ALL THE TIME

A JUDE LUCAS NOVELLA



Contents

1. Chapter 1 – The Offer 1

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 — The Offer

I'm sinking into a chair that costs more than most people's cars, Italian leather so buttery it practically purrs when I shift.

The thing's all curves and architectural impossibility, like someone fucked a spaceship and birthed furniture.

KaneTrade's LA office is a cathedral of tech-bro wet dreams—floor-to-ceiling glass that drinks the golden hour light like it's communion wine, walls so clean they hurt to look at. Everything's white and chrome and bleeding money, the kind of space that whispers *you've made it* while simultaneously reminding you how easily it can all disappear.

A holographic sculpture spins in the corner, some abstract bullshit that probably cost six figures, catching light like it's hoarding secrets. The desk facing me is a slab of ebony wide enough to land a helicopter on, and I'm sprawled opposite it, legs stretched in that calculated casual way that says *I belong here* even when your gut's screaming *run*.

Outside those impossible windows, Los Angeles spreads like a glittering infection—downtown's steel towers piercing the smog, the Hollywood sign winking sharp against hills that still wear scars from January's wildfires. Smoke ghosts the horizon even now, four months

later, ash dusting everything like fairy tale powder if fairy tales were about paradise burning. The firefighters KaneTrade flew in from South Africa saved half the city, but you can still taste the char in the air when the wind shifts wrong.

I'm Elliot Voss, and six months ago I was nobody. Now I'm the face that launched a thousand fan accounts, the voice that made American girls weak for British vowels they don't know are fake as tits in a Malibu plastic surgeon's waiting room. My Hampshire accent—crafted in a vocal coach's studio in Burbank, polished until it gleamed—slides out smooth as single malt, burying Liverpool's salt and struggle so deep even I sometimes forget the chippy on Smithdown Road where I learned to fight.

Riptide. Jesus, what a ride that was.

The film hit theaters last summer like a beautiful plague—beachy thriller nonsense, all sun-soaked secrets and surf-board chases, the kind of mindless perfection Hollywood churns out when it remembers people want to feel good for two hours. I played Jace, the rogue with the smirk and the mysterious past, outsmarting international spies while looking like I'd stepped off a Calvin Klein billboard. Six hundred million global box office. My face on every billboard from Piccadilly to Sunset, trending on Virtue Verse harder than a royal scandal.

Britain's golden boy, they called me. The next big thing. The one to watch.

And Christ, did they watch. Every coffee run became a photo op, every stumble out of a West Hollywood club became a think piece about the pressures of fame. Agents started treating me like I shit platinum, directors slid into my DMs with projects that had eight-figure budgets attached. I went from struggling actor sharing a flat in Brixton to owning a Venice Beach loft that looks like it belongs in *Architectural Digest*.

The money's real. The accent's not. But nobody asks questions when you're hot.

Declan Kane sits across from me now, eldest of the KaneTrade dynasty, and his smile could cut glass. Everything about him screams precision—suit tailored to molecular perfection, hair that's never known a bad day, teeth so white they probably glow in the dark. His eyes don't blink enough, like he's running on some internal algorithm that forgot to include normal human behaviors.

"One hundred fifty million," he says, and the number lands like a physical weight in the room. His voice is velvet wrapped around a knife blade, the kind of tone that makes you lean forward even when every instinct screams to run. "Four years. Total commitment to the brand."

One fifty fucking million.

I've made good money since *Riptide*—enough to buy the loft, enough to never look at prices when I'm grocery shopping at Erewhon, enough to feel safe for the first time since I was eight years old and watching Mum count coins for the electric meter.

But this?

This is *fuck you* money.

This is generational wealth.

This is the kind of deal that gets you into rooms where they decide who gets to be famous and who gets to fade away.

I lean back, letting the Italian leather cradle me while I survey the view.

Somewhere out there, paparazzi are camped outside my building,

Virtue Verse feeds are analyzing my every public appearance, and teenagers are making TikToks about my jawline.

The machine of fame is humming, and I'm the golden cog at its center.

"Details?" I ask, keeping my voice casual, like I negotiate nine-figure deals over breakfast.

It's a performance—everything's a performance now—but one I've gotten good at.

Declan's brothers lurk behind him like expensive gargoyles.

Milo's got that PR slickness, all perfect teeth and practiced charm, the kind of guy who could sell you your own kidneys and make you thank him for it.

Rex is different—pure menace wrapped in a Tom Ford suit, knuckles that look like they've met faces before, the kind of quiet that makes you check your exits.

The wall screen flickers with Virtue Verse feeds—#PureTrade trending, some influencer getting crucified for a scandal I don't bother tracking.

America's gotten weird since the election, all moral panic and purity culture, like the whole country decided to become a Southern Baptist church overnight.

But that's background noise.

My eyes are on the prize.

"Total synergy," Declan continues, sliding a contract across the desk. The thing's thick as a phone book, pages crisp as fresh hundreds. "Public appearances, media alignment, personal commitment." His voice dips into preacher territory, smooth and hypnotic. "America's changing, Voss. New values, new expectations. Clean living, pure hearts, that sort of thing."

I nod like I'm following, but my mind's already racing ahead to the possibilities. Franchise deals. Marvel contracts. Maybe Nolan will finally return my calls. The kind of projects that turn actors into brands, brands into legends, legends into the kind of people who get

their own stars on the Walk of Fame while they're still alive to enjoy them.

The contract's logo—KaneTrade's sharp K—glints like a warning I'm too hungry to read.

I skim the first few pages: "public appearances," "brand alignment," "personal conduct clauses."

Standard studio bullshit, the kind of legalese that basically says *we own your soul for the duration, please sign here*.

Outside, a billboard catches my attention: "Clean Living Now" in bold white letters, featuring some impossibly wholesome family selling an app that promises to "cleanse your digital life."

LA's always got a new hustle, and apparently salvation's the latest trend. The Virtue Verse feed keeps cycling—#SaveOurStars, #PureTrade, endless sanctimonious noise about "redeeming" fallen celebrities.

America's gone proper churchy, 2025's moral wave crashing over everything like a tide of holy water and judgment.

But I'm British, which means I'm automatically classier than whatever mess they've got going domestically.

The accent helps.

Breeding always plays well here, even when it's fake.

"Creative control?" I ask, flashing the kind of grin that's gotten me out of trouble since I learned to walk. "Input on projects, that sort of thing?"

Declan's laugh sounds like breaking crystal. "Trust us," he says, and Milo claps his hands together like a seal who's just learned a new trick. "You're family now, mate."

Rex grunts something that might be agreement or might be the sound a predator makes before it strikes. His stare feels heavy, like he's measuring me for something—a suit, a coffin, hard to tell which.

I'm about to make some clever quip about family when Declan slides another piece of paper across the desk. This one's different—glossy, professional, the kind of headshot that costs more than a car.

A girl stares back at me. Twenty-two, according to the text below. Cheekbones carved by gods or surgeons—hard to tell the difference in this town.

Lips full enough to launch ships, skin that's never met a pore.

But it's her eyes that stop me cold. Big, brown, and absolutely fucking screaming.

They're the eyes of someone trapped behind glass, watching the world through a window she can't break.

Lila Kane.

The name hits like cold water.

I know that name, know it the way you know a song that's been stuck in your head for weeks.

Lila Kane, KaneTrade princess, social media darling turned cautionary tale. Last spring she was everywhere—Instagram posts from Coachella, bikini shots on Malibu beaches, the kind of manufactured perfection that gets teenage girls to buy whatever she's selling.

Then came the video.

Blurry phone footage, probably shot by some dickhead influencer looking for clout. Lila bent over a VIP table at some festival, snorting lines off the glass like it was powdered sugar, laughing like the world was ending and she was the only one who got the joke.

The clip went viral in that special way scandals do now—millions of views in hours, trending topics, think pieces about "the fall of America's sweetheart."

#LilaLost. That's what they called it. Hashtag and everything, because nothing's real until it has a hashtag.

In the new America—this weird, puritan fever dream we're all living in now—that kind of thing doesn't just damage your career.

It fucking annihilates it.

One minute you're an influencer princess with a seven-figure net worth; the next, you're digital poison, your face a warning to "good girls" everywhere about what happens when you step out of line.

The Kane family's tech empire couldn't scrub it. All their AI and algorithms and whatever the fuck they do with data—none of it could make America forget the sight of their princess with powder on her nose and chaos in her eyes.

"You're hers," Declan says, and the room tilts.

Not a movie. Not a franchise. Not the kind of deal that gets you on *Variety* covers and makes other actors hate you with professional jealousy.

Lila Kane. A fake relationship. Four years of playing boyfriend to a girl whose face is synonymous with scandal, whose name trends for all the wrong reasons, whose eyes look like they're begging for someone to throw her a rope.

One hundred fifty million dollars to sell my soul. To make Lila Kane America's sweetheart again. To convince a country that's lost its collective mind about "moral values" that their fallen princess has found redemption in the arms of Britain's cleanest export.

"Big price for a date," I manage, the words sticking in my throat like glass.

Declan's smile doesn't budge. "Big stakes," he counters. "We protect our own, Voss. When the fires hit in January, we had firefighters flown in from Cape Town. Cost us eight figures, but every life saved was worth it."

It's a flex wrapped in humanitarian bullshit, but the message is clear: KaneTrade's reach is global, their resources infinite, their com-

mitment to their brand absolute. They'll move mountains—or at least deploy private fire departments—to protect what's theirs.

And now they want me to protect Lila.

I look at her photo again, those trapped eyes pulling me in like gravity. Everyone wants a piece of me now—agents, directors, brands, fans who scream my name outside premieres.

But KaneTrade wants it all.

They want to own me the way they own her, the way they apparently own enough of everything to bend reality to their will.

The Virtue Verse feed keeps cycling: #PureTrade, #SaveLila, digital prayers for America's lost lamb.

And here I am, being offered the role of shepherd, complete with a nine-figure paycheck and what's probably a very complicated morality clause.

Outside, ash swirls in the dying light, and somewhere in the distance, sirens wail—could be police, could be ambulances, could be fires still burning in hills that never fully healed. LA's always been good at hiding its scars under perfect lighting, but the damage shows if you know where to look.

I'm holding Lila's photo, studying those eyes, wondering what kind of girl ends up with a face like art and a scandal like scripture. Wondering what four years of fake love does to a person. Wondering if I'm saving her or if she's saving me.

The contract waits, virgin white and thick with promises. Declan's smile never wavers. His brothers watch like predators who've cornered something tasty.

And somewhere in the city below, Lila Kane exists—real, breathing, trapped behind the kind of fame that eats people alive.

I pick up the pen.