgiveness so soon." Selene stepped closer. "First, we'll negotiate what you want versus what I'm comfortable doing. We'll begin after we discuss safety."

Simple enough.

“Do you know what you want?” Selene asked.

Vivienne looked over the room as she considered her response. This was not the time to be coy. “Submission, mostly. I like bondage and”—she thought of the riding crop she’d seen hanging from the wardrobe—“being struck...consensually.”

“Impact play.” Selene grinned, showing perfect teeth. “Barehanded or with a tool?” She stepped closer until she was mere inches away.

Vivienne swallowed, feeling her nerves inflame. What would it be like to be thrown over Selene’s lap?

“I have a selection of devices that we can play with,” Selene continued. “Given that you’re the client, how we do this is entirely up to you.”

“I’m not sure.” The words stuck in her throat. The idea of laying things out for selection seemed too...clinical.

“Do you want me to lead you in a scene so you’re not quite sure what will happen?”

Vivienne nodded, heat crawling up her chest. “That would be...satisfactory.”

“Satisfactory,” Selene repeated teasingly. She walked around Vivienne in a circle, close enough that Vivienne could reach out and touch her if she wanted. “I’ll demand the utmost obedience if you want submission. Are you prepared to obey?”

A shiver ran down Vivienne’s spine, and she drew herself taller as the woman came to stand before her again. Close enough to kiss. “If you’re as good as you seem to believe.”

Selene laughed. “I think we’re both going to enjoy this.” She looked Vivienne up and down, then drew her gaze back up to meet Vivienne’s eyes. “If we’re to do some domination with impact play, is there anything off-limits?”

“What do you mean?”

“I keep to all the lovely fleshy areas and away from anything that might do any serious damage. But...some areas fit that description that some people aren’t comfortable with.”

Vivienne cleared her throat nervously. “I don’t mind.”

Selene studied Vivienne closely. “This is very new for you, isn’t it?”

Vivienne folded her arms. “I’ve engaged in plenty of BDSM in my time. I’m hardly some twenty-year-old virgin looking to get their cherry popped.”

“Oh, I’m sure you have. I’m sure you’ve played with spanking and handcuffs and thought they were delightful. It’s where we all begin.” She smiled at Vivienne disarmingly. “How about if I show you a standard play, and if you find yourself uncomfortable at any time, or if you stop enjoying yourself, we’ll stop.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“Good. Before we begin, let’s run through a few things.”

“Housekeeping?” Vivienne asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Ah, so you do listen. That’ll make things easier. I’ll be direct. I don’t engage in sex in the first session, no matter how lovely the client is.” Selene paused, drinking her in again. “I’ll need you to get tested before there’s any sex.”

“Tested? I assure you—”

“Assurances are well and good, but I don’t know you, and you don’t know me. We don’t have to engage in sex, if you don’t wish to be tested, but those are my rules if you do.”

“And how will I know about your history?”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” Selene gave Vivienne a mischievous grin.

Vivienne nodded. She didn’t even know if she wanted to engage in sex or if she would do a repeat session, so it wasn’t worth discussing further.

“Now, is there anything I should know? Any triggers, fears, or concerns that I should be mindful of?”

“No,” Vivienne said honestly. There was nothing worth bringing up.

“Any injuries to be mindful of?”

“No.”

“Do you know your limits?”

“I do.”

Selene’s eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms against her chest. “And what’s your safe word?”

Vivienne frowned. “‘Stop’ isn’t sufficient?”



“No. And don’t choose ‘mercy’ either. I quite enjoy begging, and you’ll enjoy doing it on your knees.”

Vivienne sucked in a breath. Begging? She had never begged for a single thing in her life.

Selene grinned, and Vivienne felt arousal tightening low in her belly, making her aware of the lace she wore under her garter belt.

“I recommend a word that’s two or three syllables long that you can say through a gag—so avoid plosives and fricative consonants. And you might want to choose something jarring that can be said during role-play.”

Vivienne raised her eyebrows, pleased that the woman understood *something* of language. “Fine. What about ‘music box’?”

“Suitable choice,” Selene said. Then her expression softened. “Final question: what are you hoping to get out of this?”

Vivienne opened her mouth to speak, but whatever lie she had prepared didn’t come out. Instead, she looked into the depths of Selene’s blue eyes. “To let go.”

Selene nodded. “I’ll need you to remain honest with me about your current state. You need to let me know whenever you feel unwell or you stop enjoying the scene.”

She walked over to the dresser and withdrew a length of rope and a blindfold from one of the drawers. Then she went to the closet and opened it wide enough for Vivienne to see. Selene drew her hands over different items, fingering various tools and toys before she paused over the riding crop.

Vivienne held her breath, but Selene moved on to the next item. She sighed, trying not to be disappointed. This woman was clearly well-versed in her own play; Vivienne would have to trust her.

Selene shut the closet door and placed several items on the bed. She held the riding crop in her hand.

Vivienne tingled with anticipated pleasure.

“Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?” Selene asked.

“You will be discreet, won’t you? This won’t come back on me?”

“So long as you assure me of the same, I will never speak a word of what happens between us to another soul.”

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“Good, because I have excellent lawyers.”

Selene laughed. “As do I.” She took a step back, gazing over Vivienne again. And then her visage changed, and she seemed to grow taller in her heels. She turned to lift the lid of an ottoman bench. “You can place your bag, jacket, and dress here.”

“My dress?”

Selene stared at her, as if daring Vivienne to say something more. Perhaps protest.

Instead, Vivienne drew a breath and stepped forward, placing her bag inside. Then she removed her coat and placed that in the ottoman too. All that was left to remove was her dress. She hesitated.

Selene stepped closer and pulled Vivienne’s hair over her shoulder, then unclasped the top of the dress and slowly drew the zipper.

Cool air brushed over Vivienne’s skin. The dress slid down her arms, her waist, and her hips. Vivienne stepped out of it and stood in her slip and lingerie.

“*Oh*,” Selene commented, brushing her fingers over where the garter clasps hooked onto her stockings. “Did you dress up for me?”

“No,” Vivienne said. “I like to match.”

“Yes, I understand that. But the garter belt?”

“I don’t like pantyhose.” She picked up her dress and placed it into the ottoman.

“It suits you,” Selene said as she closed the lid.

Now there was nothing between them except silence.

Vivienne glanced at the items on the bed, her heart racing.

Selene settled herself on the bed next to the items and crossed her legs. “Stand here.” She pointed at the space in front of her.

Vivienne obeyed. So far, it seemed to be nothing more than a game of patience. She wished Selene would get to it.

“On your knees,” she said as if she were a schoolteacher asking the class to sit in their seats.

Vivienne bent her knees to kneel before her. She clenched her hands into fists, then stretched out her fingers.

Selene watched, her eyes boring deep into Vivienne’s.

“And now?” Vivienne asked.

“And now, until I say otherwise, you may only speak when spoken to. You are my servant, and I am your queen. You will obey me implicitly.” She paused, cocking her head, as if daring Vivienne to protest. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Selene corrected her. “Yes, my queen.”

“Yes, my queen.” Vivienne wasn’t sure how she felt about calling Selene “my queen,” but it came easier than “mistress.”

“Hands forward.”

Vivienne held out her hands, palms upward.

Selene turned Vivienne’s arms so the wrists faced each other a few inches apart. She took the length of rope and began coiling it over one forearm.

Then, like a parlor trick, Selene knotted and twisted the rope, binding her wrists in an elegant knot before Vivienne could even think about squirming away. Selene slid her fingers between the bindings, making sure they were tight against the skin. “Does it pinch?” she asked.

“No, my queen,” Vivienne answered, then dropped her bound wrists.

The riding crop struck her bare shoulder.

Vivienne looked up, surprised at how fast Selene had picked up the crop and confused about what the hit had been for.

“Did I tell you that you could drop your hands?”

“No.” Vivienne lifted her hands again.

The crop hit her on the other shoulder.

Vivienne sucked in her breath, the pleasure of the pain rushing through her.

“Do you know what you did wrong that time?”

Vivienne blinked, still reeling from the hit. “No,” she whispered hoarsely.

Selene placed the riding crop on the bed, then touched the mark on Vivienne’s shoulder.

With a shiver, Vivienne leaned into it.

“When I ask you a question, I expect you to answer ‘yes, my queen’ or ‘no, my queen’ every time, without hesitation or question. Can you do that for me?”

Vivienne gritted her teeth at the condescension in Selene’s voice. “Yes.”

Selene reached for the crop.

“My queen,” Vivienne quickly added.

“Good girl,” she purred.

Selene fingered the leather handle thoughtfully, then pulled her hand away and picked up the blindfold instead.

Vivienne shut her eyes as Selene placed the blindfold around them, tying it in place. She felt Selene moving around her, and then her fingers were combing her hair. At last, Selene settled her hands on Vivienne’s shoulders.

Vivienne waited, her arms growing tired from holding her wrists up.

A warm breath tickled her ear, and Vivienne gasped. Then Selene whispered, “Move forward until you feel the bed press against you here.” She stroked Vivienne’s body until her fingers rested under her ribs, holding her firmly before slipping away.

Vivienne slowly moved forward on her knees until her hands touched the mattress, then shifted a little more until the frame pressed against her stomach. She waited, anticipating the riding crop hitting her.

Instead she heard the sound of a drawer opening and closing. Her heart beat faster. Had Selene chosen another tool, perhaps a cane? Or maybe a gag to keep her quiet?

“Look at you, keeping perfectly still,” Selene said, coming up behind her, fingers stroking her shoulders, her nails running down Vivienne’s forearms as she pressed against her back. “So obedient.”

Vivienne clenched her jaw, bristling at the comment, but she kept quiet.

“I can’t wait to watch you come undone.” Selene drew Vivienne’s arms above her head.

Vivienne felt Selene set her heels on either side of her calves, her skirt brushing against the back of Vivienne's head. Then there was movement above her.

Something metal was clicking. Selene was fiddling with the rope bindings. Vibrations went through the fibers, then the rope was tugged upward, hoisting Vivienne's arms up until they were reaching above her head, forcing her torso to stretch toward the ceiling.

Selene drew her hands down Vivienne's forearms again. Her fingers were warm against the cool air, her nails blunt as they slid under the rope to check the tension. It was strangely intimate and made Vivienne more aware of her state of undress.

"Do you remember your safe word?" Selene asked as she again drew her fingers through Vivienne's hair, brushing it over her shoulder and off her back. It was gentle and soothing, and Vivienne wanted to press against her hands.

"Yes, my queen," she said, feeling a flutter low in her belly.

"And what's your safe word?"

"Music box...my queen."

Selene stepped away but Vivienne had no sense of where she went. In the quiet pressing over her, Vivienne's chest rose and fell. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears as she stretched her fingers in the restraints.

Then, something cold touched her between the shoulder blades, sliding down the bare skin and over the slip, passing the length of her spine before lifting away.

That was her warning.

The crop snapped against one of her shoulder blades. Vivienne gasped, arching against it. The pain rippled over her flesh even as endorphins flooded her bloodstream. A second strike came, and then a third just as quick on the other side. Vivienne breathed out in relief.

Selene brushed her fingers along Vivienne's shoulders, stroking where she had struck. Perfume filled her senses as Selene stepped in closer behind her, the crop dragging low against her backside.

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Mm."

A short thwack against her ass made Vivienne jolt in the restraints. Wetness seeped between her thighs.

“I expect you to use your words.”

“Yes.”

Another thwack against the other cheek, harder this time, and Vivienne suppressed the moan. “Yes, my queen.”

“Good girl.”

There was quiet again, except for the sound of floorboards creaking beneath Selene’s footsteps. Vivienne’s arms and shoulders ached in the restraints. If she squeezed her muscles, the rope drew tighter.

Every strike stung with fresh relief. She wanted it. The suspense and uncertainty between each strike. The brief touch against her skin that both soothed and teased before the next hard and fast strike.

And then the excitement turned to relief, and Vivienne’s emotions twisted. It was like the brick walls she had built around herself had turned to glass, and each strike left a crack.

Finally, one strike hit her high across the shoulder blades, and it wasn’t a gasp but a sob that broke through.

And then Selene was there, her body pressed against Vivienne’s, arms around her. “Are you ready to stop?”

Vivienne nodded, clamping her jaw shut because she refused to cry. She didn’t know why she wanted to cry, but the words she needed to say weren’t coming out, and she knew she needed to say those fucking words, but if she did, she was going to sob, and she couldn’t sob, and—

Selene pressed her hand firmly under Vivienne’s chest and over her ribs, tugging at something. And then Vivienne’s arms dropped, and she was sagging back against Selene, drawing in a tight breath.

“Lift your arms,” Selene said, her voice soft and soothing.

Vivienne did, and the ropes untangled. Her arms fell to her sides.

Selene removed the blindfold and splayed her hand over Vivienne’s chest, holding her steady, breathing slow and deep behind her.

She took a breath, once, twice—pressing her tongue against the roof of her mouth until her breath became more even and the need to cry ebbed away. “I’m fine,” she said at last, though she trembled and the words caught in her throat.

“You are,” Selene agreed, then pressed her lips against Vivienne’s bare shoulder.

Vivienne squeezed her eyes shut, again willing herself not to cry as she drew in one breath, then another, and then...the hand released, and Selene moved away.

Vivienne opened her eyes and blinked away the blur.

A hand appeared in front of her. Vivienne looked at it for several seconds before realizing that Selene was offering to help her stand. Taking the hand, she pushed onto her heels, standing awkwardly until the world steadied.

Selene reached her arm around until she was holding Vivienne by her waist.

Vivienne wanted to crumble against her, collapse from the exertion of it all. Instead, she took another breath and straightened herself, holding her shoulders back.

"You don't need to do that," Selene said, her arm steady on Vivienne's waist, the other hand still holding hers. "You're allowed to let go."

"I'm fine," Vivienne said and looked at Selene.

"You are," she agreed, "but you're also allowed to take a moment. There's no one else here."

Vivienne looked away. "I should get dressed." She pulled her hand away. Her skin felt as if Selene had woken every nerve ending.

"Before you do, I need to check over the marks."

Vivienne nodded and allowed herself to be turned around.

Selene touched her back gently, examining her shoulders, drawing the hem of her slip up to look at the marks on her hips and thighs. Vivienne wobbled on her heels, her muscles twitching as Selene softly touched each welt.

"They'll be down by morning." Selene readjusted the slip. "I can put cream on them, if you like."

Vivienne cleared her throat, knowing that if Selene so much as stroked a thumb over her cheekbone, she would burst into tears. "No, thank you," she said firmly. "I can manage that at home."

"As you wish. I'm going to make a pot of coffee. Or would you prefer tea?"

"Coffee's fine," Vivienne said, her voice thick. Her skin burned where Selene's fingers had touched her.

“I’ll zip up your dress when you’re ready.”

“Thank you.”

Selene left the room, closing the door behind her.

Vivienne dressed carefully, doing up half of the zipper anyway before giving up when she couldn’t stop her arms from shaking. She stood before the mirror. Her face was flushed. Her hair was a tangled mess, but it was nothing that a quick comb through couldn’t fix. Pulling out her makeup, she touched up her lips and eyes.

As she made her way downstairs, she heard liquid being poured into cups. For a moment, she considered leaving, embarrassed by what had occurred.

Except...she hadn’t paid.

Raising her chin, she stepped into the kitchen.

Selene was putting milk and sugar on the table. She looked up and smiled. “Do you need help?” She pointed to Vivienne’s dress.

“Yes, please.”

Selene brushed Vivienne’s hair over one shoulder, then zipped up the dress. She smoothed down the back of the dress and rearranged Vivienne’s hair, her fingers grazing her shoulders.

Vivienne shivered as her touch brushed against the tender marks.

“I wasn’t sure how you liked your coffee.”

Vivienne sat across from Selene. She didn’t feel like crying anymore, but she felt a heaviness, like she could sleep for hours. She hadn’t felt this tired since she was working on her doctorate.

“How do you feel?” Selene asked. “And don’t say ‘fine.’”

“Exhausted,” Vivienne said honestly.

“That’s to be expected. You took a good number of hits.” Selene sipped her coffee. “More importantly, did you find the relief you were after?”

Vivienne considered. She wanted to say she did not. Despite the intended intimacy of the situation, nearly crying in front of a stranger soured whatever pleasure she might have taken from it. But the truth was, all the frustration she’d been feeling that week was gone. Her back was sore, but she felt lighter. “I did,” she answered.

Selene smiled. “I’m very good at what I do.”

“And arrogant.”



“Comes with the territory.”

Vivienne brought the cup to her mouth, trying to suppress a smile.

The coffee was decent. It soothed her as she sipped it. Vivienne considered how much money had been invested in the interior of the home to give it such elegance. It was nothing like the dungeon fantasy that one might associate with a dominatrix.

It suited Selene, and it also made Vivienne aware that she still hadn't asked for payment. Was she supposed to broach that?

“Careful. You'll wind yourself right back up with thoughts like that.”

Vivienne set her cup down. “I beg your pardon?”

Selene grinned. “You're overthinking something. I can see you stiffening to avoid saying whatever's on your mind, perhaps because of some...social propriety. Whatever it is, just say it.”

The woman seemed to read her like an open book. “I was thinking about how payment worked.”

“Cash or card,” Selene said frankly. “If you use your credit card, the payment will show up as a clothing boutique.”

“Do you run a clothes store?”

“That's a story for another time.” Selene poured herself more coffee. “Now, cash or card?”

Vivienne pulled out her wallet, withdrawing several bills.

Selene accepted the money with a smile and set it on the table. Then she got up and went to a cupboard, where she pulled out an invoice book and a pen. She scribbled on the page and ripped it off, handing it to Vivienne. “You know by now I'm the type of woman who likes to keep her books in order. My website is at the bottom of the invoice. If you go to the Services Offered tab, you can explore other interests you might have. If you don't find something on the list, we can talk about it the next time you visit.”

Vivienne took the invoice and studied it. Selene had written “for services rendered” in one column with the amount of time in the next column. At the bottom was the total. It was all very professional. Vivienne looked up at Selene. Was this merely a business, or was it as much a leisure pursuit for Selene as it was for her clients?

“And why do you think there'll be a next time?” Vivienne asked.

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“Because you’re going to go home and shower and think of me as you touch each mark.”

“Excuse me?”

“And then you’ll wait a few days, but you’re going to dig up that invoice, find the website, and scroll through the services I offer until something clicks. Then I’ll have the delight of hearing your voice on my phone again.”

“I certainly will not.”

Selene laughed. “Suit yourself, but do check out the services page first. I’m sure you’ll find a few things to pique your interest.”

Vivienne stared at the woman. She wanted to storm off or snap back, but she didn’t. She was glued to her seat, fury and—more importantly—excitement building.

She was excited in a way she couldn’t remember feeling since she was a twentysomething, getting up to mischief because she could. Because it made her feel—

Ah. That was it.

She felt alive.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE GIRLFRIEND EXPERIENCE

VIVIENNE SHOWERED WHEN SHE GOT home. Her skin stung, the pain coming to life in the back of her skull, and she could no longer tell if the sensation was pain or pleasure. She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath. All she could think about was Selene looking at her and promising that Vivienne would return home and think of her.

As the hot water burned over her back, she held the shower spray over a particularly painful welt and buried her fingers between her legs. As the water stung her back, she trembled, gasping at the orgasm striking through her as she recalled the swish of the riding crop and Selene purring “good girl” in her ear.

Vivienne hated that the woman was right.

She finished her shower, slipping a robe over her pajamas, then went downstairs to dinner.

Hattie set a bowl of roasted vegetables on the trivet. Beside it, meatloaf cooled on a platter that had served many a roast dinner during her childhood.

“How was your meeting?” Hattie asked.

“Perfectly adequate, though I doubt anything will come from it.” The lie slipped out easily. The spine of the chair pressed against a welt, causing the pain to flare, and Vivienne bit her tongue. Selene had said the welts would be gone by morning. Vivienne very much doubted that.

Claudia quirked an eyebrow at her, but Vivienne avoided her eyes and poured a glass of water.

“You look different,” Claudia commented.

Vivienne nearly dropped the pitcher. She looked at her niece, wondering if her gown had slipped from her shoulder to reveal a welt.

“Relaxed,” Claudia said.

“I finished grading the most recent essays from the first-year students,” she said, which was truthful enough.

“You’re never in a good mood until the end of the year.”

Vivienne frowned. “And what, pray tell, do you consider a good mood?”

“You came home smiling.” Claudia popped a small potato into her mouth. “I think you went on a date.”

“Ridiculous.” Vivienne rolled her eyes. “When would I have time to find myself a date? Between my work and my students, not to mention looking after this family, I barely have a moment to go shopping for myself.”

Claudia frowned. “Well, you seem happy.”

Vivienne glared at her, considering whether to scold Claudia for the petulant tone. Before she could decide, Hattie began talking about her morning shift at the bookstore.

Vivienne listened to Claudia eagerly inquiring about the changes at Hattie’s work, as if a bookstore café were some new and revolutionary idea. Neither Claudia nor Hattie had taken half as much interest in her work. It was something shiny and new, she supposed. It would pass. Eventually, it would be a job like any other, and they would find new things to be excited about.

Just as her desire to hire a dominatrix was shiny and new.

And yet, when Vivienne went to bed that evening, she replayed the encounter repeatedly, reliving each strike and tease, remembering how it felt to have her hands coiled and knotted so beautifully in rope and how Selene’s nails had raked across her skin.

The relief at the end, when she’d...

No, she couldn’t admit that. Submission and impact play was one thing, but nearly crying? Vivienne couldn’t honestly find relief from someone hitting her hard enough and long enough that she cried,

could she? It went against her very nature. The only reason she'd become so adept at sneaking out of the house as a teenager was to avoid that same punishment.

But then...that was different.

She thought of the way Selene's hand had splayed against her ribs. How she'd known just when her limit was met and undid everything so effortlessly, then held her until the urge to sob had ceased.

Vivienne turned over in bed, pushing the thought away. No, she didn't want to think about it any longer. She couldn't allow herself to indulge in that fantasy anymore.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Vivienne found Claudia alone at the breakfast table, one leg bouncing as she paged through the Sunday paper.

Vivienne made herself a cup of coffee and joined her at the table. "What time are you going to Rebecca's?" she asked.

"Luca's," Claudia corrected, although Vivienne was certain it had been Rebecca's yesterday. "Could you drop me off by ten?"

"Of course." Whether it was Luca's or Rebecca's didn't really matter. Claudia's friends were always polite, making small talk when they came to the house, but she was especially fond of Luca. Perhaps it was because Luca was Claudia's first friend in grade school. Or maybe it was because she saw elements of herself in the boy. "And you've finished your homework?"

"I've got one more thing to do, but I was going to do it with Luca and Bec."

"Is it a group project?"

Claudia shrugged but didn't look up from the paper. "Sort of."

"Claudia, we agreed that if you went to a sleepover, you would finish your homework first."

Claudia glanced up at Vivienne with a flash of teenage rebellion in her eyes. "It's just a small project for biology. If we work together, it will be faster."

Vivienne pressed her lips together and held Claudia's gaze. "If you don't honor the agreements you've made, people will stop offering

them to you. Finish your homework, or you'll be calling your friends to tell them that you will not be able to make it today."

Claudia slapped the newspaper shut and pushed her chair back. "Fine. I'll go finish it." And she stormed up to her bedroom and slammed the door.

Vivienne closed her eyes, suppressing the urge to go upstairs and tell her off. Claudia's mood swings were becoming worse. Robert used to get into foul moods as a teenager, but Claudia's seemed to be explosive—though she preferred it over Hattie's teary outbursts.

"In a mood, is she?" Hattie asked as she came down the stairs. Her sister was still in her nightgown, curlers in her hair. She bustled around the kitchen.

"We had an agreement that if she finished her homework, she could sleep over with her friends, but it seems she's decided to blow it off."

Vivienne sipped her coffee, then opened the newspaper. She read about the local Denton family scandal, then about a new highway set to open next year, before she turned to the personals section.

Selene had no ad listed. Not that it mattered; Vivienne wasn't interested in pursuing her services again.

"I thought I'd work out in the garden today. Do you have any plans?" Hattie asked.

"Just work, Hattie." Vivienne closed the newspaper. She had a journal article to write, and she intended to have the first draft finished by the end of the semester.

She finished her coffee and took her mug to the sink, then went to her office and shut the door behind her. A long time ago, the office had been her father's, and many of his law books remained on the shelves. Working at the heavy desk was a familiar comfort to her.

After her parents passed and Robert had married, he moved into the house while Vivienne, after some years of travel, had settled in the city and built a career at the university.

And then when the plane crashed, leaving Claudia without her parents, Vivienne returned home. Hattie moved in to help with arrangements and never left. Vivienne was grateful, though she would never admit it. She was perfectly capable of raising Claudia by her-

self—and had for the most part—but the house was big, and Hattie helped fill it.

She switched on the computer and pulled up her article. After reading through the last section she had written, she sighed and opened a browser, typing Selene's website into the address bar.

The website, like the house's interior, was elegantly designed with a vibrant use of red. It had the usual tabs, including a blurb about the dominatrix with detailed, tantalizing information. Photos disguised her face while showing her in a range of outfits with different devices. Most of the photos were tame, with Selene holding the familiar riding crop. In others, leather and rubber were prominently displayed.

Vivienne clicked on the Take a Tour section, which showed the house in daylight with a view of the garden area.

Finally, Vivienne clicked on Services.

She glanced through bondage, domination/submission, impact play, medical play, mistress/pet, and other standard kinks that Vivienne had heard of or experienced herself. She was intrigued by a few, disregarded several as not her thing, and then stopped, intrigued, when she saw:

### **Girlfriend Experience, Deluxe**

Includes everything in the Girlfriend Experience package, plus a few bonuses. Discuss with Selene to have this tailored\* experience to your liking.

Recommended for weekend bookings.

*\*You must be a repeat client to experience the full benefit.*

Vivienne closed the browser. Warmth spread across her face. She knew very well what the Girlfriend Experience was, yet the idea of a tailored encounter sent a shiver down her spine.

Was that where she was with her life? So lonely that she wanted to fall into the arms of a sex worker and play pretend?

No, that was absurd. Vivienne didn't need to see the woman again. She'd had her fun, and even if she went to see Selene again, it wouldn't be for something like that.

Besides, it'd be far cheaper to pick someone up at the bar if she craved that kind of experience. She could drive up to the city, go to a cocktail lounge, and choose from among a sea of people. But then there was the hassle of the conversation dance, making sure the other person used protection, and figuring out how experienced they were. Assuming she could even find someone she *wanted* to have sex with.

Vivienne closed her eyes and leaned back in the creaky old office chair. Maybe she should see if one of her old flames was in the area.

*No*, she thought and returned to work. She had just finished reading through her most recently written paragraph when someone knocked.

Without waiting for a response. Claudia pushed the door open, crossed her arms over her chest, and leaned against the doorframe.

Vivienne glanced at the clock on her monitor. How long had she spent scrolling through Selene's website?

"Have you finished your homework?" Vivienne asked gently. The last thing she wanted was a screaming match.

"I did," Claudia said. Then she sighed and dropped her arms. "I'm sorry. You were right. I promised to finish my homework, and I should keep my promises."

If it wasn't a sincere apology, at least it was something. If Claudia was admitting fault to get what she wanted, she'd at least done what Vivienne had asked.

"Thank you," she said, pushing up from the chair. "You said you were staying at Luca's tonight?"

Claudia nodded and smiled. "Popcorn and horror movies."

"Will Henry be there?"

"Not to stay over, if that's what you're concerned about."

*Hardly*, Vivienne wanted to say. Once Luca became comfortable with his identity, it seemed ridiculous to bring in a no-boys rule, given all the previous times he had stayed over before transitioning. To draw a line now and forbid Claudia from attending a sleepover because Henry would be there seemed hypocritical and, frankly, disrespectful.

Something was going on, and if it wasn't Claudia sneaking off to have sex with Henry, what else could it be? "Have you got everything you need?" Vivienne asked.



Claudia gestured to the overnight bag in the hallway. It looked crammed full, and Vivienne wondered why until she reminded herself that her niece should be allowed some secrets.

If the teenagers were pilfering alcohol from the liquor cabinet, they would have fun and nurse a hangover tomorrow. If that was the case, a hangover would be punishment enough.

“Is your phone charged?”

“It is.”

Vivienne nodded, then picked up her handbag and keys. When she told Hattie where they were going, Hattie asked, “Oh, could you pick up some milk and eggs on your way back? I used the last of them on breakfast this morning.”

“It’s not exactly on my way, but if you can’t do it yourself... Is there anything else you need?”

“Never mind. I can always cook something else or run out myself—”

“No, you’ve already asked. No point in both of us leaving the house today,” Vivienne said.

By the time Vivienne got to the car, Claudia was waiting in the passenger seat, her bag on the floor.

“And you’re sure that you have everything?” Vivienne asked.

“Absolutely.”

\* \* \*

On the drive over, Claudia tuned in to her favorite station and hummed to the music. Her bad mood seemed to have evaporated.

As they pulled up to the Fitzgerald farm, Vivienne adjusted her sunglasses. She considered asking if Joe had noticed any strange behavior with his son.

But as soon as the car stopped, Claudia jumped out of the car with a quick goodbye, then ran up the steps, not even giving her a chance to speak with Mr. Fitzgerald.

*So be it.* The door opened, and Claudia hugged Luca and Rebecca as if it had been months since she’d seen them rather than a little over a day. If they were up to no good, Vivienne would find out soon enough.

Vivienne headed into town to pick milk and eggs from the local grocery store.

It was a simple enough task, except for the fact that she ran into Selene at the dairy case. Selene placed an item in her cart, then turned, coming face-to-face with Vivienne. She wore a black raincoat over a red dress. Her hair spilled down her back.

Despite being in this town for over fifteen years, Vivienne had never once seen the woman. She had to fight the urge to run her fingers through her hair.

Selene raised her eyebrows and stared at her, as if to suggest it was her move.

“Excuse me,” Vivienne said politely, stepping around her. She could feel the woman staring after her as she made her way to the milk. She grabbed the closest carton before moving to the eggs and taking out a dozen. Then she hurried to the cashier.

Except it was the local Oakdale Market, which meant there were only ever two cashiers working at one time, and one was dealing with a customer who seemed to be doing her monthly shopping. The other cashier had two people in line. Selene was the second.

She turned to glance at Vivienne, then smiled and looked away.

All Vivienne could think about was the photo of Selene posed in lingerie on the Girlfriend Experience, Deluxe, webpage, a paddle in her hand and a raincoat like the one she was wearing, opened suggestively.

Vivienne got in line behind her, pride refusing to let her walk away. The cashier was checking out an older man, who was very slowly counting out his money.

The other cashier was still scanning through a hundred items. Vivienne looked back at the gentleman, who was now arguing over a coupon.

It was as though the universe was tormenting her.

Selene laughed softly as she shifted the basket in her hand, and Vivienne felt her cheeks burn. Perhaps she should step away, say something vague about needing something else, and return after Selene had left.

“Do you often huff like that behind strangers, or is there something I can help you with?” Selene asked, half turning to look at Vivienne, her eyes sparkling. “You seem wound up about something.”

Vivienne’s chest tightened at the sight of Selene’s face. She pictured the woman’s mouth falling open as she leaned forward to—

“Well?” Selene pressed. “Did you need something?”

“I’m fine,” Vivienne responded and looked from the man ahead of them, who was now requesting a manager, to the woman in the other line, still only halfway through checking out her groceries.

“I didn’t ask if you were fine,” Selene said, low enough that only Vivienne could hear. It was the same tone she’d used last night. “I asked if you needed something. You’re making a lot of noise for someone simply standing in line.” A look of amusement broke over her face.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Vivienne asked.

“Making small talk. What do you think you’re doing?”

“Waiting to purchase my groceries.”

Selene glanced down at Vivienne’s basket and then back up again. “I see. Had a chance to peruse my services yet?”

A jumble of words piled up in the back of Vivienne’s throat. She was saved from responding when the manager finally showed up.

“Oh, you have. And you’ve found something you like, haven’t you?”

Vivienne averted her eyes, refusing to respond. If Selene wanted to rile her up, that was fine. She would just look for another dominatrix to—

No, she wouldn’t. She wasn’t going to look for a new sex worker because she didn’t need that service.

Selene turned away to check out, still chuckling. Vivienne pretended not to hear her small talk with the cashier, though she watched Selene from the corner of her eye until she left.

Only then did Vivienne let out a breath.

\* \* \*

Vivienne drove home to Claudia’s music playing in the background, unable to calm the turmoil in her belly. When she arrived and

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set the grocery items on the table, Hattie opened the carton of eggs. Two of them were cracked.

“Oh, that’s all right,” Hattie said as she took them out. “I’ll just toss them into the compost.”

Annoyed with herself, Vivienne said nothing and returned to her office to work on her journal article. But instead, she booked an appointment with her gynecologist. She was overdue for a checkup anyway. It had nothing to do with Selene because there was no way that she would engage the woman for any further services, least of all sexual services.

She scrolled through her article, trying not to think about Selene’s hungry expression when she’d looked her up and down, as if she could undress Vivienne right then and there and take her on the spot.

She closed the document, shut off the computer, and went upstairs.

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# PRINCIPLE DECISIONS

BY THEA BELMONT

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