



TAKEN



— A MAFIA ROMANCE —

LOGAN CHANCE

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TAKEN

By Logan Chance

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This book is dedicated to my reader's group, The Dark Side, for believing in me.

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“The only evil in this world are the people in it.”

— XAVIER STONE



“Because when I hold your hand, I feel like I'm flying.”

— XAVIER STONE

SYNOPSIS

Rhiannon

Things change. Sometimes not for the better.

Xavier is no longer the maid's son. Or my best friend. Now he's wealthy and powerful—the dark don, in charge of one of the largest corporations in the world.

I never expected the boy who always saved me to be the man who kidnaps me.

Xavier

Some things never change.

Rhiannon is still as fiery and beautiful as the day I walked away. Now I'm back, ready to seek vengeance against the one man who wronged me. My rival. Her father.

If her father wants war, he'll get a war.

Kidnapping his daughter is the key to my ultimate revenge.

PROLOGUE



SEVENTY-TWO STEPS until my life ends. *Mendelssohn's Wedding March* wafts from the strings of the tuxedoed orchestra serenading my death. The white satin bridal gown and veil cling to me like a shroud.

One.

Two.

Three. I count to calm my galloping heart.

Cold eyes at the end of the aisle lock with mine, daring me to run. The golden wings of the turtle dove necklace hidden within the bouquet of white roses fisted in my hand, cut into my palm.

Four.

Five.

The robed priest smiles under the watchful eyes of the marble saints. Murmurs of “So beautiful” and “God bless” turn to wailing shrieks of horror as a shot rings out, dancing across the crescendo of the wedding march.

God isn't here today. And there will be no marriage, only death at this red wedding.



Eight years old

“SHH, YOU’LL GET US CAUGHT.”

“No one’s going to find us. Don’t be such a baby, Rhi.”

“I’m not a baby,” my voice raises a little with denial.

I hate when Xavier calls me a baby. I’m eight years old and can do a ton of things for myself. Like, daddy lets me ride my bike around the neighborhood all alone. Well, really until the end of the street, but still. Plus, grownups say I have a mature soul; whatever that means. It doesn’t sound babyish, though.

“No talking until we get outside,” he whispers. He’s so bossy. But, he is two years older than me, so I guess, technically, he *is* in charge. Plus, he’s my best friend, so I overlook these things.

We duck out the French door in the kitchen, into the dark, trying our best not to make a sound.

This probably isn’t a good idea. Rescue the princess is a game we play often but never at night.

The moon plays peekaboo in the cloud-covered sky, and we slip like mist across the damp grass, hopefully without being seen by the guards.

If my father found us sneaking out, we’d probably be murdered. You think I’m exaggerating, but I’m not. I’ve heard the staff whispering when they think I’m not listening. Once, I asked my mother if he’s a bad man, and she told me never to say it again. She said he protects us from the other bad

people of the world. So, I guess he's good to us.

Well, good to me, anyways. He doesn't care much for Xavier. Mom says he only tolerates him because he's Hannah's son. She's our maid, tall with beautiful hair the color of chocolate, and one of the nicest women I've ever met. And if I'm being honest, sometimes, when she brushes my long red hair, I pretend she's my mother.

Don't get me wrong, I love my mom, but she's always busy entertaining my dad's boring friends when she's not working at his office.

"This way," Xavier directs, leading me down the uneven cobblestone path that cuts through the backyard.

He grabs my hand when I hesitate, and like always, I feel as if nothing can harm me out here with him.

"We're almost there," he reassures, taking us away from the safety of the big brick house, toward the towering woods.

"Maybe we shouldn't," I hedge.

Unsure, I peek over my shoulder for a moment. Like a beacon calling me home, a light flickers through an upstairs window.

"No turning back." Xavier's blue eyes glow with anticipation of all the things I'm afraid of as he tugs me along. He's the opposite of me: fearless.

A blanket of twigs snap beneath our sneakers as Xavier tightens his grip on my sweaty hand. Crickets chirp and things I don't want to think about rustle through the darkness as we move further than I've ever been through the knotty trunks.

A small cabin, in a clearing, comes into view, and he rushes up the rickety stairs, to the front door, dropping my hand somewhere along the way.

Spooky shadows lurk inside the windows, and I hang back a bit, my sneakers cemented to the earth. "What's in there?"

"Don't be a fraidy cat."

"I'm not afraid." I raise my chin and step on the first wooden plank leading up to a small porch.

He opens the door. "Ready?"

I'm not, but I'll never let him know it, so I continue on and follow him into the unknown.

He flicks his flashlight on and scans the room. The dark walls are bare, and a lone chair sits like a throne in the middle of the room with steel handcuffs attached to both arms.

"What is this place?"

“I don’t know,” he answers, looking over at me. “I followed your dad and his friends the other day down here.”

“Xavier, we shouldn't be here. I don’t think good things happen in this place. I don't like it here.”

He grabs my arm, his blue eyes holding mine. “One day, I’ll take you away from your father and all the bad things.”

Xavier has never liked daddy either. His cold hard stare. The gruff in his voice when he yells at him for everything.

My father calls him a ...nuisance.

“What if I don't want to leave?”

“What could you possibly like about living with your father?”

I don't get to answer because there’s a snap of a tree branch outside.

“Hide,” he says, flicking off his flashlight. We crouch by the far wall of the small cabin, behind a table of tools I don’t fully understand.

The front door flies open. “Who’s in here?” The sound of my father’s voice startles us both. Xavier, eyes loaded with fear, slaps a hand over my mouth before I can answer.

Tucking my knees to my chest, I try to make myself disappear. I squeeze my eyes shut, anything to make me go away. My father will probably spank me for being out here, maybe ground me forever from playing outside, but it’s nothing compared to what he’ll do to Xavier.

He might even go so far as to fire his mother.

When my father shines his light around the room, we shrink back into the small alcove of the side. Footsteps fall faster to our hiding spot, and Xavier is yanked up by his hoodie.

“You're hiding like a rat,” my father bites out. “Why are you in here?”

Xavier’s eyes meet mine, and he gives a little shake of his head, warning me to stay silent. “Answer me,” he yells so loud it feels like the walls vibrate.

“I was just exploring,” Xavier finally responds.

“Exploring?” My father drags him to the chair and drops him down in it. “Come out of there, Rhiannon,” he orders.

Reluctantly, I stand from my hiding spot. He flips on the light, and I squint against the fluorescent glare. He's scary when he's angry. Pinched face, flaring nostrils. And right now, he's madder than I've ever seen him. Hannah says to count when I'm afraid or upset and when I'm finished, it won't seem so bad. So, I count the steps over to him in my head to calm myself.

One.

Two.

Three.

I don't want to be a baby, but the tears start falling.

Four.

Five.

He grips my arm and yanks me in front of Xavier. "What are you doing here, Rhiannon?"

Through my tears, I answer. "I'm only eight, you can't expect me to make good choices."

He pulls his leather belt free from the loops... and then whips me.

Over and over.

Until the numbers in my head jumble.

Until I see little stars behind my squeezed eyelids.

Until I cry out I won't do it again.

"Stop," Xavier yells. "It's not her fault. Punish me."

"This *is* your punishment, Xavier," my father shouts.

Finally, after a few more minutes, the hits cease, but the sting and burn continues so fierce I rub my bottom. I'm sure Xavier really thinks I'm a baby now; I can't stop the shudders waffling my frame or the hiccuping sobs.

My father leans down, an inch from Xavier's stricken face, bracing his hands on the arms of the chair. "Remember this lesson."

Xavier doesn't look at me on the entire walk back. My father strides ahead of us across the lawn and when he's out of ear shot, Xavier takes my hand.

"One day, Rhiannon, I will take you away from him."

I don't say a word. The look in his eyes tells me he isn't kidding.



Twelve years old

“SHE CAN'T PLAY,” Dean, Xavier’s new friend, balks. “She's wearing a dress.”

“So,” I snip back, “I can still throw.”

Xavier blows out a breath, saying I'm sorry with his eyes. “It's baseball, Rhi.”

Dean smiles at me, a big Cheshire grin, knowing I'm going to lose at my attempt to join in their game. Almost every day, after school, I race through my homework and head to the small cottage at the back of the property where Xavier lives with his mom. It's the only real routine, I have. But, every afternoon this week, Dean has been here. Dean with his stormy gray eyes and skater blond hair.

“Come on, Rhiannon, you might get hurt,” Xavier says to me, “and you know what happens when you see your own blood.”

I lower my head. “Yeah, I faint.”

“That’s right. We don’t want you fainting all over the place.” He bops my nose with his finger.

“You could be our cheerleader,” Dean offers.

Ignoring him, I turn away and cross to the patio of their home. Hannah waves to me from behind the kitchen island, and I slide the door open and step inside to the scent of garlic.

“Hi, Rhi,” she greets me, her knife flying through the mushrooms on the

counter.

“Hey,” I reply, droopy as the daffodils on the counter.

“Why the sour face?”

I shrug, slipping onto the wood stool at the island. “I don't know.” All it takes to loosen my lips is an arch of her brow. “Well, things are changing, and I don't like it,” I confess.

“What do you mean?”

Her hazel eyes flit over my shoulder to the back lawn. “Dean?” she asks, with just enough comfort in her voice, and sympathy in her eyes, to set my tongue to wagging.

“Yeah,” I answer, resting my chin in my palm, “and everything. Everyone gets to do what they want, and I'm stuck in the castle.”

Fortress is more like it. A few years ago, I realized there are invisible bars surrounding the grounds of our house. I don't get to do the things my friends do: sleepovers, movies, hanging out. I'm like a dog that can only go so far before I'm zapped. I have everything I want, except what I *really* want: to be normal.

Why would Xavier stay imprisoned with me when he can run free with Dean?

“Listen to me, Rhiannon,” she says. “It's life. The only sure thing is the sun rising and setting. What happens between that is always uncertain.”

“Well, I don't like this life,” I pout. “I want to be free too.”

“I don't know that we're ever truly free, Rhi.” A wistful look crosses her face. “There are always invisible ties tethering us to things.”

“Mom,” Xavier interrupts, peeking his head in the door, “can I go to the ice cream shoppe with Dean?”

I pop a mushroom into my mouth, listening to Xavier haggle his way into a yes. “You can come too, Rhi,” he says, hopefully.

“Fat chance,” I answer, standing.

Xavier knows Dad will never say yes. His favorite word is no.

“Don't give up so easily,” Hannah encourages me.

“Ok,” I concede, “if I'm not back in ten minutes, then you know the answer.”

Four minutes later, I sprint across the checkerboard marble tile in the entryway, down the long hall to the wooden door of my father's office. My sandaled feet slide to a stop.

I knock.

“Come in,” he calls out. His dark eyes narrow when I step inside his high-tech lair. “What do you need, Rhiannon?”

“I want to go to the ice cream shoppe with Xavier and Dean.”

With one syllable, he squelches my request. “No.”

He looks back at the flat screen monitor, raising his hand and shoos me away like an irritating fly. That's it. No explanation, as usual. Must be nice to be a grown up. If he keeps this up I'm going to lose Xavier to Dean forever. It's not fair, so I do something I know I shouldn't. Something that is never allowed. “Why?” I question.

The big leather chair he rules his office in squeaks faintly when he leans back, as if it is too afraid to speak up.

His crisp white dress shirt, always a dress shirt, never a cool t-shirt like I see the other dads wear, strains against his broad shoulders when he crosses his arms that never hug me. Fed up and probably a little foolish, I cross mine too.

“You can go to your room now,” he dismisses me.

His dark eyes hold mine. And that's the end of my attempt to rebel.

The silver clock above his head ticks off the deadline to be back at Xavier's. One day, I'll go wherever I want, just not today.

I drag my feet out of his office, through the museum we live in, out the back door, across the lawn to my favorite alone spot—between the gnarly roots of the chestnut tree that sits close to the back of the grounds. A bird flutters from the branches when I sink down on the ground and lean back against the trunk. It roams the pink sky; free.

“Hey,” Xavier says, dropping down beside me.

“I can't go,” I tell him, staring straight ahead. “But it's okay. We have chocolate ice cream.”

“Want to make milkshakes?” he asks. “You can bring your ice cream over to my house.”

I look over, confused. “Where's Dean?”

“He left.”

“You didn't want to go?”

“Nah,” he answers. “Not if you can't come with us.”

I should be happy he chose me over Dean, but it doesn't feel very good. Feels kind of bad, actually. Now he doesn't get the crushed Oreos on his ice cream he really likes. Plus, his favorite is vanilla, and I only have chocolate.

“Well, it's looking like that will never happen.”

“We need to work on your bargaining skills,” he says. “I think I'd rather have no dad than one like him.”

I pluck a blade of grass, twisting it around my finger. “Do you ever think about your father?” We never talk about his dad. And neither does Hannah. There's no pictures or anything saying he even existed.

Xavier picks up a stick, discarded from the tree, and throws it. “Not anymore.”

I don't want him to feel weird, so I change the subject. “When I'm old enough, I'm going to live in a giant castle.” It'll be beautiful.

“A castle? You live in one now.”

I hug my knees. “No, a real castle with a moat and everything in some far-away land.”

“Like Ireland?”

I blink. “I don't really know. Are there castles in Ireland?”

He chuckles. “Yeah, big ones.”

“And I'll always have ice cream.”

“You know,” he looks over at me with a gleam in his eye, “we could always go anyways. It's not far, and I've got money.”

“Well, technically,” I rationalize, “he said no to you and Dean. But Dean isn't going.”

He grins at me, his dark hair catching the sun's rays, and I decide in this moment, underneath this chestnut tree, that there isn't anything much better than Xavier's smile.



Fourteen years old

THE FROWNING GIRL staring back at me in the full-length mirror looks very mature for fourteen. Actually, she looks like a mini version of my mother—long auburn hair, beestung lips, thick lashed brown eyes, and a pert nose. All that's missing is a glass of wine in my hand. Today is my birthday, and mom insisted on an extravagant party in my honor, complete with a lot of people I don't even really know. I'd rather stay in my room and draw. I fiddle once more with the barely there straps holding up my ruby red dress. I look like one of those frilly dress wearing dolls that sits in a glass case. Minus the creepy.

A knock, three quick raps, sounds on my door, and I rush to open it. “Xavier, get in here.” I grab his arm, pulling him closer to me. “You have to quit turning off the security system. My dad will kill you if he finds out it’s you.”

“I’m too good to catch,” he says, before his eyes widen, taking me in. “Wow, you look like a girl.”

“Ha ha.” I splay a hand on my hip. “I *am* a girl, silly.”

With a roll of his eyes, he ignores my statement of fact and lunges onto my bed. His too tall body looks a little ridiculous shoved between the bubblegum pink pillows and zoo of stuffed animals. Last summer, his height took off, and now he towers over me. Not sure what was in the heated air, but last summer, my body changed as well; I’m no longer flat chested. I call it the

summer of boobs. All the scrawny angles have filled out. Hannah says to be proud of my curves, but I'm not used to the new attention. Now, the boys who never noticed me, gawk like I'm the shiny new version of the Playstation.

Except Xavier, of course. He still treats me the same. I could grow horns and a tail and he wouldn't care.

Grinning, he tosses the ball cap that's always covering his dark hair on my comforter. "You think your dad will let me come to the party dressed like this?" He points to his worn jeans and black t-shirt.

I smile at the mischievous look in his eye. He would do it. "I don't think he'll let you come to the party no matter what you wear."

It isn't a secret my father still isn't Xavier's biggest fan. Instead of a nuisance, he's now 'trouble with no future.' But he does have a future, and it's definitely brighter than mine—he's the star baseball player at his public school. And he's smart, like genius, top of his class. He has some kind of photographic memory, because he never needs to study. And he has this freaky ability to get into my dad's house undetected. Actually, into anything with a security system.

"I have something to tell you," he says in a tone that lets me know it's not something I want to hear.

Worried, I perch on the edge of the bed and gaze into his troubled blue eyes. "Ok, go ahead."

He picks up the ball cap and studies the fraying brim as if the peeled back threads hold the courage to say what he's about to tell me. "Your dad asked me to come work for him when I graduate."

One.

Two.

Three.

I haven't had to count to calm myself in a long time. You get older and learn to just deal. But this. I'm old enough to know my father gets what he wants, and for some reason he's set his sights on Xavier.

Four.

Five.

"Say something," he urges.

"Why does he need you?"

"Don't you get it, Rhi." He stands from the bed. "He wants to hire me to do his dirty work."

I shake my head, pushing his words away. "No, he wouldn't." But, who

am I kidding? It is so like my father to take the one good person in this world and try to corrupt him. Once, Xavier told me he would take me away from this place, and I was afraid, but now I pray for it.

With each passing day, I realize the depth of what it is my father does. The “business associates” who come and go at all hours. The mayor and police chiefs who visit often. The Internet is a powerful tool, and so is my curiosity about the words I’ve overheard dropped: *Omertà*, *soldier*, *underboss*. I know what they all mean. I know Ralph doesn’t carry a gun when he drives me to school to protect me from the everyday moms and dads dropping off their kids. I know Sam and Lester aren’t just carrying guns to keep the mailman out of the big iron gate. And I know my mom doesn’t have a shadow following her everywhere she goes because she wants one.

I won’t let this happen.

Xavier is everything wonderful in this world. And he’s all mine.

Well, maybe not *mine*, but I spend more time with him than my own family. Unlike Xavier, I may have a father in my life, but he might as well not be there except to give me a last name.

“I thought you were going to leave and go away to college?” I finally respond. “And then I’d join you.”

That’s our plan: when we graduate, we’ll go far away and leave all this behind. I have my life all mapped out, and it takes place in Maine now. I’ll have a house, with a wraparound porch, on the shore and a little shop where I sell greeting cards I’ve designed.

“It’s ok. I would never work for your father.” The determination in his voice rings strong and true throughout the room.

I bite the corner of my lip, my eyes meeting his. “What are you going to do?”

My dread vanishes with the curve up of his lips. It’s still my favorite thing. Xavier has one of those easy smiles, like you’re the only one in on a secret with him. He can flash it at me from across a room, and it instantly changes my mood.

“Don’t worry about it.” And just like that, he dismisses all the negativity weighing down the room to pull something from his jeans pocket. “I got you a present.”

“What is it?” I try to not sound overly eager, but gifts from Xavier are always special. The stuffed rabbit sitting on my bed meant more to me than the expensive dresses my parents gave me last Christmas.

He steps closer, dangling a delicate, gold chain from his fingers. “Happy birthday,” he says, dropping it in my outstretched palm.

I glance down and run my finger across the cool metal of the attached charm—golden birds nestled, side by side. “I love it.”

“They’re turtle doves. My mom used to tell me the story of the two turtle doves when I was a kid.” He reaches in and separates the charm, holding one of the doves in his hand. “Legend says, they’re a symbol of friendship. As long as you have one, and I have the other, then we’ll be friends forever. No matter what your father does.”

I bound off the bed and tackle-hug him. “This is the best thing I’ve ever received.”

He pulls away, smiling. “Ok, ok. Don’t get all weepy on me.”

“I made you something too.” Grinning, I cross to my desk, pull open the drawer that hides my secret hobby, and grab the envelope with his name.

“It’s not my birthday,” he says, taking it from me.

“I know, but I’ve decided I don’t want all the attention. It’s awkward.”

He laughs, opening the envelope and sliding out the card I made—a smiling hand drawn chestnut.

“‘You’re my favorite nut,’” he reads inside. “You know, this may be the best one yet. You’re getting really good. Someday when you’re rich and famous, I’ll have the originals.”

Later, when I’m down at the party, standing with Morgan and Daphne, the daughters of one of dad’s friends, I hold the dove between my fingers and smile. Nothing will separate us. There isn’t anything my father could do to make him into a bad guy.

When I look up, Xavier is there.

“How did you get in here?” I ask, checking over my shoulder to make sure my father hasn’t spotted him yet.

“I came in the service entrance,” he jabs a thumb over his shoulder, “through the kitchen.”

I smile. “My father will...”

He cuts in, “Kill me, I know.”

There’s a twinkle of mischief in his eyes and a slow grin curves his lips. “Let’s get out of here. Unless you’re having fun standing here in the corner.” He winks.

“Xavier, you’re going to get me into trouble.”

He shrugs. “Nah, come on, it’ll be fun.”

He doesn't need to say any more. Next thing I know, we're sneaking out of my party and through the front door.

Somewhere across the lawn he grabs my hand.

"Let's go to the lake."

There's a small lake right at the edge of my father's property. I'm not usually allowed to go to it, except during the summers when I'm well-monitored.

But, I'm older now. And even if I wanted to say no, the thrills of excitement that race through me as Xavier sneaks me away from my house scream yes. It's more addictive than chocolate.

He removes his sneakers and drops my hand as he hits the tip of the shore. "Water feels good," he tells me, dipping his toe in.

His shirt flies off and in my direction. And I don't move looking at his bare chest. It has ripples and muscles. He's sixteen and already has the physique of a hard-working teen. He drops his jeans, revealing his black boxer briefs, and my mouth hangs open like the fish we hook in the summer. Not attractive, I'm sure. And then, *splash*, he wades into the water deeper.

"Come on," he urges.

I glance down at my dress and toe off my dress shoes. "Well..." I'm not sure how to finish this thought.

This thought being 'I can't be in my panties and bra alone with a sixteen-year-old.' Especially not Xavier. I have boobs and stuff. And my bra isn't even a full bra, it's a special half one that doesn't cover much.

"Rhiannon," my father's voice booms from behind me, causing a momentary knee-jerk reaction of panic all throughout my body.

I turn slowly. "Hi, I was just stepping out for a little fresh air."

His face turns a deadly shade of red when he catches sight of Xavier. "Go back to the house, Rhiannon," he orders.

I gaze out at a very calm Xavier, pushing his hands through the dark water, and then back at my dad.

"It's okay, Rhi," Xavier calls out. "Go ahead."

My feet won't move, because they are too scared to leave Xavier out here alone with my father.

"She doesn't listen to you," my father scoffs. "Go, Rhiannon," he tells me again.

My stupid, stubborn feet won't go, they just won't, and then I'm picked up and tossed like a rock to skip across the lake into the chilly water. My feet

finally do something, kicking and thrashing me up to the surface.

“Fuck,” Xavier says, reaching out for me.

“Is that what you wanted?” my father's cruel voice asks Xavier. “For her to swim with you? Now get back to the house, Rhiannon.”

“Rhi, I’m not kidding, go,” Xavier whispers.

This time I do, so I don't make it worse. I wade out, my watery dress sagging like my pride, and reluctantly pass my father. A shoe wallops me in the back and then another.

“You forgot those,” my father says. “Don’t disobey me again.”

Halfway up the hill, I turn back but can’t make out anything.

Right up to my bedroom I go, slam the door, and cry like a baby until I pass out.



“THROW THE BALL,” Dean calls to me from across the field near my house.

“Chill.” I throw the ball right into his catcher’s mitt. Catch that, fucker.

I smile as Dean shakes out his hand from the fast pitch of my ball.

The sun blinds me for a moment as he throws the ball back, and I do a little dive to clutch it out of the air. I land facing the DeLaurio mansion.

Black sleek cars line the drive. Dinner party. Shannon DeLaurio, Rhiannon’s mother, loves throwing the extravagant parties to show off her perfect life. Every weekend it’s something.

Last weekend was Rhiannon’s birthday party, this weekend a prestigious dinner event.

It must be a big deal, because the security has been beefed up. Most likely politicians.

I turn and throw the ball back with enough force to knock Dean back a few steps when he catches it.

After a few minutes, out of the corner of my eye, I see a small figure emerge. Rhiannon. I haven’t seen her since the lake; my punishment.

“Hey,” she says, lifting her hand in a little wave. “I made you something.”

I drop my glove and race over to her.

“Oh, come on. We playin’?” Dean shouts.

“Give me a minute,” I call back as I jog across the grassy field.

Rhiannon is cute today, in a pink sundress and her long hair pulled back in a braid. She clutches a Tupperware container like it’s going to jump out of her hands, and my stomach smiles knowing I’ll get some of her delicious

treats. She makes the best sweets.

“I felt bad about my birthday party.” Her brown eyes frown at me with regret as I reach her. “You know, with my dad.”

I wave off her guilt. “Oh please, it’s fine.”

“I made some lemon bars for you.” She bites her bottom lip. “I just wanted to apologize for him.”

I place both hands on her shoulders and bend at the knees to stare directly in her eyes. “Hey, don’t ever apologize for him.” And I mean it. Asshole doesn’t deserve it.

“I know.” She holds the bars out a little and I smile. “What did he do after I left?”

I won’t tell her how he tried to make me feel less than human for even thinking about wanting to spend time with his daughter. Or how after, he had his minion, Mike, sucker punch me in the ribs.

“Nothing. Told me to get dressed and go home.” I give her a little wink to let her know all is well.

She lifts a brow. “Really?”

“Yeah, it’s all good.”

“Dude, you about done?” Dean calls from across the field.

I grab the container of lemon bars and hold them up. “Sorry, more important things.”

Rhiannon laughs, popping open the top.

“Hey, want to stay and watch us practice?” I nod toward her house. “I mean, I know you guys are having some sort of party.”

She beams. “It’s fine.”

“It’s never really fine.” I walk backwards, smiling at Rhiannon as I take a bite of my bar. “And that’s what makes it fun.”

She drops down in the grass to watch as Dean and I resume practice until the sun droops in the sky and the wind chills.

“Five more minutes,” I call out to Dean. Two guys, dressed in slacks and button-down shirts, obviously guests from the event happening at her house, wander our way.

“Rhiannon, what are you doing out here?” the lanky, blond kid asks.

“Hey, Ian,” she says, standing. “Just watching my friends play.”

He glances our way, his eyes assessing and judging everything about the situation.

“Throw the ball,” Dean yells.

I put up a hand, wanting to watch to make sure she's ok.

"Why don't you come back to the house, instead of hanging out with these guys," Ian says.

The way he says 'these guys,' like we're toxic waste threatening to contaminate her, pisses me off. I've noticed this asshole around her house before. His dad is a Senator or something else equally important. The other tool beside him, with short black hair and squirrely brown eyes, is probably a politician's kid too.

I drop my glove and walk over.

"Everything ok over here?" I ask her.

She nods.

"Hey, is he the pitcher for the Knights?" Ian asks Rhiannon as if I'm not here.

"I am," I answer as Dean makes his way across the field to have my back. "And you can ask me."

Ian holds his hands up, in a mock surrender, and laughs a laugh much too cocky. "I've heard about you," he says. "Too bad you can't afford to go to our school, they could use a good pitcher."

My fists ball, begging to knock the smirk off his pasty face. His friend stays silent, darting his eyes back and forth between us.

Rhiannon steps beside me. "Ian, get lost."

I laugh at the look of shock on his face.

I wink. "Looks like money can't buy you everything, asshole."



Seventeen Years old

THE PROM IS a big deal in most people's life. But, not mine. I couldn't care less. My dream date was Xavier, but with him in his own apartment with Dean, and not really aware I'm alive, it didn't happen.

I text Morgan to hurry up and get here.

Be there in ten, she replies.

Taking one last look in the mirror, I smile at the strapless black dress I'm wearing. It's simple, with a hint of shimmer, and whispers against my skin. The dove Xavier gave me three years ago is my only jewelry. I know he's around today, courtesy of Hannah, and hopefully, he'll finally notice I'm not a little girl anymore.

I slip on my heels and step outside my room. The house is quiet as I make my way down the wide staircase to the landing where Hannah stands changing out flowers in the tall bronze floor vases that decorate the foyer. Her eyes light up when she sees me. She stops what she's doing and hustles over to me.

"You look so grown up, Rhiannon." She gives me a hug.

"Thank you, Miss Hannah."

"You remember what I told you?" she asks, arching a dark brow.

A blush heats my face remembering Hannah's lecture about sex and condoms. I already know these things, but I'm sure she feels it's her duty since my own mother seems not to realize I'm on the brink of adulthood.

“How could I ever forget,” I tell her.

Aside from the fact that's a conversation no teen wants to have, having it come from the mom of the guy you're pining after made it a hundred times worse.

She laughs a little and continues to mortify me. “Sex isn't something to be ashamed of, Rhiannon, but it shouldn't be taken lightly.”

“Yes, I know,” I reassure her. “There will be no sex tonight.”

She smiles and kisses me on the cheek. “Smart girl. Now go have fun,” she says before leaving me.

I'll admit, I've thought about it...a lot. With Xavier. Somewhere along the way, my feelings of friendship morphed into infatuation. Unrequited infatuation. He's never made a move. Not even last year at Tina's sixteenth birthday party when we were snuggled together on the hammock in her parent's backyard. It was the perfect opportunity. The definition of perfect. We gazed at the blinking stars. We laughed about the future and my plans to attend MECA, Maine College of Art.

I pulled out the quirky hand drawn card, with a tiny screwdriver on the front, I made for Tina inscribed with “Happy Birthday! Get Screwed” and then he got quiet and leaned in close. I know I saw something in his expression. And just as I closed my eyes, ready and willing, he pulled away and stood so quickly from the hammock, it almost sent me crashing to the ground. More like crashing down to reality.

After that party, things changed. There was no more talk of the future.

Xavier stayed away, going to parties with new friends, and... he started dating girls. Lots of them. Holly, Noel, Faith. His very own Christmas card. On and on. Since then, our friendship has basically been non-existent. No more watching movies and just hanging out. I haven't even told him I received my acceptance letter to MECA a few weeks ago. No one knows, actually. In secret, I applied. Now, I must convince my parents. I'm ready to use the bargaining skills I've been mastering.

On my way to the kitchen, I pass my father's office and halt when Xavier says, “I won't be working for you, ever.”

My eyes widen. No one has ever talked to daddy that way.

But, the main reason for my surprise is Xavier's words. Hearing him standing up to my father sets a flame of hope alight in my stomach.

It extinguishes when I hear my father laugh. Such a sinister laugh. The kind of laugh that makes grown men cower in fear. The kind that makes me

feel five and afraid again.

“Xavier, you’ve always been a smart kid. Why waste your talent?” My father rises from his chair. “This is my fifth security system you’ve broken into.”

“Not that hard.” Xavier clears his throat. “But the fact of the matter is, I won’t ever work for you.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Yes, we will.”

Out of my peripheral, I see my mother exit the great room, wine in hand, and I quickly step away from the battle of wills taking place behind the cracked door and turn towards her.

“Well, you look lovely, dear.” She teeters on her black heels a bit, tipsy, like always.

“Thanks, Mom,” I reply, meeting her slightly bloodshot eyes.

Somewhere between my ninth and tenth years, Shannon DeLaurio began having wine for breakfast instead of fruit smoothies. Of course, we don’t discuss it, though, because that would mean there’s a problem. Mom doesn’t do problems, so, therefore, they don’t exist.

Personally, I think she drinks herself into a coma every day, so she doesn’t have to deal with my father. I know I would if I was married to the man.

She threads a strand of my hair through her fingers. “Ian will love the dress.”

Ian, my hand selected date for tonight. Even if Xavier had asked me, my domineering father wouldn’t have allowed it.

I grin, keeping up the pretense. “I’m sure he will.”

“Just smile and look pretty. That’s all they really care about.”

Thankfully, the doorbell interrupts our awkward moment.

Ian and friends have arrived. We take a few obligatory photos in front of the fountain, and after I hop into the back of the limo, I gaze upstairs and see Xavier staring down on me through the arched window.

I trace the dove connecting us as Ian shuts the door, closing me in.

The next two hours are spent avoiding Ian in the ballroom of the Four Seasons. Lots of time spent in the bathroom. Hannah truly had nothing to worry about in the sex department tonight. The more my father pairs us up, the more I distance myself. He’s too into himself to even notice I’m not interested. After he does this weird grinding thing against me on the dance

floor, while declaring himself King of The Prom, I decide I want to go home. I've had enough, and my mind hasn't stopped thinking about Xavier and my father. I need to see him.

I fake a headache, telling a now half-drunk Ian I'm leaving.

"Why, Princess?" he slurs, sliding his hand around my waist.

I hate when he calls me princess. It's an unspoken 'secret' amongst everyone of my background. It's one of those things everyone knows but doesn't speak about. Rhiannon, sheltered daughter of the... I can't even think the word, because that makes it true.

"I feel a little dizzy," I lie.

"You finally get out, and you want to go home?" He shakes his head. "No."

"Um, yes," I answer, raising my brows, "and that's what I'm going to do."

This flask sneaking jerk, who already thinks he rules the world, is not the boss of me. Boss, ugh. In a few more months, I won't have to think about any of this anymore. I'll be a little fish in a big pond of other little fish.

He reaches out to touch the dove. "Shouldn't you be wearing diamonds? You're always wearing this thing."

I push his hand away. "This *thing* was a special gift from Xavier."

"Ah, Xavier. And what makes it so special? It's probably not even real gold."

"He has the other half," I inform him. "And not everything has a price. I'm leaving."

He's upset, but not too much, because he doesn't even bother walking me out. Good choice, dad. Father fail one million.

Half an hour later, the limo drops me in the circular drive, and when it pulls away, a deep voice startles me.

"How was prom?" Xavier asks, leaning against a tall oak.

"God, you scared me," I tell him.

"So how was it?" he asks again.

"Everything was fine." I slip off my heels and walk closer, wanting to talk about more important things. "What happened with my father today?"

He pushes off the trunk, a naughty grin tugging at his lips. "Don't worry about any of that now. Tell me about your night."

"There's nothing to tell." We step into the dimly lit house, making sure not to wake anyone as we travel to my bedroom upstairs.

"Did you have fun?" he asks, as soon as the door shuts behind him.

“Sure I did.” I grab black yoga pants and a t-shirt from the drawer and walk toward the en suite bathroom.

“I don’t believe you,” he whisper-shouts as I close him out.

I drop my things on the marble counter and glance at my lying self in the mirror.

What am I doing? Trying to make him jealous? As if he cares.

I reach my hand around to unzip my dress and tug. It’s stuck. Just like me. Stuck in this never ending rut of wanting what I can’t have.

Over and over again, I try, but the little thingy isn’t unzipping.

I peek my head out the bathroom door. “Xavier?”

He sits on the bed, my old ratty stuffed bunny in his hand, and when he sees me, his eyes skim my face.

“Can you help me with my zipper?”

Ugh, this sounds so contrived. How embarrassing.

“Sure.” He drops the bunny and steps closer.

When I turn around, there is no space between our bodies. He sweeps my hair across my shoulder, and I suck in a breath at the featherlight touch of his fingertips across the nape of my neck.

Oblivious to his effect on me, his hands land on my zipper. “This little fucker is stuck good.”

Describing what’s happening in my belly as butterflies doesn’t do it justice. The flutter is more powerful, like a swarm of eagles soaring.

He tugs a little harder, and his knuckle grazes against my overheated skin.

After another tug, the zipper finally succumbs to his power, just as I want to do.

He lowers it a bit, and I turn in his arms.

Xavier lets out a small chuckle, his hands unsure where they should go, but there’s nothing funny in this moment. Not now.

Instead of pulling away like I expect, he traces the gold chain draped over my collar bone.

“You still wear this,” he whispers.

“Every day.”

His eyes meet mine and the air stills in my lungs. This is all new. The overwhelming feelings. The rush of adrenaline I feel right now. My brown eyes hold his uncertain blue ones, wondering if he’ll finally kiss me. Wondering if I’ll be any good at it.

His crystal eyes war with something inside his head, and I see the

moment he decides against whatever he was planning to do with me.

But, I don't want to back down.

"I've never had a real kiss before," I confess.

He laughs a little. "What?"

"Will you...uh...show me how?"

"No."

I step away from his rejection of me. "I'm a freak. All the other girls are having sex, and I'm so inexperienced it's laughable."

He runs a hand down his face. "I've seen the guys at your school, be thankful they aren't kissing you."

"It doesn't matter anyway. Most of them are too afraid to even try because of who my father is. I'm going to die an unkissed virgin."

"Good." He shakes his head. "Why are you even asking this? Is this something you want?"

I chew on my bottom lip. I can't voice what I really want, because that would be too embarrassing. "Yes."

Xavier steps closer, tilting his head closer to me, his raven-colored hair inviting me to run my fingers through it.

"Rhi," he whispers, his lips nearly touching mine.

"Yes?"

"You sure?"

"Yes."

He presses his lips to mine. And it is...un-be-lievable. I let him lead me in this kiss. This explosion of want.

His hand plunges into my hair, thumbing through each strand. On a groan, he moves his body closer, wrapping his arm around my lower back, melding us together.

I cling to his shirt, fisting it in my needy hands.

The kiss deepens, his tongue finding mine, and everything changes. Everything. This kiss, with its rapid pants and hungry moans, strips away the last of the girlish layers, leaving a woman in its place. Nothing could have prepared me for the reality of his lips on mine. There is no coming back from this kiss. No wonder kissing leads to sex. A want so intense, it threatens to consume me, settles in my core.

When I trail my hand up his chest, across his pounding heart, he tears his lips from mine. No matter what else happens in my life, I'll never forget this moment, his labored breath and hooded eyes.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Lesson learned?"

I step closer as he steps back a little. "Yes, but why did you stop?" I rush the words out.

He avoids my eyes. "I think I gave you enough practice for Ian."

"What? I won't be kissing Ian," I can barely get out.

"Oh, come on. You know your dad will have you married off to him before you're even eighteen."

"That's not true."

"Don't be so naive, Rhiannon. Maybe if I go to work for your father, I'll be good enough in his eyes to even sit at the same table."

"Don't even joke about that." He raises a brow, and oh my god, is he serious? "Would you?"

"Does it matter?"

The high of my first kiss plummets into my first taste of disappointment. True disappointment. I never expected him to be the one to serve it to me.

Hopes and dreams dim into a dark reality I can't be a part of. "Please leave. I don't want to see you right now."

Deaf to his pleas, I slam the door shut.

I rip the prom dress, bought with tainted money, off me and throw it in the trash can. After a long scalding shower, trying desperately to wash away the contamination that is imprinted on my skin, I change into my night clothes.

When I emerge back in the room, Xavier is gone.



LIFE CHANGES IN AN INSTANT. What in the damn world was I thinking by kissing her? I shouldn't have. I mentally kick my own ass. I've always kept a good distance from her. Kept my hands to myself. Kept the whispers away from her father's prying ears. And he's got jumbo fucking ears. Dumbo ears. He's always watching, always listening. She's on a short leash that he yanks back if she goes too far. Pretty sure that's why he hates me, because I'm the one thing he can't control.

I slip out the back door, still tasting her kiss on my tongue, and head down the long drive I've walked a million times to see Rhiannon, back to my mom's house. I really fucked up coming here today but seeing her with that All-American athlete and piece of shit douchebag, Ian, well, no fucking way. There was no way I was going back to my apartment till I knew she was home.

Headlights come into view, driving away from the cottage I grew up in. I step to the side of the narrow drive, into the grass, as two black sedans speed by. Delaurio's car.

A weird feeling sets in. You know the one, where your hair stands on ends, or your skin breaks out in goosebumps. I jog the rest of the way, up the front steps, and jiggle the front door handle. Mom's car is still parked next to my piece of shit Ford truck. I fumble with my keys in my pocket and damn near drop them as I try to get them into the lock.

"Mom?" I call out, racing through the house, flipping on lights as I go. My heart beat slams into overdrive when I can't find her. I reach for my cell, heading into the kitchen, and there she is sprawled out on the floor in her

nightgown. Her eyes stare through me.

I slide along the floor, like I do on the field sliding into home base, and scoop her head off the floor.

“Mom, say something. Mom?”

Her chest doesn't move. No air comes from her lungs. She isn't breathing. There's no sound as I punch in the numbers 9-1-1 on my cell and bring it to my ear.



Suicide. Overdose. Mixed with alcohol.

I sit in disbelief as the coroner tells Mr. DeLaurio one more time about the events that took place. My mother didn't have anti-depressants. There was no liquor in the house.

What the fuck does he know? Asshole wasn't even here, but pretty sure Mr. DeLaurio was.

The realization that she's even gone hasn't fully hit yet. She's been everything to me—mom, dad, friend. And when I find out who did this, they will fucking pay. Rhiannon finds me and wraps a comforting arm around me, our earlier fight forgotten.

Her tears soak my shirt before her mother ushers her away. Everything is moving in slow motion.

Mr. DeLaurio finishes up with the officials, and a catastrophic storm is brewing in my bones. He glances at me, his solemn look as artificial as his worried smile.

The chief of police and coroner stand close together, signing off on papers. DeLaurio walks across the spot where her body lay an hour ago.

Even if I did speak up, then what? Who would believe a kid against the powerful Mr. DeLaurio? Who would believe me at all?

No one.

And I know what type of man he is. And now what? I'll tell you what—I stand up to one of the most ruthless mob bosses in the world. What have I got to lose? I have nothing now but distant relatives I don't even know.

“Two cars left here,” I say, glancing over at DeLaurio. “Looked a lot like yours.”

“Son, you're upset,” the police chief says. “Sorry for your loss.”

“You're not going to listen to me?”

“No,” he says. He gives a chin nod to Mr. DeLaurio and they are both gone before I can get another word out.

We bury my precious mother's body on a rainy and cold, late spring day. As I stand next to my mother's casket, laying a white rose amidst the mound of flowers on top, my heart turns to ice.

My eyes meet Mr. DeLaurio's. The man's damn face hasn't left my dreams since the moment I found my mother dead on the floor.

Despite the rain pouring down in broad gray sheets, he heads in my direction. He sets a hand on my shoulder as I catch sight of Rhiannon turning to leave after the service. I just can't bring myself to seek her comfort, even though she's offered. Many times. I know she's hurting, but my pain is too great and it's all mine; I don't want to share it.

“Son, I know this must be hard on you.”

I breathe through my nose to control the anger tearing through me.

“If you need a job...”

I cut in, “I don't. I'm going to find Rhiannon,” I taunt him.

Let him try to stop me. But he does. He not only stops me, he destroys me with his words. He tells me things with a meaning that cuts like a double-edged sword and I can barely hear him over the rain chilling my bones. The thud of dirt hits the casket, and I glance to Rhiannon who shares an umbrella with her mother as they race to the car.

“I don't believe you,” I say.

“I understand what you must be feeling.”

“You don't understand shit.” And he doesn't.

My head spins, and I fight back the urge to smash his head in with the shovel covering my mother with the vile ground he stands on. I stalk away, confused and angry.

Death changes people. Who I was before died along with my mother that night.

A few weeks after the funeral, I pack my mother's belongings, taking one last look around. I will never forget this place, or the lesson learned here, but now it's time to move on.

With a life insurance check from the lawyers, access to a hidden account of my mother's, and a new mission in my heart, I step outside and throw the box in my old pickup.

Time to leave the garden of evil and look for my own forest to claim.



Two years later- Nineteen years old

“THESE ARE GENIUS,” Delilah, the manager of *Worldly Gifts*, the gift shop in my father’s luxury hotel, coos.

“I’m just going to slip a few in the inventory.” Her honey-colored eyes fill with skepticism at my bold attempt to sneak something past my father, so I continue with Operation Get Delilah Onboard. “You do the ordering,” I remind her. “He’ll never know.”

I need her to agree. This is the perfect place to test out my brand of greeting cards. The fact he won’t know I’m using his store to make my own money is even better. And I’m not too worried he’ll find out, because in the year I’ve worked here, not once has he deigned us with his presence. Even though I’ve spotted him frequently having lunch meetings or cocktails in the hotel restaurant with all the important people he owns. He should set up another gift shop with all the Mafia must-haves. Need a police chief to hide illegal activity? Five thousand dollars. Politician? Bargain priced at ten thousand dollars.

It’s excruciating waiting for her go ahead, and just when I’m ready to beg, she looks up at me and a conspiratorial grin lifts her glossy red lips. “Let’s do it.”

If I was a squeer, I would squee. Long and loud. Instead, I pull her in for the hug of all hugs and thank her for her loyalty with a kiss on the cheek. Someone like Delilah isn’t easy to find, since most people are terrified of my

father. I grab a smooth silver rack from under the counter and slide it next to the register. In a few minutes, I have my very own display of *Inscription Prescription Rx* greeting cards.

"I'll take this one," she says, plucking one with colorful lollipops that reads 'thanks for not sucking' inside.

"It's free," I tell her. I'll never be able to repay the debt I owe to this tiny woman with pink-tipped hair.

"No way," she argues, pulling her handbag out from under the counter. "Honey, it's time you do something for yourself." She slides a five dollar bill on the register. "And now, it's time for me to go to lunch. Keep track of your money," she calls out over her shoulder. "I'll be back in an hour."

After she's gone, I walk to different spots in the swanky rectangular store checking out my cards. They look great from every angle, if I do say so myself.

It's a little bittersweet seeing the whimsical drawings designed to make someone smile since the driving motivation behind them was utter sadness. Sadness over Hannah. Sadness over Xavier leaving with no warning two weeks later. I lost the two most important people in my life, back-to-back. I have no idea why he left or where he went but, part of me, after all this time, still clings to the hope he's going to contact me.

"Hey, Princess." I look over to see Ian, looking very yacht club in his khaki pants and thin black sweater, striding into the store as only someone who thinks the world revolves around them can. "How does it feel to be out of the tower?"

"Hey, Casper," I say back, finally dubbing him with the name I've always wanted to. He's too pale—too much of an asshole. His helmet of blonde hair gleams under the lighting as he approaches.

"Being out of captivity agrees with you," he says, openly leering at me like I'm a plate of beef carpaccio he scarfs down every time my father has him over for dinner.

"Wish I could say the same," I mutter under my breath.

The future politician that he is, he lets my barbs fly past with a practiced smile that I imagine will be used many times on his campaign trail. A campaign trail that will be privately funded in part by my father. God Bless America.

"Let's get together and talk about the future," he suggests, like he's being recorded for a sound bite.

“Sorry, I’m really busy.” Forever. I move behind the counter, putting the glass case barrier of high priced handbags between us.

His eyes narrow a bit at my rejection, but the smile doesn't falter.

“Just stopped in to say I ran into Xavier in the Miami airport not too long ago,” he verbally punches me in the gut. “Said he was going wherever he wanted when I asked where he was headed.” His calculating blue eyes hold mine. “He said to give you this.”

He slides the final death blow on the counter. I jerk a little, as if he kicked me, and slip my hands in my jeans pockets so he doesn't see them shake.

The turtle dove.

The other half of the gold charm I still wear around my neck.

“You alright? I'm sorry. He was never good enough for you.”

I'm not dumb enough to believe he's sorry. This is what's dangerous about someone like Ian: his blade of cruel intentions is coated with false concern. And as he slides the knife in and guts you, he covers the duplicity with an ‘Are you ok?’

By some miracle, I hold back the sob welling in my throat. Internally, I weep that Xavier is roaming the world, and I'm waiting for his return. Outward, I smile, fighting the ache in my chest. The last grain of hope I've been holding onto slips through my fingers.

“You should go.” I give a head nod to the garish marble lobby where his father stands typing on his phone. “We all have our captors, don't we?”

He gives a little rap on the glass case. “Next time, Princess.”

There won't be a next time. One way or another, I'm leaving here.



A few weeks later, I go to the one person who has the power to set me free.

I drop the acceptance papers to MECA that have been stashed for two years on my mom's desk.

“What's this?” she asks, picking up the creased envelope.

“This is my ticket away from the Mafia,” I answer, finally speaking the word I've held in so long.

“Rhiannon,” she scolds me, as if the room is wired, “what are you talking about?”

“You think I don't know?” I lean down, brazen with the need to get away,

brace my hands on the desk and look straight in her worried eyes. "I've known for years what Dad does. He's a criminal. Just because you keep me a prisoner doesn't mean I'm oblivious to all the things he is."

She shakes her head, red tendrils escaping from the loose bun on top of her head. "You're not a prisoner."

"We're all prisoners," I spit back. "Unless you're lucky enough to disappear."

"Listen, I know you're still upset about Hannah and then Xavier leaving," she stands, with more life in her than I've seen in years, crossing around the beechwood desk, "but you can *not* say these things."

"I think I've been silent for too long." Bitter tears flood my eyes. "You don't miss your voice? Well, I do."

"Rhiannon, there is no normal life in our world." Empathy etches itself on her face, transforming her into someone who looks like they actually care. "You can run forever, but there is no escaping. Don't fool yourself into believing otherwise."

"Please, I'm begging you. If you love me, don't sentence me to the prison you live in," I whisper.

For a moment, the mother I remember from so long-ago surfaces. The one who took care of me and loved me before Hannah stepped in as a replacement. "I'll make it happen."



Four years later- Twenty-Four years old

MECA College

I SEE HIM, even though he thinks I don't. His black wool coat and beanie do nothing to disguise him. I've named him Maximus in my mind. It's a good strong name for the brawny man who has lingered in the shadows for years following me everywhere. I'm sure in a different life, we'd be great friends. Maybe grab a coffee or a burger. In this one, no.

I wave, letting him know I'm aware he's there, and that he is failing at his spy duties, before tossing my coffee cup in the wire trash container.

Being tailed by one of my father's men is a small price to pay for the semi freedom I have at MECA. I'm not sure what my mother said to loosen the shackles on me, but it worked. The sweet taste of being independent has a sour aftertaste still not knowing where Xavier disappeared to. It's a little like sucking a lemon after a rich piece of chocolate pie. But he clearly put all this behind him, and I've tried to do the same. I've made a few friends, been to parties, and lost my virginity. All while being guarded by Maximus.

Orange and gold leaves swirl and scatter in the breeze as I weave through the throng of red-cheeked students in colorful coats and scarves trying to ward off the frigid Spring air. My toes feel like blocks of ice inside my black leather boots as I hurry to my apartment building a few blocks from campus.

Doesn't matter. Everything about living here is worth a few frostbitten toes.

Once inside, I switch my jeans and red sweater for yoga pants and a hoodie and pull on my eggplant emoji socks. It's the closest I'll get to a penis. My phone rings just as I pop a frozen dinner into the microwave, and I mentally curse at the caller ID. My father. Even the trill of his ring sounds demanding. *Answer meeeeeee*. I've sent him to voicemail twice already today. He never calls, and it's inevitable I'm going to have to answer, so I take a deep breath and get it over with.

"Hello."

"I need you to come home this weekend," he says.

"I'm great, thanks. My professor says I have an innate talent and thinks my cards will be a huge success. Did you know I hand draw cards and write quirky little sayings in them? Probably not, you're busy with your mob stuff..."

"Rhi-an-non" he interrupts, stressing each syllable of my name, which means I've really burrowed under his olive skin, "you *will* come home this weekend. A driver will pick you up tonight at seven o'clock."

"Why?"

The beep of the microwave sounds as he hangs up on me.



"I've notified the school you won't be returning," I think I hear my father say.

Shock does funny things to you. Absurd things. All I can think about was my last meal in Maine was a Lean Cuisine spaghetti. Not lobster, not blueberry pie, or a hearty rich seafood chowder—a Lean Cuisine. I didn't even need to save those calories.

"You can't do this. I'm a few months away from getting my degree," I retort, needlessly. I may as well be speaking to the walls here in his office.

He can and he did. Waves of nausea swell through me. I'm going to vomit all over his navy suit. "Why are you doing this?"

"I let you go to school and have your independence. Now it's time for you to settle down, Rhiannon." My ears aren't working. I tug my lobes, but I can't feel my fingers. "I'm announcing your engagement to Ian."

My brow furrows at the lack of remorse in the dark eyes staring at me as if I'm not his flesh and blood. As if I'm some inanimate object he can give

away. This isn't the eighteenth century where you get acres of land or a goat for your daughter's hand. No, in this world, you get government bills passed in your favor.

His regal office closes in on me. All that's needed is the slamming of a gavel to make it final.

"You'll sign a contract agreeing to his terms." And there it is.

The large oak desk separating us sways, and I close my eyes to block out the evil sitting across from me. His image, in his expensive suit and blood-red power tie, is seared on the inside of my lids.

One.

Two.

Three.

"I won't do it."

"You have no choice. It's your duty."

"My *duty*? To give you a political connection to do your bidding for life?" My voice rises in panic. "I don't even like him."

"I'll have your apartment packed up and you will stay here until the marriage."

"And when's the big day?" I grit out.

His eyes rake me over, not a care of my opinion in the matter. "We want it to coincide with his campaign, so it'll be a long engagement."

"Fuck you," I whisper.

Quick like a snake, he darts forward, venom striking me. "You will do what I say, or others will be punished."

His poison flows through my veins, immobilizing me in the small leather chair designed to make the occupant feel insignificant.

I don't doubt for a second, he means what he says. He's notorious for his lessons. "I will get a car, and I will come and go as I please. Those are my terms."

I reach in my handbag and pull out the card I've been holding for him: a picture of an oversized grapefruit and a smaller one beside it, with the inside saying, 'Thanks, Dad. I'm eternally grapefruit.'



Two Years Later

It's time.

SHE LOOKS over her shoulder and slings a small black suitcase in the back of her cherry red Tesla. If the situation were different, I'd probably commend her for her car choice. Not because it reminds me of the color of her hair, but because it was so easy for my men to put a tracking device underneath. Too fucking easy. Her father should rethink who he lets in his organization.

He should rethink everything.

“Follow her,” I order my driver as she pulls away from Delilah’s house.

“Yes, sir,” he says, easing out of our spot across from the large brick home.

Many years have led to this moment.

I'll find my own form of justice: revenge.



TIRES SCREECH, a black car cuts me off on the two-lane road in the middle of nowhere. My seatbelt locks when I slam on the brakes to avoid crashing. Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes away is as far as I got from my doomed future.

The black car in front of me stops, and I squint to get a better look.

A tall man exits the back seat, and I grab the pepper spray from my purse.

My heart slams against my chest as I watch the shadowy figure draw closer. With nowhere to go, or anything to defend myself with, I clutch onto the spray in my hand.

The door is locked, thank God, and I breathe a tiny sigh of relief. Very tiny. The man gets closer, and believe me, if I could run him over, I would. But, there's no room for it since another car is behind me.

Tap. Tap. Tap, on my window.

I look straight forward.

"Rhiannon," I hear a man say, and it takes me a moment to recognize the voice calling my name.

And that's when I turn toward the sound, glance up, and stare into the glacial blue eyes of a ghost.

It took me a lifetime to fall in love, and a moment to fall out. Right now, on my knees, in front of my former best friend, is when I fall out. I hate him.

Red trickles from his knuckle I slammed in the door, down his fingertip, forming a red teardrop that falls on the tip of his designer shoe. It splatters

and spreads, oozing like paint across the glossy black leather. Such a shame his five hundred-dollar shoes are ruined.

I breathe through my nose, trying not to faint at the sight of the crimson red.

My scalp screams for mercy when he fists my hair tighter and yanks my head back. The handsome face I dreamt about for years is contorted into a mask of rage I don't recognize.

"You're coming with me," he demands.

"No."

He bends down, until his blue eyes are an eyelash width from mine. "Rhi," he whispers. "I won't show you any mercy."

"I don't want your mercy, Xavier," I whisper back.

His warm lips brush against my ear. "What if I take you back to Ian?"

My heart races at the mention of my forced fiancé. For two years, I've endured the impending nuptials, biding my time until I could escape, only to be thwarted by this.

Like vultures, his suited men watch in the darkened parking lot, waiting to see who comes out the victor.

"Let me go."

"No." He pulls me to standing. "Haven't you learned yet I mean what I say?"

"Like leaving me?" I taunt. A muscle ticks in his jaw.

He releases my hair and turns away. "Put her in the car," he orders.

His henchmen get no resistance from me as they lead me to the black sedan.

I'll figure a way out of this. Just like when we were kids and played rescue the princess. Except, this time, Xavier isn't smiling and laughing. And this time I'm not the princess of some imaginary land. I'm a different kind of a princess. Something I want no part of. A Mafia princess. And Xavier isn't my white knight coming to rescue me. He's willing to kill me to get what he wants.



"What are you doing in my room?" I wrap the plush, white towel tighter around me, trying to shield myself from the insanity of this situation.

“This house belongs to me. Why wouldn't I be here?” Xavier’s eyes flit over me.

“What's the matter, Rhiannon?” He crosses the distance between us. “Still shy around boys?”

“You’re so mean now.” I whisper, looking up at him. And I *still* can't believe I'm actually looking at him after all this time. When the car cut me off on the outskirts of the city, I figured it was one of my father’s men. That maybe Delilah had sold me out. Never did I expect to see Xavier step from the car. I've had zero time to process what's happening. Zero time to come to grips with the fact the boy who left is standing in this room a man with obvious wealth and a vendetta the size of Texas. Or hatred the size of Wyoming. Or both.

“You've changed since I saw you last,” he says, ignoring my question.

So, has he—the model perfect chiseled angles and masculine planes of his face are still beautiful, but it's his eyes. The warmth is gone. He’s colder now.

“Well, ten years makes a lot of difference,” I tell him. “I'm not a naive seventeen-year-old anymore.”

“I'll say,” he murmurs, his gaze lingering on my breasts. He crosses his suited arms. “I brought you more clothes.” He nods to the platform bed now filled with designer shopping bags alongside my suitcase.

“You can't keep me here in this cell.”

“Sure, I can,” he says. “It’s a nicer cell than your father keeps you in.”

I rummage through my suitcase, looking around for my phone and wallet. Oh God, all the cash I’d saved to start over with—gone.

“You won’t find it,” he says, knowing full well what I’m after.

“What do you want with me?” I ask.

“Everything you’ll need is in the bathroom drawers.”

“You know, no one ever seems to answer me. It's as if I never asked the question. Is this a mob thing?”

“Mob? Is that what you think I am?”

I can't look at him anymore; it makes my chest ache to see what he's become. I turn from his piercing blue gaze and continue rifling through the shopping bags filled with jeans, t-shirts, panties, bras. He’s right—everything I could possibly need, except my phone.

“Well, I don’t know,” I start. “You kidnap me, threaten me, and steal my things. Sounds very Mafia to me.”

“You have no idea who, *or what* I am.”

As if that answers anything.

“And,” he continues, “as soon as your father gives me what I need, you can go back to your life and marry your pretty little politician wannabe.”

Never. It took months and months of planning to get everything in place to escape a wedding to that asshole. “My father will never give you what you need. Looks like you did all this for nothing.”

The heat from his body sears my back, and the towel is yanked from around me. I spin to face him as he dangles it from his fingers.

“Xavier,” I yell, grabbing a handful of clothes to cover myself, “why did you do that?”

“Don't patronize me, Rhiannon,” he warns. “One way or another,” his heated gaze sets fire to my skin, “I'll get what I want.”

He drops the towel and slams the door on his way out.



Mafia.

WHAT EXACTLY IS Mafia these days? It's a loose term. I'm a different kind of mafia, the CEO of my very own new world order. Security systems. I've designed the best in the world. My businesses are owned by my shell corporations, hiding my wealth, to make Mossack Fonseca look like a newspaper route company next to mine. I don't have soldiers shaking down people in back alleys; my dealings are in boardrooms. And my army is the trained computer hackers who graduated top of their classes from MIT.

My hands are definitely not clean.

I didn't get the nickname Dark Don of the business world for nothing. I'm a ruthless motherfucker, and I'm not afraid to play dirty.

"Mr. Stone," Justin, a member of my security detail, calls out, semi jogging up beside me. "Got five minutes?"

"It's late." I continue to my office and sit behind my desk to finish work I dropped the instant the call came in she was making her move.

"I need to talk to you."

My eyes lift from the documents, neatly stacked, waiting for my signature. "Make it quick."

He takes a seat and bobs his legs with nervous energy. "Seems they already know Rhiannon is missing. Mr. DeLaurio says he's offering a lot of money for her safe return."

"Safe return? Ah, ok." I let this information roll off my shoulders. He

knows his daughter is missing. Good. Cause I've got her, and I'm not letting her go that easily.

Let him offer all the money in the world. I have just as much. If not more.

After a few more details, I dismiss Justin, finish up, and go to check on my little prisoner. Seeing Rhiannon again was not how I imagined. Agreeable, sweet, submitting to my every command is what I pictured. Because, although she's always been in this life, she somehow remained untouched by it all. But, she had some fight in her; I saw the scorn in her eyes when she looked at me as if I were shit on her shoe.

It's quiet, too quiet, as I roam the halls of this massive house like a ghost. My proverbial sheet is a suit and tie as I stride down the endless hallway which leads to her room. Her 'cell'—which is pretty fucking far away, I could probably drive there quicker—sits on the opposite side of the estate. Obviously, I didn't need a house this large—no one does—but it's a statement. A statement written in bold across the front of the sprawling structure: don't fuck with me, or I'll fuck you harder.

I grew up with nothing, and now I have everything I could ever want. Except, what's behind the locked door in front of me.

The lights are dim when I step inside and move to the bed where she sleeps bundled under the navy comforter. One small foot, with pink toenails, peeks from beneath the blanket.

Her chest rises and falls as she breathes through her tepid dreams.

As I study her, I take in the perfect lines and curves of her tight little figure. Pictures and small video clips showed how beautiful she'd become. But, seeing her now, in the flesh, big fucking difference. Ten years. Ten fucking years of watching her life play out from a distance. Ten years of planning and accumulating wealth to finally set my plan into action.

I have her, now I just need to let him know it.



The next morning, my first stop is the security office. Having Rhiannon in this house is stifling. Like a goddamn elephant sitting on me. I feel her presence bearing down on what's left of my conscience everywhere.

It gives me a headache—she gives me a headache.

I jam my thumbs into my temples, trying to drive her condemning brown

eyes out of my head. Fuck. She's still there.

"Mr. Stone," Zeke, sitting behind a panel of flat screen monitors, calls out as I enter the room converted into a mini-surveillance center.

"How's our little prisoner?"

"Trying to escape." He chuckles as I glance at the screen where Rhiannon works her fingers around the window in her room. "She's pretty," he says. But, corrects his word choice when he sees me lift a brow. "Pretty determined," he says with a cough.

"Yeah, a lot of good it'll do her." This house was designed by the top security expert in the world—me. Metallic glass windows. State of the art security system. She's not getting out.

When I reach Rhiannon's room and step inside, she's given up her attempt at escaping to sit in the fawn-colored armchair, staring out the window at the wild bramble thicket with its dark blackberries and prickly thorns.

"There's no way out."

"There's always a way," she says, not breaking her gaze from the view outside.

"Ah, hopeful Rhiannon. Trust me, there's no way."

She moves to the bed, crossing her arms, finally meeting my gaze. Her brown eyes shoot daggers at me. "Trust you?"

She makes a sarcastic sound which I choose to ignore. What I can't ignore are the way the baby blue sleep shorts and tank I purchased for her hug all the right places.

"Get dressed. You'll be having breakfast with me every morning."

She stands. "And then what?"

On autopilot, I move closer. Her body is still as inviting as ever. The curves have matured more, and she's grown into her plump breasts. I rake my teeth along my lower lip. "Whatever I decide."

"And if I say no?" she huffs.

Getting extremely too close, so close I can smell the mint on her breath, I zero in on her. "You don't want to find out."



WHEN I WOKE THIS MORNING, in a strange bed, in a strange house—in Xavier’s house—I tried to pretend I was in a bad dream. You know, one of those dreams that seem real but isn’t. A nightmare that would end as soon as I stretched the sleep from my limbs. Didn’t happen. What did happen was a serious pity party as I laid in bed staring at the wall. Is this really my life? One man after another, bossing me around, parading me around like brainless arm candy, *kidnapping* me. Seriously, when I get away from here, I don’t even want to look at another man. Especially Xavier.

I realize now, a little too late, I had romanticized him over the years. Made him into this untouchable hero who could never do anything bad.

Today, after I dined with him for breakfast, where he refused to answer any of my questions, he returned me to this room and locked the door. I don’t know how I’m going to get out of here, an escape will be next to impossible, but I won’t give up.

Not like I did with my father. Living the life of a zombie, fulfilling every wish my father had with little resistance. When Ian told a reporter, we would be starting a family soon after the marriage, it was at that moment my eyes opened. Wide open. Like a dam lifting, and all my stupidity came pouring out.

I never questioned anything before, when I should have been questioning everything. Obviously, as I reached my twenties, my father couldn’t keep me under lock and key anymore, that would look too weird. A man trying to fly under the radar—trying to look legitimate—doesn’t want that kind of spotlight. So, with the help of Delilah, who has some very shady connections

of her own, I devised the plan to get as far away from my father as I could.

I never expected to land in the arms of Xavier.

A knock sounds on the door and the knob turns ever so slowly. A smiling sandy-haired woman, wearing a black skirt and white dress shirt, enters with a small bag in her hands.

"I'm Krista," she announces as if it's perfectly normal I'm locked in a room.

Briefly, I contemplate racing past her, but she quickly closes the door, and it locks from the outside as soon as it shuts.

"I guess we're both prisoners now," I tell her.

Undeterred by my gloomy attitude, she continues toward me like a beam of sunshine. "I've got all kinds of things for you."

"Do you have the key to that door?"

She doesn't falter from whatever her mission is. "Xavier instructed me to give you these."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "Being stuck in a room can get lonely. You'll need something to keep you occupied."

Hm. I don't want to take the bag extended out, but she did answer my question which no one else seems to do. Maybe this could work to my advantage.

Smiling, I take the crisp brown bag from her hands. "Thanks."

After informing me she'll be checking in on me every day, she leaves.

I study the bag in my hands, equal parts repulsed and curious. This all feels very surreal. With nothing else to do, I sit cross legged on the bed and pull out what I least expect... a notebook, sheets of self-folding heavy card stock and drawing pens. The good ones. It's a lot messed up that I feel any sense of gratitude over his gift. He remembers. My mind can't rationalize the juxtaposition of sentiment with the fact it was given to me because I'm his prisoner. No, I shouldn't feel grateful at all. Fear is the emotion I should feel.

Before I completely melt down, I move to the desk in the corner and draw.

Once I start, I can't stop.

When the sun fades in the sky, and no longer pours through the curtains, my stomach grumbles just as the door opens. He's here, looking like he stepped out of a hottest executive's ad, dressed in tailored navy slacks and a white dress shirt that clings to the muscles hidden underneath.

“What do you want?” I ask, irritated that I'm noticing things about his appearance.

He doesn't say anything for a while, just lets his large presence fill the room until it's impossible to breathe anything except his scent. He smells like a lifetime of regret waiting to happen.

“It would be easier if you didn't resist me,” he finally says in a low voice.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

He moves closer and sits on the bed. “I just mean things would be smoother if you didn't try to fight me at every turn.”

Frustrated he's acting as if we didn't spend a good chunk of our lives as friends, I continue trying to break through his armor. “What happened to you?” I have so many questions. “Why did you leave?”

He breathes in deep and lets out a smooth, controlled breath, running a hand through his dark hair.

He's not going to answer me, and my heart deflates a bit.

“Well, since there wasn't a lot else to do,” I pick up the card I've been working on and hold it out, “I made this for you.”

His fingers brush mine when he takes it from me. I watch as he studies the smiling princess on the front, wondering if he remembers our childhood game.

“Thanks for not killing me today,” he reads on the inside. He looks back at me. “You forgot yet.”

He looks very serious about that, but I'd like to believe he hasn't completely crossed to the dark side.

He pockets the card. “You hungry?”

“Yes,” I answer at the same time my stomach growls.

“Come with me.” He holds his hand out and I take it.

His hand is different, strong and harsh, not like when we were kids. It's possessive now, like he owns my tiny hand in his.

On the walk through his spacious home, my eyes memorize everything, and I hurry my steps to keep up. We pass through immaculate, sophisticated rooms with vaulted ceilings and shiny hardwood floors. Black leather couches with deep red pillows and not a lot of anything else is the theme. It isn't warm and friendly, instead, it's polished and unlivable. He turns a sharp corner and leads me down a long corridor filled with Art Deco paintings that brighten the white walls. And so many doors.

Of course, there are guards at every entrance, and I'm sure, cameras

everywhere.

We enter a formal dining room with a long mahogany table surrounded by seating for ten. The smell of something delicious makes my stomach growl again.

“Sit,” he directs, leading me to a chair at the end of the table.

He takes the seat right next to me. And when I say right next to me, I mean right next to me. His thigh brushes mine. “I hope you still like Beef Wellington,” he drawls out.

My mouth waters. I'm a little ashamed that my body is so concerned about food under the circumstances.

Krista sets two white plates in front of us, overloaded with Beef Wellington and a white mountain of creamy mashed potatoes. But... there is only one set of cutlery.

His hand reaches it before mine, and he gives a short laugh. “You don't think I'd give you silverware you could use as a weapon against me, do you?”

Damn it. What a brilliant idea. I suck at escaping, because that thought never crossed my mind; I just wanted to dig in. “Well how am I supposed to eat this?”

“I'll feed you,” he answers, cutting into the food on my plate.

When he brings the fork to my lips, I almost don't want to open for him out of pure defiance. But, whore for Beef Wellington that I am, I open wide.

My moan is audible when the tender filet hits my tongue. Briefly, his eyes fall to my mouth before he looks away and takes his turn.

“You don't think it's a little gross we're eating from the same fork?” Now that I know I could possibly use the utensils as a weapon, I decide to pull from my vault of memories and remind Xavier of his aversion to eat or drink after anyone when we were younger.

The fork tines, supporting a hefty dollop of mashed potatoes, stop at his full lips and then he slides it in. “Nope.”

I nod. “Ok, well I just remember you saying stuff about germs.” I smooth the napkin in my lap. “I just recently got over a really nasty cold.”

He loads up the fork and moves it back to me. “I'll take my chances.”

“This is crazy,” I tell him, before accepting the offered bite. “I'm not going to fork you to death.”

“Just eat.”

The rest of the meal is finished in silence, and for the next few days, the routine remains the same: breakfast together, lunch in my room alone, and then dinner, where he feeds me like the child he's always seen me as.

My disdain for the new Xavier grows as the words between us lessen. He barely even looks at me.

One night, after dinner, my anger and resentment hit an all time high when he holds my arm on the walk back to my room. I wiggle free.

"You don't have to hold onto me. I'm clearly not going anywhere," I spit out.

"I'll do whatever I damn well please."

He opens the door to my room, and I step over the threshold, facing him. "I hate you for leaving." I slam the door shut in his handsome face, and the lock clicks loudly against the silence in the air.

He pounds his fist into the hard wood, shaking it on its hinges. "I hate you for staying," he shouts.



“RHIANNON,” Xavier says, when he enters my room a few days later. Since he didn’t say hello, I don’t feel the need to acknowledge him.

I sit on the bed, my long hair hanging like a curtain to hide his face from me as I scribble on another card.

“Get up.”

“Why?” I glance at him.

He steps closer. “Stop questioning me. You’ll live longer.”

“If you wanted me dead, you would have killed me already.”

“Don’t tempt me. Now get up.” His eyes study me in a way he never has before. Almost like he’s worried I might not follow.

“Fine.” I swing my legs over the bed in an exaggerated movement, and my feet land on the floor. “Can I ask where we’re going?”

“No.”

Nice.

He leads me out the door, down the hall, and through the front door into the sunshine.

“What are you doing?” I ask, squinting in the bright light of the sun’s rays.

“I figured you could use a walk outside. But no talking.” Out of nowhere, he grabs my hand and walks me down the stone path to the small set of woods flanking the front yard.

Ah, fresh air. I can finally breathe again.

Still as bossy as ever. Is it weird we're holding hands? Is it weirder that I almost like it? Almost.

I finally get a good look at the property. It's a little disheartening for someone planning an escape attempt. The two-story brick house sits on a secluded lot of land with woods surrounding. For anyone to find this fortress they'd have to know it's here.

And they must not, because no one really comes here. No visitors, no guests, only him and his loyal men.

The sole woman I've seen is Krista. She's nice enough. Very cheery. But what makes her work for these men? What makes a person immune to another's captivity? I don't ever want to be that person.

How could Xavier become that person?

The boy turned hardened man beside me is as mysterious as the morning dense fog that surrounds the trees like a veil of secrets.

"This place is beautiful," I say to break the silence.

"Mmm."

"I've always liked summer best." I tell him, wanting to fill the silence.

"Yeah."

"You're probably a fall guy, huh?"

He doesn't say anything, only shrugs his broad shoulders.

"Most people are." I glance over at him. "I just don't get why people love it so much."

"All the colors?" he asks, cutting his eyes to me.

"Probably, but everything is dying. It's kind of sad."

"Well, winter is worse, because everything's dead."

He squeezes my hand just a bit, it's barely even noticeable, but to me, the imperceptible movement is enough to send a tiny shrill of excitement to my heart.

Must be a leftover teenage reaction.

"True. But, most people hate winter."

He stops, and turns to face me. "This is the property. You can have free range of the house and outside," he says, cutting me off about the seasons. But, I don't care...free range. What is he thinking giving me access to roam? I could almost hug him.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He resumes walking without acknowledging my words.

He keeps his stare fixed on where we're headed and his hand tightly

around mine.

We walk a few more minutes while I keep trying to make small talk without much help from him.

“You’re quite the chatterer,” I say, trying to still my steps beside him.

“I said no talking.”

But I don’t listen. This is ridiculous. He can’t do this to me with no explanation. “You’re not even going to tell me where you’ve been? Have you been here the whole time?”

“I’ve been here and there,” he drawls. “I’ve been everywhere.”

“You sound like a Dr. Seuss book.”

This earns me a glance and a small twinkle in his eyes. “What do you want me to say, Rhi?”

The use of Rhi, instead of Rhiannon, makes me believe we’re still connected and not the strangers we’ve become.

“I just want to know what happened to you.”

He continues his strides at a quick pace, and I have no choice but to keep up. “I did what I had to do. The end,” he says.

And the conversation is over. He probably won’t ever tell me, so, I try a new angle. “Why kidnap me?”

He doesn’t slow, navigating us through the trunks of trees as we trudge deeper into the woods. “I need you, that’s why.”

Words I’ve wanted to hear since I was fifteen years old fall from his lips, but not in the meaning I wished back then.

“Why?”

He finally stops, his breath coming out in quick short bursts. “You sure ask a lot of damn questions.”

“And get no answers,” I retort.

Giving up on finding out any useful information, I let him lead me again, and we walk in silence until we come to a clearing with a small lake. The water ripples as the wind rushes over. He drops my hand and sits on a small patch of grassland. I could run, but where? I drop down beside him.

“Do you remember the night of your fourteenth birthday party? he asks with a small smile.

“I was so scared that night.” And I was. I think back on my father's face when he saw Xavier with me.

“Why didn't you stay in Maine?”

“How do you know I went to Maine?”

He stares at me, his hair gently rustling in the breeze. “Lucky guess?”

“Have you been keeping tabs on me all these years?”

He laughs, but there's no humor there. “No, but I do know a few things.”

My mind takes off like a jet engine, wondering what all he knows about my life. And as much as I want to ask, I keep the conversation on neutral ground. He's talking, so that's a win in my book.

“It’s peaceful here,” I finally say after a few minutes.

“Yeah, I haven’t been out here much.”

“Too busy?”

He casts his eyes to gaze at the soft, rippling lake.

I lean back on my hands. “I missed you.”

His eyes shoot to mine. “You shouldn’t have. I’m not the same guy anymore, Rhi.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Have you seen anything in the past few days to think otherwise?”

I have. Just giving me the gift of cardstock and drawing pens is very much like the old Xavier, but I don’t tell him that. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I glance out to the crystal lake, catching the sun’s glare off the small waves, once more. The only sound is the birds chirping and my thundering heart wishing for all the things that could have been. And it’s in this moment, I let it fade away. My Xavier is gone now.

He stands, reaching his hand down to me. “Let’s head back.”

I don't take his hand this time.



The next morning, Xavier fetches me for our morning breakfast, and already my stomach recoils at the thought of spending any time with him.

“You remember Dean?” he asks, on our way to the kitchen. “He’s coming here today.”

Ah, Dean. How could I ever forget the boy who constantly baited me.

When we reach the dining area, I take my usual seat and Xavier sits close to me.

“So, you and Dean have remained friends over the years?” I ask. My

appetite disappears, and I shake my head no to the fork with scrambled eggs.

“Yes,” he brings the fork closer to my lips, “now open.”

“No,” I tell him. “Is he like your boss?”

This earns me a chuckle from his infuriating sexy lips. “No, more like my right hand man.”

“Oh, I see.” But, I really don’t. How nice. The fact he remained in contact with Dean doesn’t sit well with me.

He lifts the fork to my lips again, and I turn my head. “If I can’t feed myself, I won’t eat.”

He eyes me and the tip of his tongue caresses the corner of his mouth.

“I’m not going to attack you. It’s not like I’m going to bring you down with an eating utensil.” And let’s be real here, the thought of piercing flesh with a fork repulses me. “Even though I may want to,” I mumble under my breath.

His hand holding the fork is still suspended in the air as he studies my face. Then he hands it over to me.

A little stunned he actually gave in, I take it, scooping the food from my plate and taking a bite.

“Maybe I liked feeding you.”

“It’s the control, huh?” I ask as I grab another forkful.

He raises his brow. “Something like that.”

And then he turns away from me. And that’s it for our conversation.

Somewhere in the late evening, I fall asleep out of sheer boredom. It’s dark when I wake, and I cross to the window and lean my forehead against the cool panes.

A convertible, black car pulls into the circular drive, and when the door opens, a man, wearing jeans and a grey button down shirt, emerges.

A few minutes later, my door opens.

“She’s in here,” Xavier says, stepping to the side and revealing the mystery man.

Dean’s eyes meet mine. So odd seeing the adult version of ourselves. He’s handsome now. Light hair, cut short, and a tall lean physique that now has muscles. He’s blonde like Ian, but not pale and ghostly, a golden tan warms his skin.

“What are you thinking, Xavier?” He scrubs a hand down his face, probably trying to erase the memory of me.

“Don’t question me.” Xavier’s voice leaves no room for argument.

Dean only sighs. “She’ll get us all killed.” And with those words he breaks his stare from me and leaves the room.

“Well it was good to see you again too,” I say, sarcastically.

Something flickers behind Xavier’s icy stare before he follows Dean out.

“Come back soon,” I call out to the closed door.

I don't know what he's planning.

It isn’t a secret that my father will look for me. I’m sure he’s called the calvary to bring his princess back to his castle, so I can marry the prince and live unhappily ever after.

For one fleeting moment, I’m happy to be here with Xavier and not at home. Even though he’s playing a dangerous game. And it could only get worse. So much worse.



DEAN'S ANGER rolls off him like dice on a craps table.

"So you want to tell me what this is all about?" he asks after charging into my office. "You kidnapped her already?"

"Kidnapping is such an ugly word." I cross to my desk and take a seat. "She was running, so we had to swoop in and take her earlier than expected."

"I know how much you hate deviating from your plan. You think this is wise?"

"Yes," I snarl. And with the warning tone in my voice, he doesn't question, only scrubs a hand across his jaw, a nervous habit he employs frequently.

"I don't like this," he finally says after a minute or two.

"You don't have to like it."

He turns away from me to glance out the window overlooking the vast property.

"Listen, I've never questioned you. I've always had your back." He turns around. "But, you're playing with fire, and I don't want either of us getting burned."

"I have everything under control."

"Like you did in high school?"

My eyes narrow on him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That girl has owned you since day one, Xavier."

"That's not true." Or at least I wished it wasn't. But the boy she owned isn't the man standing here anymore. I just need to remember that.

"I get it."

“Look at this.” I toss a newspaper clipping of an interview with Ian about their impending nuptials his way, and he reads over the article.

“We’re so happy to finally be getting married. We’ve been best friends since high school, and I knew the moment I met her my life would change for the better.”

“Best friends?” he scoffs. “I seem to remember it differently.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“I guess that’s what happens when you don’t get out in the sunlight. You become delusional.”

“Vampire. Maybe that’s his weakness,” I muse. “I’ll throw the sun up his ass and test it,” Dean smiles. “And now they’re pretending Rhiannon isn’t even missing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Proxy stand-in. Marry your daughter off without her consent.” I shake my head. “Wedding’s in a few weeks.”

“Unbelievable.” He laughs. “Actually considering who we’re dealing with, it’s not.”

I fill Dean in on the details of my plan, weighing every option and the role Rhiannon will play.

“Have you talked to Marshall?” Dean asks.

“Not in a few weeks, but he’s staying updated.” We’re leaving for LA in a few days, so I need you to make sure the house is sound.”

He nods. “I’ll get started first thing in the morning. I’m going to crash. I’m exhausted.”

After he’s gone, I spend the next few hours tying up loose ends and ensuring everything is ready for our arrival. Then I lie to myself that I need to check on her. It’s becoming a nightly ritual, watching her sleep. I just can’t seem to stop. It’s as if she’s deliberately tempting me. Her soft breathing, the way her red hair falls across her silky skin. Even the way the damn moon caresses her soft curves in a shimmery light. It makes her look edible enough to eat.

I’ve been with plenty of beautiful women over the years. Yet, none as perfect as her. It’s never been about looks with Rhiannon, because I know her

inside and out, but fuck if she doesn't get my dick hard.

With that thought, I decide not to visit her room tonight and head toward my suite instead.

In bed, I have my laptop with the footage from the last twenty-four hours of surveillance on the house.

All the footage of Rhiannon plays for me, and my eyes devour her.

The more my mind tries to erase the thoughts of her, my body writes it's very own sex scene.

My dick hardens as I watch the screen of Rhiannon down by the lake. Her sexy walk and the way her hips sway from side to side. The wind playing in her hair as the sun's rays bounce off the sweet smelling strands. I can almost smell her scent drifting from the laptop.

Fuck, what is she doing to me? Even at the ripe old age of fifteen my body was attracted to her. I thought about her all the time growing up. Mainly, late at night in my room alone. While most boys my age were thumbing through dirty magazines, I was thinking about her.

I pull myself out of my track pants and stroke my cock to video footage of her sweet body on display for me.

My eyes roll back as a low groan escapes my lips. Fuck, I want to touch her. What would she do if I did? Would she enjoy it? Would she resist me? Would she beg for more?

My mind spins until I'm dizzy with ideas and adrenaline pumps through me. I tug harder on my massive hard-on, knowing I'll never know what her touch will feel like. I'll never know the depths of how far I can take her. How high she can reach with me fully seated inside her.

My heart thunders, as I pick up speed. I'm so close to coming, and the only vision in my mind is of her with her legs spread. Her inviting pussy there for the taking. And I want more than anything to take it. To come so deep inside her. To feel her hot heat clenching around me.

I push the laptop to the side of my bed as I continue pumping and fisting my hard dick. With eyes closed and teeth biting my lower lip, I get off to my favorite image of Rhi... her on her knees before me. God, how bad I want to shove my cock so far down her throat and listen to her gag as she takes me all the way in.

"Fuuuuck," I breathe out, my abs contracting with the force of coming. Guilt settles in when my body finally calms. And then I push the thoughts of her away, because I need to stop thinking about what will never be.



THE NEXT MORNING, Krista informs me my door is unlocked. I can't get dressed fast enough. Clearly, this place must be Fort Knox or he wouldn't give me access, but there's always room for a mistake. Best laid plans and all.

The entire day, I make notes in the notebook given to me. Counting the men who come and go. The times they switch shifts. Checking exits. Learning the exact steps from one room to the next.

Xavier hasn't been present at all today, leaving me to myself for breakfast and lunch, and I wonder to myself if he's even here.

But, I don't care. I keep formulating my plan of escape.

In the study, I get distracted by the floor to ceiling shelves empty of books, except for one lone copy of *Great Expectations*. Hm.

"Enjoying your freedom?"

A glance over my shoulder reveals Dean, in jeans and a gray t-shirt, resting against the door jamb, with his arms crossed.

"I'll let you know when I'm out of here."

He pushes off the door frame. "Just so you know, you'd have more luck shoving a camel through the eye of a needle than getting out of here."

"Yes, well, you always were a downer."

"No, realistic." He smiles, stepping into the room. "And no one can design a security system better than Xavier can."

"I'd ask if you wanted to sit and chat," I say, nodding to the two overstuffed club chairs, "but we'd need another seat for your ego."

He chuckles. "I can see why he wants to give you back."

His words sting, more than I care to admit, but remind me there is an end

goal here which doesn't work out in my favor. Maybe Dean will unwittingly drop some useful info, if I can contain the sarcasm he always seems to bring out in me.

"You must be pretty good to get all this done in such a short amount of time," I try to compliment him.

He perches his tall body on the chair arm. "What makes you think that?"

"One book on all these shelves. Must have been a recent purchase."

"Pretty observant. Maybe I should hire you," he says, dryly.

"Maybe you should," I challenge him. "I'm smart. Not like everybody says, like dumb."

He grins. "Did you just quote *The Godfather*?"

"Maybe."

"Hey," Krista, interrupts, "I was looking for you." She stops just inside the door.

I am observant, because I don't miss the shy dart of her eyes to Dean or the way he rises slowly, sliding his hands in his pockets, practically looking like he wants to pounce on her. Very interesting. Love in Captivity. Maybe I should write a novel to put on these shelves. "Xavier said to order more supplies for you," she informs me, "and I just need to know if there's anything different you'd like?"

Why does he insist on showing me the nice side of him? If he didn't care in some capacity, he wouldn't do this, right? Dean studies me, thoughtfully, and I try to shutter my reaction to her request. I don't want him to see my turmoil.

"I'll leave you two alone," Dean says, crossing to the door. "Always a pleasure, Rhiannon," he calls out over his shoulder.



Later in the afternoon, when I stand outside, deciding which is the best direction to run, when the time arises, Xavier walks up behind me.

"What are you doing out here, Rhi?" his deep voice asks.

"Feeling the sunshine on my skin." I lift my face toward the cloudless sky.

He steps beside me, both hands in his tailored-suit pockets. "There's a plan in place," he starts. "We're..."

But, I cut in, "Save it. I don't want to hear anything about what you and Dean have planned."

He hisses, lowly. "You need to stop being so damn difficult."

I spin to face him. "Difficult?"

"We're leaving here tomorrow."

Well fuckity fuck fuck. All that note taking for nothing. I cross my arms. "You sure you don't want to leave me behind again?"

His blue eyes flare. I struck a nerve.

His eyes skim over my yoga pants and pink t-shirt, leaving an eruption of goosebumps in their wake. "You're accompanying me to a function tonight before we leave. Krista will help you get ready."

A whirlwind of confusion swirls inside me. He's going to take me out in public?

"What kind of function?" I ask with trepidation.

He thumbs his lower lip before speaking again. "Something I'm required to attend."

"I'll check my calendar."

He smiles—a real Xavier smile—and it slams into me with such force, I nearly crumple. "Smartass," he says. And his eyes twinkle and dance and I can't turn away.

"But it's a nice ass, I've been told," I sass back.

"Yes, it is," he agrees in a husky voice that seeps through my skin and lights a fire in places that cause my face to heat.

Something is very wrong with me, because in this moment, with the look in his eyes, I forget the situation I'm in and press my thighs together as if I can kill the attraction to him in my wet vagina.

"Who has been telling you you have a nice ass?"

"If you want information, you have to give to receive."

"I'm very good at giving." He wets his lips.

My nipples harden under his hooded gaze. Are we flirting? My nipples seem to think so. The stiff peaks strain against my bra. I've never sixty-nined, but that is the visual playing in my warped mind. "Maybe we should exchange at the same time."

He rakes his teeth over his bottom lip. "You're playing with fire, Rhiannon."

With that warning, he turns from me, and I watch him walk away. The tight muscles in his back and ass pull the material of his clothing tighter with

each step. He's hot. Fire is right, and I'm not willing to be burned twice.



Dressed in a simple, slinky black cocktail dress and black heels, courtesy of Xavier,

we slide into a silver Mercedes. He doesn't even need to tell the driver where we're going. He just knows. Everyone knows, except me. All I know is no one at this dinner party will ask questions. Poor little Rhiannon. But, don't worry, you don't have a one-way ticket to Pityville and we won't fall down together during my temper tantrum, because I've got my own plans. Maybe I can steal a phone and make contact with Delilah. She's got to be wondering what happened since I didn't make contact. In our planning, we came up with a code to make sure it was safe to talk. If she says 'dragonfruit' then I know my father found out my plans.

Before long, we arrive at a sprawling mansion nestled between a throng of trees.

"Stella," Xavier says after the door opens.

"Xavier, so good to see you," a leggy blonde, in a sparkling silver top and jeans that are a second skin, greets us as we step inside the foyer. It's pretty standard, well standard for mansions: marble floors, enough space to make your voice echo, a round table in the center of the room with a whole garden of exotic plants, and a tiny white poodle that comes yapping when we enter.

"Don't mind Fifi," she says, scooping the little thing up. "My husband is through there." She gestures her hand to an arched entryway. A portly man appears on cue, wearing a smile as big as a watermelon across his face. "Xavier, there you are."

He's right, no one asks questions. Neither Mr. Happy Pants or Cruella Deville have even glanced in my direction.

After small talk between them, we enter into a dining room, and Xavier seats me at a large table filled with crystal and china.

"Sorry we're late," a feminine voice shrills, and I turn in my seat.

My eyes crash into a mustached man I have definitely seen before. But where?

My memory data bank is working overtime as I try to remember where I've seen him before. Years ago. Think.

Everyone is introduced, and Xavier doesn't bother mentioning me, but it's as if everyone here knows me anyways.

Ken Gordon and his wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Davenshire who own the place.

The salads are served, and I fork around my spring greens as my brain pushes out steam with working so hard.

"So, I didn't care what anyone said. I wasn't taking no for an answer," Mr. Gordon says and the table erupts into feigned laughter.

And that's it. When he smiles, I see it. My hand stills. He's a friend of my father's. The chief of police.



RHIANNON IS OBVIOUSLY NERVOUS, and I think she's already realized why I have her here. She pushes her food around on her plate, forcing a smile every now and then. She squirms in her seat, and I place my hand on her thigh under the table to calm her. Or stop her. Stella and Hank Davenshire probably think I'm crazy for bringing the daughter of DeLaurio here, but Hank owes his company to me so they won't say a word. And maybe I do have a death wish. Maybe I just give absolutely no fucks.

There's a method to my madness here. Waltz into a dinner party with DeLaurio's daughter on my arm with the chief of police sitting across from us making fucking small talk. It's almost comical. Yes, I want him to let DeLaurio know I've got her, and yes I know they can't do a damn thing about it.

I don't think Gordon has even recognized either of us yet. Probably just thinks we're business associates of Hank's. But, rest assured, he'll definitely know who we are when we leave. And I'm sure the rat bastard will personally be the one to tell DeLaurio I've got his daughter.

We work through an assortment of pecan-crusted salmon with asparagus and potatoes, and before I can finish off another bite, Rhiannon leans over.

"Can I go to the restroom?"

We're in a house, what harm can she do?

"Come right back."

She excuses herself from the table, and I continue discussing menial bullshit with Hank and Ken. Once dinner is over, and the wives aren't around, is when I plan to make exactly who I am known, and then, he'll go

run along like the crooked cop he is.

“A toast,” we all raise our wine glasses, so they’re good and drunk later, “to keeping the streets safe,” I toast Ken.

Everyone cheers, and I smile at him over the rim of my glass before checking my watch.

“Excuse me, everyone,” I say, rising from my seat.

I quicken my steps down the hall and round the corner to the first-floor bathroom.

“Rhi.” I knock.

No answer.

Shit.

I jimmie the knob and bust the door open.

And with the sight I see, I don’t know if I should laugh or be furious.

I lean against the door frame. “I can see right up your skirt.”

She freezes in her attempt at crawling through the tiny window above the whirlpool tub. It’s like damn *Winnie the Pooh* getting stuck in his tree trunk from the cartoon Rhiannon and I watched as kids. For fucks sake.

“I don’t care. Enjoy the view; I’m leaving. That man out there will have my father here in ten seconds once he realizes who I am.”

“I doubt that.” I move further into the bathroom. “Seriously, Rhi? You’re never going to get your hips through that window.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

The sight is a ridiculous one: her black dress pushed up and a peek of the soft-blue lace of her panties underneath as her legs dangle before me.

She loses a shoe. Those sexy as fuck red shoes that make her legs look endless.

“Oh, that’s gonna suck when you need to run,” I call out.

She wiggles a bit, twisting and turning, and then her body slumps against the window. “I’m stuck,” she says with defeat.

“Shocker, didn’t see that one coming.” I move closer and reach out to touch her leg. It’s silky smooth. “What were you thinking? Do you know how far out in the woods we are?”

“I don’t care. I need to get away. I’m not going back. I’d rather take my chances with the coyotes than be forced into that marriage.”

“Ah, you underestimate me.”

“Just help me down.”

“You know, on second thought, I might just leave you here. Let Hank and

Stella deal with you.”

“You wouldn’t dare leave me here, Xavier.”

“Are you going to be a good little girl and promise not to run away?” My mind fills with images of her being a good girl just for me. I run my hands up her toned legs and grip her waist.

“Scouts honor,” she says.

“You were never a girl scout, sweetheart.” I yank on her waist just enough to free her as she shimmies back through the pane of the window. She slides like water down my body, and her delicious ass runs over my cock. It pulses, wanting to sink between her cheeks, and I try to steady my hands on her hips.

This is not the time to have my dick go rogue and pop up for any ass that comes within a two-foot radius of it. This isn’t high school, and I should be able to control the big fella. But, no, my body wants no part of what my mind’s got to say. And I have a semi as she turns in my arms and wets her lips.

“We should get back out there,” I breathe out, huskier than I mean it to sound.

She arranges her dress back into place and smoothes her wild mane of auburn hair. “Ok.”

I grab her elbow on the way out. “Promise me you won’t try anything like that again.”

“Promise me you’ll let me go,” she counters.

“Ah, I see you still haven’t mastered those bargaining skills.”

“You don’t really know what I’ve mastered,” she says as we step out of the bathroom to rejoin the party.

She walks in front of me, and I take a second to appreciate the view of her fine ass in motion as it walks away from me.

After dessert, I grab Rhiannon’s hand. “Sorry, we have to get going.” She steps closer to me, as if she’s afraid he’s going to snatch her away from me. “Rhiannon, you remember Ken Gordon, right?” Her eyes dart to me, silently asking how to answer. “He works for your father.”

Recognition dawns on Mr. Gordon’s face, and he shakes his head. “No, I don’t work for DeLaurio.”

I step closer. “Of course, you do. Hiding murders, turning the other cheek to hidden deals.” His pathetic excuses, that he’s on the up and up and not in cohorts with a known mafia boss, are useless.

“Let him know his daughter had a great time,” I brush past him, “and Xavier sends his regards.”



After dinner tonight, I need a stiff drink. I head into my study, pour a glass of scotch and grab a cue stick. I move over to the billiard table and rack a few balls for a few shots. What was Rhiannon thinking tonight?

It'll be nice to be back in LA tomorrow, in my city.

Rhiannon walks past the cracked door. I hit a ball into the pocket. She walks past again.

“What are you doing, Rhiannon?”

She pops her head in. “Nothing, just thinking.”

“Get in here.”

She slowly enters with both hands behind her back. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“Wanna play?”

She takes a few more steps closer and smiles. “Sure, I should tell you, I’m really good.”

“Oh, yeah, ok.” I laugh a little.

Is it odd that being around her slips me back into the boy who walked away so many years ago? Like it’s easy to just *be* with her.

I rack the balls, and she grabs a cue stick from the wall.

“Isn’t there some captor handbook that says you shouldn’t interact with your prisoners?” She moves over, and I step back so she can break.

“I don’t like to follow the rules.”

She leans over the table, glancing back at me. “Yeah, you weren’t really much for rules growing up.”

She breaks and a stripe lands in the corner side pocket. Her jeans hug her ass, tight, as she leans across the table again, lining up her shot.

I divert my eyes back to the green felt. “Yeah rules are meant to be broken.”

She hits the cue ball and all the balls just roll along the table. “I agree completely.”

I shake my head, knowing full well she’s referring to earlier when she tried to escape from me. “Do as I say, not as I do.” I knock a few solids in

one shot.

“Show off,” she says, sashaying around the table to give me more room for my next shot.

“Corner pocket,” I call, tapping my stick in that direction. “You never used to hang out with me in my prime.” I make the shot and move around the table, studying my next move.

“Oh, when was your prime?”

I laugh. “High school. Friends and I would hang out and play pool all the time.”

“Yeah, I didn’t leave the castle much.” She takes a seat while I knock in a few more shots.

On my next attempt, I miss, and she heads back over to the table.

“No,” I say to her. “Go for this one.” I point at the twelve ball.

“Oh.” She leans across the table, the angle all off, and I step closer.

“Like this.” I lean slightly over, trying my hardest not to smell her sweet fragrance as I teach her how to line her shot up correctly. “It’s all about the angles.”

I stand up in a rush when she turns her head slightly to catch a glance of my face.

She makes the shot. “High school was rough for me,” she says, her eyes catching mine.

“How so?”

I move to the table, grab my drink and take a long swallow. I raise my glass to her, silently asking if she wants one. She nods, and as she takes her shot, I pour her a scotch neat.

“Well, not many friends. You remember, I couldn’t even pick my own prom date.” She leans her ass against the pool table, and I stalk closer to hand her the drink in my hand.

Our eyes lock. “Who’d you have in mind?”

She brushes her fingers against mine as she takes the glass from me. “Who do you think?” she asks before taking a sip.

“Me?” My heart stalls, waiting to see if I guessed right.

She pushes her hand against my chest, laughing slightly. “Maybe.” She steps away. “It’s your turn.”

I line my shot up, shoot with just enough force, and another ball goes into the far pocket. “Maybe? Or am I right?” I lean over the table, aiming, and then sink another ball.

“Yes.” She takes another sip, and I stand straight, my eyes catching hers.

“I’m sure your dad would have loved that.”

She blows out a breath. “Oh, I know.”

As intriguing as this conversation is, I don’t like talking about the night of her prom. It was a bad time for me. And I change the subject. “Listen, Rhiannon, what happened tonight...”

She cuts in, “I still can’t believe you did that.”

I shrug. “Didn’t seem like a big deal to me.” I move closer. “But, what *was* a big deal was your little stunt.”

She holds up a hand. “Yeah, I get it.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.” She places her cue stick down and takes another sip of her drink.

“Well, I’m sure your dad has the news I’ve got you by now.”

She visibly shakes a bit. “I expect him here any minute.”

I laugh. “I don’t.”

She cocks a brow. “What game are you playing, Xavier?”

I step closer. “Billiards?”

“No, really.”

I set my stick on the table, caging her in with my arms against the table. “I’m playing don’t fuck with me.” She sucks in a breath. “And anyone who does I’ll make sure they get theirs.”

And I will.

Her wide eyes don’t leave mine. There’s about zero inches between us, and I breathe in her scent as my heart beats an edgy rhythm. “You should get to bed. We leave early tomorrow,” I say, pushing my arms off the table to stand back.

She doesn’t say a word, just rushes out the door, swaying that ass like a swinging watch to hypnotize me. I don’t think she realizes how sexy she walks. I shouldn’t realize how sexy she walks.

And I sure as hell shouldn’t be hard.

But I am.



SOMETIMES WE FIND an unlikely ally in places we least expect. I've found one in Krista. After giving her a card with two wildflowers growing in a pile of poop, with the inside reading: 'Friends are like wildflowers, often found in the most unlikely places,' the barriers came down. While she helps gather my things, in hushed whispers, she fills me in on our destination: Los Angeles.

Apparently Xavier has homes in many cities, but LA is the primary residence. She doesn't stop there, finally revealing these men who never speak to me are Xavier's security detail, the best and brightest money can buy: geniuses, ex-military men, men who are all, without an inkling of doubt, loyal to Xavier. Not that Krista isn't loyal to him. I mean, she's not setting me free. For all I know, he approved this info. But, I'll take what I can get.

Like the prisoner I am, I'm hustled into a waiting black SUV with tinted windows. After a long flight, late in the night, we arrive at a gated mansion that causes my jaw to drop. The two story stone structure beams with light from its glass filled front. I'm not sure exactly what Xavier does, but this compound far exceeds even what my father owns.

"Very nice," I say to a tired looking Xavier. For once, he's not in a suit. The soft jeans and t-shirt he's wearing make him less formidable.

The driver stops at the entrance and Xavier takes my hand, helping me out and leading me into my new cage. Albeit, a very beautiful cage. The inside is spacious and modern. Abstract art lines the walls as he crosses through the living area filled with high tech gadgets, warm leathers, and soft rugs. This is his world, and it's very...*him*. Dark, classy, a hint of mystery—just like its master.

He continues down a hallway that leads to two doors opposite each other.
“This is the guest wing,” he finally speaks.

Guest. His choice of words reminds me that I'm a temporary prisoner he plans on returning like an unwanted suit, and I need to figure a way out of here fast.

“How very civilized of you to call your captives guests,” I say as he opens the door to a room the size of a small apartment. A majestic canopy bed, all in white, looks very inviting right now. It's like a fluffy cloud amidst the varying shades of sky blue and sunshine yellow pillows in the deep window seats on each side of it.

“I think you'll be very comfortable here. Same rules apply here as they did in Chicago. You can roam the house and the land,” he says, as if this is a hotel stay. “I have a function to attend, so tomorrow we go shopping to get you some things.”

“What's wrong with the clothes I have?”

He drops my small leather duffle onto a navy overstuffed chair. “Are you actually putting up a fight to let me buy you pretty things?”

Yes, why am I questioning frivolous purchases? Out is out. “Well, when you put it that way.”

He half smiles. Obviously, I couldn't care less what I'm wearing, but this outing, hopefully, might be an enormous miscalculation on his part. A crowded store could be the perfect opportunity to slip away.



The moment we stepped foot into Lanvin, on Rodeo Drive, I knew attempting to get away would be futile.

Dress after dress I've tried on waiting for an opportunity that is virtually impossible with the store attendants fawning all over me.

“That dress is exquisite on you,” Hilary, the saleswoman says. I'll take her word for it, because with her jagged short blonde hair style, and boobs popping out of her pink button-down, she oozes sexuality.

Xavier, looking like a dark angel in his Brioni tailored suit, is oblivious, sitting in a plush, white armchair, tapping rapidly on his phone.

“What do you think?” I ask, stepping up to him. The tight bodice, which leaves half my breasts exposed, probably has over a million shiny flashes of

sparkles sewn in. He stops his tapping and glances up. “You’re a fucking masterpiece in that dress.”

The lust filled gaze directed at me causes an immediate reaction in my core. I’ve never had a man look at me like this. His eyes strip the dress from me, and I turn away to hide my blush.

“It’s not too much?” I ask, stepping up to the mirror, turning around in a half-circle to check out the non-existent back. The material drapes just before the curve of my butt.

“We’ll take it,” he tells the sales attendant, never taking his eyes off my ass. The way he looks at my body is like a starved lion ready to spring on its prey and rip it to shreds.

I step back into the dressing room and sag against the wall. I have to remind myself not to get sucked into the vortex that is Xavier. It’s hard—so hard. The effect he had on me as a girl pales in comparison to a woman. I’ve seen porn now, and those sexy little Tumblr clips, so when he gives me a look like he just did, my traitorous mind conjures up much more explicit things.

“The Louis Vuitton store isn’t too far from here,” he calls out to the closed door.

I won’t lie, my heart flutters a little with excitement.

After making the purchases, he places his large palm on the small of my back and guides me out the store. A man appears out of thin air to take the bags from him when we step outside into the warm air.

“Aren’t you worried about my father finding us?” I ask as we amble down Rodeo Drive. It’s hard not to get distracted by the beauty of the European style buildings and focus on the danger of the situation.

He shrugs. “He won’t.”

The carefree attitude he has as we walk down the busy street is ludicrous to me. Any of these people could be someone sent by my father, and he really doesn’t care.

I glance over my shoulder, making sure we aren’t being followed, and spot a black SUV down the road.

“They’re mine; don’t worry.” He looks over at me. “I have my own army, and this is *my* city.”

His words send a chill down my spine and I’m beginning to believe that my father is no match for Xavier.

We enter the Louis Vuitton store, and even though I grew up with money,

I never shopped at these types of places. Maybe it was because I didn't want to stand out more than I already did by flaunting my father's wealth, or maybe it was from always being asked by my father to explain my credit card purchases if they were too extravagant. At any rate, my escape is going to have to wait a few minutes while I check out these shoes and handbags.

A short, stout man with thick glasses, gelled-brown hair, and wearing a suit probably worth more than the shoes he's selling, waddles over. "Hello, sir," he says, shaking Xavier's hand.

"Get her whatever she wants," he replies.

"Yes, sir." The man smiles at me, assessing just how much he can convince me to want. "I'm Harold. Let me know if anything catches your eye."

Oh, it all catches my eye, little guy. I glance over to Xavier, and an easy smile lights his face. My lips betray me and smile back.

This is so not the time to be enamored with shoes and handbags. Or Xavier. But honestly, there is no way out of here, so I might as well look. And maybe I deserve a pair or hundred for all of this. So, I spend the next hour trying on almost every shoe in the store.

"Those," Xavier says, stepping up beside me. He wets his lips, eye fucking the black, strappy stilettos on my feet.

"You like these?"

"I fucking love them," he answers in a husky voice that does nothing to ease the ache intensifying between my thighs. His phone rings, interrupting our shoe moment, and I close my eyes and count to calm myself while he steps away and speaks in clipped tones to whoever is on the other end.

"We're done," he announces. "Something has come up."

Harold quickly rings the purchases, and in fifteen minutes, we're on our way back to Xavier's house. Thankfully, he's occupied the entire ride back with whatever is so important on his phone and I stare at nothing out the window, getting my head back together.

"Everything ok?" I ask as he puts his phone away.

"Yeah, just need to handle a few things."

"Things about my father?"

"No. Just business stuff."

I let his answer roll off my shoulders. Maybe it is all just business and nothing to do with my father. You can't have everything Xavier does without working hard.

“We’re leaving in a few hours,” he informs me as the car pulls into the driveway. He opens the door. “Wear the fuck me shoes.”



My first full on attempt at escaping failed miserably, but tonight, I’ll be smarter.

“You look nice,” Xavier says to me in the back of the luxury sedan which takes us to our next ‘event.’

Nice is not what his hooded eyes say as they skim over the tiny material of my red cocktail dress. My wardrobe usually consists of dresses that rest a little bit above the knee, and this dress hits mid thigh, right where Xavier’s eyes rest.

“I like you in red. Makes your hair look more wild.” His voice is low and husky, and I give a little tug at the bodice which barely contains my breasts before they jump into his sexy mouth.

“I’ve always had a bit of a wild streak.”

He cocks a brow at me. “I’ve known you your whole life, and I’ll say that isn’t accurate.”

“Not my whole life Xavier,” I throw back at him. “We don’t really know each other anymore.”

“Yes, you keep reminding me.” He turns to glance out the window as the driver pulls up to a long line at an art gallery. “Tell me something I don’t know then.”

I’m not sure if he means that metaphorically, but I decide to go with literal. “My friend, Delilah, found a private investor for my cards.” He looks back at me, and I sigh. “I could’ve been the next Hallmark if you didn’t ruin it.”

“Why can’t you still do it?”

“Come on, Xavier,” I say, “you know the best way to control someone is through their bank account.”

He studies me so intently, I feel stripped bare, all my faults on display. “Maybe you need to put up as much fight as you do with me. Tell your father to fuck off.”

He’s right. But I don’t plan on going back.

The car inches closer to the entrance, and a light illuminates the anger in

his clenched jaw. “Or better yet, I’ll tell him to fuck off.”

The coldness in his stare tells me he’d have no problem at doing that. “Now you tell me something,” I urge, not really expecting anything in return.

“I found my father,” he shocks the hell out of me by saying.

“And?” I whisper, fighting the urge to reach out and touch him.

“And nothing,” he says. “It’s a high that crashed as soon as I met him.”

“Trade ya?” I offer, softly, as we finally make it to our drop off.

He smirks, and for a beat, when the door is opened, I see a spark of warmth in his eyes.

Curiosity about why he’d bring me here rattles in my brain. He’s clearly giving the finger to my father, and although I don’t understand his thinking, it works to my benefit. I’m not going to be the docile doormat anymore.

With Xavier’s large hand on the small of my back, we glide past two security guards, who wave us through at the front entrance, and head straight into a party filled with no individuality. Clone after clone of women in designer gowns and men with three-piece suits.

With powerful strides, he slices through the small crowd, leading me over to a lanky man with a dark hunk of hair combed into a mohawk.

“This is Jean-Pierre, the artist,” Xavier introduces us.

“Call me JP,” he says.

I shake his soft hand, admiring the unconventional art. “It’s all so... interesting.”

Rabbits line the concrete walls of the gallery. His brushstrokes are genius, but I’m not much into rabbits getting it on... And then, like I’ve been plowed down by gunfire, it hits me. I realize why I’m here. This isn’t just about shoving a giant fuck you down my father’s throat until he chokes—it’s about me. *For me.*

This guy, JP, is pretty much responsible for my leap into the arts thanks to his instructional tutorials on his website. Wanting to keep my hobby secret, I scoured the Internet, looking for how-to’s. One day, I stumbled across a wacky guy, obsessed with furry animals. But he was so thorough and so knowledgeable. Xavier used to tease me relentlessly about it, saying that one day he was going to find this guy for me. It’s why he gave me the stuffed rabbit so long ago.

Jean-Pierre launches into a long soliloquy of how his pictures of rabbits screwing in the woods inspire tranquility or something asinine while I lock eyes with Xavier.

This is so thoughtful and so very confusing. I smile, unsure how to handle the emotions rolling through me. "You were a big inspiration to me," I tell Jean-Pierre. "If you'll excuse me, I need to hop over to the restroom."

That earns me an unexpected chuckle from Xavier. And the sound, deep and husky, nearly erases my desire to free myself.

I spot the restroom sign and the far entrance to the streets of LA in the distance. The unguarded entrance.

"Ok, for real, I have to go to the restroom." This time, JP catches on to my silly puns with a smile. "Nice meeting you. If you want to talk later, I'm all ears."

"I'd like that."

We say our goodbyes to JP, and before we reach the bathroom, I quickly pull Xavier into an alcove.

"What is wrong with you?" he asks with a furrowed brow.

"Thank you," I whisper. There's no way I could bust out of here without thanking him.

And then I do something I can't resist, something my arms need. I step closer and wrap them around his trim waist and hug. Tight. His lean body stiffens for a second, and then his dark head dips and he inhales.

"Your hair always smelled so nice," he whispers, sending a shiver through me. "What is that, peach?"

"Yeah."

His hand eases down my back, and I hear the thump thump thump of his heart beating faster when I rest my cheek against his chest. I don't ever want to let him go. But we don't always get what we want.

He drops his hands from me and steps away, and my body misses his touch.

"I'll be right here when you get out." His eyes sear into me, and I turn slowly and walk away, focused on my goal.

A few ladies huddle around the sink when I step inside the, ugh, windowless bathroom. Great. I stroll over next to them, pretending to fix my hair, while I think of my next move. What I really need is a decoy, a distraction.

The woman next to me, with bright blue eyes and a mass of strawberry curls applies lip-gloss to her plump lips.

"I love that brand." I smile, meeting her eyes in the mirror. "Looks great on you."

“Thanks,” she blots her lips together, slurring a bit. “I’ll tell you what looks great—that dress. Is that Valentino?”

“Marchesa.” An idea forms. A wild, wild idea. She's about the same size as me, and, hallelujah, she's tipsy. “I like yours better.”

She looks down at her gold gown and frowns. “It’s not me.”

I nod, barely able to contain my excitement over my good luck. Five minutes later, I am now dressed in gold.

“I love it,” she exclaims, preening in front of the mirror. “Back to the party.”

But, not me, I let her exit first and then hustle down the hallway and out onto the streets.

I debate on which way to go.

Who cares. Just run girl.

I glance back, checking to be sure the coast is clear, and then I bolt. How anyone can maintain speed, racing over black asphalt in heels is beyond me. But I am doing it. I'm like the wind.

I round the corner and run smack dab into a wall of muscle. Strong, hard muscle.

Two arms wrap around my body.

“Going somewhere?” Xavier’s rich voice asks.

I push against his solid chest. “Well, I was before you blocked my path like a linebacker on steroids.” I glance up to his not amused eyes.

“Don’t think I won’t put a leash on you.”

He leans close. “I’m always ten steps ahead of you, Rhi. Remember that.”

I swallow, but can’t get past the lump in my throat.

“Let go,” I say, barely above a whisper, barely to be heard by him at all.

“Don’t test me, because I promise you, I won’t fail.”

I can’t think of a retort right now, because his lips are so close to mine. I remember what they felt like. I could raise on my tiptoes and kiss him just like that. He’d probably let go then. But I don’t.

Instead I grit my teeth and admit my temporary defeat. “Fine. I’ll be a good little girl.”

He licks his lips, eyes zeroed in on my mouth as he releases me. “Any other time I’d encourage you to be a bad girl, but not tonight. Let’s go home.”

As we slide into his car, I'm not sure which is more concerning: the fact I liked the way he said bad girl or the delusional pang I got in my chest when

he 'let's go home.'

Probably the latter.

And that's even more reason to get out of here.



“RHIANNON, COME ON.” I swear this girl will be the death of me. After the performance at the art gallery last week, I’m not letting this girl out of my damn sight. And that’s fine. I like the sight of her. She has one of those faces, you know? The kind you can’t turn away from no matter how hard you try. And I tried that night, when she looked at me as if I’d given her the moon. She’s clawing her way in under my skin and fuck if I haven’t thought twice about things. But then, I see my mother’s corpse and remember why I’m doing this. “Let’s go, Rhi,” I yell again to her closed door.

She finally opens it, wearing jeans and a flowery top that slides off the slope of one creamy shoulder. “I’m ready,” she says, brushing past me with a stubborn tilt to her chin.

“Took you long enough.”

She’s infuriating, but cute as hell. “And let’s not have a repeat of the last time I took you out,” I grumble.

She crosses her finger over her heart as a swear that’s no doubt a lie, and we head off to my waiting car.

Once we arrive downtown, I lead her into the skyscraper which houses my offices.

“Why are we here?” she asks with eyes so big I could get lost and never find myself.

“Business,” I answer, ushering her into my private elevator.

She lets out a sigh and leans her shoulder against the wall. I push the button and step away from her sweet scent.

“Just a little bit longer, and then you’re home free,” I tell her, letting my

eyes linger on her petite frame.

From the moment we stepped foot in this building, I can't stop staring at her. In the car, I worked through emails and made a few calls to distract myself. Otherwise, I might've shoved her back on the leather seat and threw her legs over my shoulders.

I run a hand through my hair just to keep it from touching her. Being alone with her, here in this tiny fucking elevator, has my body on high-alert.

I know I shouldn't be enjoying the view of her cleavage swelling against her blouse. Or the way her throat moves every time she swallows. And I sure as fuck shouldn't be thinking about her swallowing me after I come in her mouth while she takes me between those pouty lips on her knees in this elevator.

But I am.

I'm imagining her dropping before me and palming my cock. The contact would have me groaning louder than I ever have before.

I've never wanted anyone this much.

She'd unzip my pants and push them down along with my briefs. My cock would jut out, and if she licked her lips, well fuck me. Heaven.

I'd ask, "You want a taste?"

She'd meet my gaze, nodding her head as I leaned back to give her better access.

She'd wrap her soft hand around the base.

I squeeze my eyes shut and let out a low hiss.

Nothing would prepare me for when her lips first make contact with the tip of my dick. I know it would be the best feeling. No doubt in my mind.

Nothing else would compare. Her lips would work magic, her tongue like a damn voodoo priestess. And when she put me in her mouth, I would grab hold of her silky hair, and she would suck, and I would pray to the heavens above to never let this end. Suspend time, please, someone, anyone. I'd beg for the moment to last forever and ever.

But God stopped listening to me a long time ago.

"Yeah, suck me," I'd say.

My words of encouragement would have her lapping at my skin at a quicker pace.

She'd run her tongue along my balls, and I'd groan louder.

Fuck, it would be the best damn blow job in the history of forever.

She'd swirl her tongue around the tip, driving me insane, and then she'd

take me completely in her mouth, going down as far as she could, and my dick would hit the back of her throat.

My cock is steel, straining on the other side of my zipper. But, my mind keeps going.

I would thrust into her hot mouth—hard—and I’d fucking love it.

“Oh, fuck, Rhi. I’m going to come,” I’d grit out.

She wouldn’t stop, and I’d get off deep inside her and she’d swallow it all down. She’d glance up, and I’d peer into the pools of brown, imagining a different outcome to my life. To a life of her and me ending up together.

A life that is never going to happen. I shake the thoughts as soon as the ding on the elevator sounds.

“Are you okay?” she asks, as I quickly step out, leaving my fantasy behind.

“This way.” We walk the short distance to my offices, and I hold the door for her.

She steps inside, and her eyes dart around the large waiting area.

“You’ll sit here.” I point to a padded leather chair, and she drops down into it, crossing her legs. I narrow my eyes at her sudden demureness. “I’ll be in there,” I jab a thumb over my shoulder. “No funny business.”

She raises a brow.

“I can see you through the glass.”

She nods, remaining quiet.

“I’ll be done shortly.”

James Marsh and Todd Halsom, private investigators, are both waiting for me when I step inside.

“Let’s get started,” I say, taking a seat at the conference table.

“So, these are Mr. DeLaurio’s accounts that we know of,” Todd says, pushing a paper closer to me.

“And we’re sure he’s involved with this gambling ring?”

“Yes, and look here,” he points to a name on the paper, “this is a shell corporation, which is also a big contributor to Ian Bingham’s campaign fund.”

“And that same company is holding the DeLaurio’s...”

“Bookie’s funds,” Todd finishes off for me.

Interesting. “And this proves it?”

“Yes,” James says.

I glance to Rhiannon sitting quietly with her arms folded in her lap. She

chews her bottom lip, and I divert my attention to the next file James grabs from his briefcase to set on the table.

He slides the papers in my direction. “Here’s that file you asked for. And I think there’s enough here to prove everything.”

I grab it and pull it closer. “Ok, I’ll read this tonight.”

I glance up and Rhiannon is gone.

Fuck.



I RACE toward the elevator and breathe a quick sigh of relief when the doors swoosh closed.

Threat level midnight here. I don't know who those men were or how they fit into this twisted game, but I'm taking my piece off the board.

The blonde receptionist casts her steely eyes on me as I rush through the empty lobby. The sweet taste of freedom is just on the other side of the revolving door in front of me. I'm almost home free.

As soon as the sun beats down on me, I head in the opposite direction of which we came. Without so much as a plan, or anything really, I travel as fast as my Chucks will carry me. See? I am smart. No heels this time.

Never looking back, I blend with the small crowd of tourists and business professionals on the streets. At a crosswalk, I wait for the traffic to clear, and that's when I feel the forcive grip of my captor.

"This is getting ridiculous," Xavier bites out, clearly not amused at yet another escape attempt.

"Let me go," I demand. The light changes and I try to go with the pack of people moving forward, but I'm held back.

"To where?" He moves us away from the crosswalk and far into an alley away from prying ears of anyone who may be passing by. His arms cage me in against the brick building behind me.

"I don't like you much anymore," I shout.

His eyes darken. "You think I enjoy chasing you around?"

"Well, *don't*. What can you possibly need from my father enough to take me hostage?"

He doesn't respond right away, and I hold my breath waiting for him to give me a clue. "Rhiannon, we're going home, and the next time you try something this stupid, you'll be punished."

"I'll scream bloody murder right now unless you tell me something. Anything." I stand my ground, challenging him with my eyes.

"You're not going to scream bloody murder. That's a perfect way to land right back in your father's grip."

Tears form of their own accord. Hot, heavy, fed up tears. I don't want them there, so I try to blink them away. "I hate you."

Oh, and I do. So much. I hate the way he stares at me as if I'm a kitten in need of shelter. I hate the way he growls my name when he's really angry. I even hate the way his grasp on my arm sends tingles to all the places I shouldn't be feeling anything for him.

"You don't hate me."

A tear trickles down, reminding me what a baby I am. I want the old Xavier back. I want to reach inside this brooding exterior of someone that looks and sounds like him and free the Xavier I used to know. "Tell me," I scream as my heart tries to fly through my chest.

"He killed my mother," Xavier shouts back.

He drops his arms, putting a few inches of space between us.

One.

Two.

I can't breathe.

Confusion billows, heartbreak follows, and my body is wracked with misery.

My thoughts jumble together in my head. Why? What? Where? How? Like the disconnected colors of a rainbow all bright and laid out for me to put back together in a cloudy sky.

Maybe she didn't give birth to me, but I cared about her, so much.

"How do you know? Xavier, tell me."

Tears spill freely down my face. And in the smallest fraction of a second, he pulls me into a hug so tight, it wraps me up and swallows me whole.

I sob into him. "I thought it was a suicide."

He explains about leaving my room that night, about the cars leaving, and how he found her in the kitchen.

My heart aches as he tells me his story. How he paid people off to find out the truth.

Bile rushes up my throat as he tells me how my father killed her. “What reason did he have?” I ask on a sob.

Hatred swims deep in the pool of his blue eyes. “She found something that she shouldn’t have.”

“What did she find, Xavier?” I say with an air of despondency.

He glances over his shoulder. “Let’s head home, we’ve already been out here long enough.”

“I can’t believe this.” And I can’t. It’s hard to process everything. “He’ll kill you too,” I whisper as we get in his car.

“I’m not worried about that.”

“Maybe I can help you,” I offer.

Steely eyes look over at me. “No. It’s not that simple.”

I’m at war with my emotions as we take the car back to his place. I’m confused and angry, but more than anything my drive to escape is stronger than ever.

If Xavier needs me to get to my father, then I need to make sure I’m not around. Because I fear what my father would do to him.

Xavier may think he has his plan in place, but I don’t want to take any chances.



“IF YOU WANT PUSSY, I’m sure she’d give it to you.”

I’ve always gotten along with Dean. My best friend for so many years, but right in this moment, his words piss me off. In a flash, I slam him against the wall.

“Don’t ever speak about her that way again,” I spit out.

“Fuck, I get it,” he barks out.

His eyes land on Rhiannon as she enters the study, and I release him to grab her

hand. “Let’s go.”

I don’t give a fuck what he thinks anymore. I don’t care what anyone thinks anymore.

“Where are we going?” Rhiannon asks, once we’re out of the room.

“Anywhere. And stop questioning me already.” I keep walking with purpose down the hall, past the guards, and into the garage. “Get in,” I say, pointing to a black Mercedes sedan.

Her eyes doubt me for a moment before she slides into the passenger side.

I get in, open the garage with the remote, and start the car. “Let’s get the fuck away for a day.”

She sits back, doesn’t say a word, but has a small barely there smile on her face.

And I’d be a fucking liar if I didn’t say it warmed me up from the inside out seeing it.



I pull into a field far away from the house and keep the engine running as I turn in my seat to face her. "Pressure, you know?"

She keeps quiet, watching me with her thick lashed brown eyes. I've always loved her eyes, but how they stare at me right now is a million times better.

"Let's pretend for one day none of this is happening." Her voice is soft like her. "Just me and you."

"I like the sound of that." Anything to not deal with the bullshit going on around us.

"I just want to know you like I used to." She shifts in her seat to face me.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"Is this like the part in a book where we tell each other our hopes and fears?"

She laughs and it floats through the air, seeps in my skin, and pushes my heart into a crazy rhythm. "Does that mean you have some? I didn't think you feared anything."

I run a hand over the steering wheel as I laugh a little. "I only have one fear."

"What's that?"

"Never getting to do this again." And then I crash my lips to hers.

My fingers sweep into her long hair, pulling her head back to claim more of her luscious mouth. She opens for me and our tongues meet together as if they've never been apart.

She moans and whimpers and it urges me on. Urges me on in the most primal way. I don't stop. I take everything I can.

My dick hardens beneath my pants. The urge to push inside her takes over, and my hands wander her body.

First, her neck, where her pulse beats as fast as mine.

Then, lower, to the swell of her breasts.

Fuck, her tits are such a turn on.

"I don't plan on stopping," I whisper against the shell of her ear.

"I don't want you to."

"Good." I kiss the column of her throat, the skin below her ear, and graze my tongue along her jaw, needing more of her.

She tastes so good.

My hand drifts further down, thumbing her pebbled nipple through the thin material of her shirt.

She throws her head back and moans.

My girl likes having her nipples played with, so I give her what she wants.

And yes, she is *my* girl. For now, anyways. Right now, she's mine.

I push the future away as I continue kneading her tits with my hands. Just watching her mouth—her pink, soft lips—as she coos out her pleasure makes my mind go wild with images. Images of us together; kissing, touching, screwing.

The images are so real as I capture her lips with mine again, sucking, lapping, and needing her to the point of no return. So fucking real.

The sun beats on the windshield as if he wants a piece of her too. His heat pours in begging for one bite of her skin. But I won't ever allow it. I can only imagine what sex with her is going to be like. Would be like, I mean.

And just like that, I'm letting my mind get carried away with things I can never have. This was already too far.

I pull away from her mouth, breaking the kiss.

Her hungry eyes meet mine, her kiss-stung lips parted waiting for more, her breathy moan letting me know she was nowhere near finished yet.

Life is funny. We both want each other. It's obvious. But, the ramifications of giving in to that one tiny moment in time is bigger than either of us could ever really handle.

There won't be a happy ending here.

It's not easy to pull away from her, but I do. Desire dilates her eyes to a bone-chilling shade of black. She slays me with her unspoken words.

I don't know what to say either. So I say nothing.

Instead, I throw the car in gear, and drive out of the field.

The sun mocks me from high in the sky, casting shadows of my past along the ride. She wants to know everything, well, I'll show her.



THAT KISS just surpassed the last one we shared. He hasn't said a word since. But, I don't mind. It gives me time to recover and pretend I'm not over here wanting to, well, unzip his pants, slide my hand inside and jerk him off while he navigates us through scenic LA. Shameful, I know.

This is my first time on the West Coast, kidnapping still counts, so I let my eyes soak it all up while I try to calm my body. LA is a different world. Nestled between the ocean and mountains, every bend in the road feels like crossing a border. Xavier continues down the meandering road, silent, and for once, I just let it be. We pass a little pizza place, and my mind turns to thoughts of Hannah. Her love for pizza was unparalleled. She believed it was one of the four food groups, and the thought makes me laugh to myself.

My brain still tries to wrap around the fact my father killed her. We always look for the good in people, but sometimes there is none to be found. He won't hesitate to do the same to Xavier. Fear wracks my bones, almost to the point of snapping. I can't stay here. I can't let anyone else get hurt.

I glance at Xavier, studying his tight jaw and clenched fists guiding the car through the rolling countryside. I believe Xavier with all my heart about how the events the night his mother died went down. My father is too far past gone to ever be able to be saved from his life. He's hurt too many people, Xavier and myself included.

A while later, he drives his stylish Mercedes into a parking lot at an abandoned office building.

"Where are we?" I ask, glancing around.

"Come on. You'll see."

I follow him to the door of the darkened concrete building with no sign indicating what it used to be. "I don't know. This place looks pretty sketchy."

He raises a brow and throws my words back at me. "If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead already."

"Touché," I reply as he grabs the keys in his hand and opens the front door.

The fluorescent lights hum to life when Xavier flips the switch.

"This is my place," he says, proudly.

I glance around at the cavernous, empty space. Tile floors and white walls.

"Doesn't look like you're doing much business out of here."

He laughs. "This place hasn't been functional in quite some time." He walks to the center. "It was the first business I ever bought."

"Really? What did you do here?"

"I started with installing security systems. Then, I invested my mother's life insurance money in buying the business."

"That's great." Fascinated with the glimpse he's giving me into those years after he left, I let him reveal it to me at his own pace.

He looks around as if he's picturing it still intact. "I designed my own security system that got a lot of attention."

"Oh?"

"You know Graham Hayes?"

I tilt my head, giving him a 'What kind of Mafia daughter do you take me for?' look. "Um, yes. *Dirty Guys Do It Better*? I used to love that show."

"He hired me to do his." He laughs to himself. "Then he told a few of his movie star friends, and the rest is history."

I cross my arms, looking around and imagining a young Xavier working here. "So that's what you do?" I smile when he nods. "I always figured you'd be a baseball star someday. But this makes sense."

"Baseball was a hobby," he says, and a bolt of heat courses through my body as he walks around, his smile growing by the second as he remembers his first business. "This was my real passion."

"So, you probably know a lot of movie stars?"

"A few," he answers, smirking.

How cool is he? I hate to say how proud I am of him, given the circumstances, but I am. So proud.

"I'm proud of you, Xavier. I always knew you were destined for

greatness.”

He moves closer, sliding his hands in his pockets. “I think you are too.”

“Thanks.” Like fog on a mirror, all the good feelings dissipate, leaving harsh reality staring back at me. “Will you vote for my husband?”

He shakes his head. “Rhi,” he whispers. “I know you’re angry because you were running away from your life, but he would have just found you.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

He moves closer, stalking, watching, and I swallow—hard. “I do know.”

“You know what? You’re crazy. One minute you’re this sweet Xavier I remember from growing up, and the next you’re the biggest asshole.” I take a deep breath. “And then, you act like I should be thanking my lucky stars because you kidnapped me?”

He blinks, moving closer.

“Don’t.” I hold up a hand to block him from coming to close. “You don’t get to sit here and pretend like you’re some white knight rescuing me. You kidnapped me and stopped me from finding *my* greatness.”

Our eyes battle each other, and he finally relents, letting me win a war I am clearly losing. “You want to leave?”

“Yes. For the millionth time, yes.”

Because the longer I stay, the more I forget about why I should be leaving.



GOD, she lights my blood on fire. And makes my heart pound out of my chest. And if she wants to run, fine. I want to tell her everything, but I won't. I can't.

"Let's go," I bite out, wrapping my fingers around her arm.

We get in the car, and I peel out of the parking lot.

She's pretty when she's mad. Her pursed, pink lips frown as she glares out the window.

And I curse myself silently for my straying, rampant thoughts. I curse myself for the hold she has on me. She's not the prisoner; I am.

"You still want to run from me?" I ask.

She doesn't answer but turns slightly in her seat to look at me with loathing.

"Do you?" I ask again as I drive further down the road toward my estate. I'm not far now.

She still doesn't say a fucking word.

"Answer me. You want to run?"

"Yes," she shouts, and I pull the car off the road.

"Get out." I throw the car in park and unlock her passenger door. "Go."

Her wary eyes hold mine, and she hesitates before her hand lands on the door handle.

"Run," I urge her.

She opens the door, one leg out, eyes pinning me to my seat, daring me to beg her to stay, or worse: chase her. She opens her succulent lips, as if to say something, but decides against it.

And then she takes off.

“Fuck,” I shout.

I step out of the car, watching her legs take her as fast as they can through the countryside.

She makes it into a thicket of bushes and out of sight as I check my watch.

I lean against the hood of the car, crossing my ankles and pull out my phone. After returning a few emails, I glance up.

And then, there she is, and I can’t breathe.

She sees me, and tears fill her eyes, and I rush to her, swooping her up to cradle her in my arms.

“I’ve got you.” I carry her and place her in the passenger seat of the car.

“You done trying to run away from me?” I ask when I pull into the driveway of my house.

She doesn’t look at me. “Yeah, I’m not going to make it very far on foot.”

I carry her into the house and straight into her bathroom.

I set her down and move to draw her a bath. “Get undressed.”

She doesn’t move. Just watches me with large questioning eyes that pierce me right in the chest. Because I can’t answer what she wants to know. I squeeze a few drops of some bubble bath shit sitting on the edge of the tub into the water.

“Get undressed,” I repeat.

She hesitates. “I can take my own bath.”

The dark smudges under her eyes are making me want to take care of her; protect her. It’s a feeling I’ve repressed since she’s been around me. A feeling I used to succumb to regularly when we were kids. Rescue the princess. She never knew the number of assholes I punched in the face defending her honor.

“You’re tired.”

She waves me off. “I’m fine.”

I sit on the edge of the tub, dipping my fingers in to check the water.

“Do I need to help you?”

She grabs the hem of her shirt, exposing her toned stomach, and before she can raise it over her head, she stops. “Turn around, please.”

My heart slams against the confines of my chest. My dick springs to life, begging for one touch of her.

I stand and turn my back to her, closing my hungry eyes and denying

them the chance to feast upon her.

A little splash lets me know she's in the tub.

"Ok, you can turn around now," she whispers.

When I turn back, her body is hidden beneath a mound of foam. Damn, the bubbles were a bad idea.

I shake her from my head. "Finish up and get a good night's sleep."

She watches me closely as I exit the bathroom.

It takes everything in me not to turn around and slide the bubbles away from her sweet tits and suck them into my mouth. I head to my room across the hall and change into black gym shorts and Dodger's t-shirt, ready to work her out of my pores in the basement gym. Hours later, still hard as a rock from imagining her running her hands all over that fine body, I decide I'm going to hell anyways. What's one more sin?

Her room is dark when I let myself in.

Like a damn obsessed stalker, I pull back the covers.

Motherfucker.

Two large pillows under the down comforter are all that occupy the bed.

My eyes search the room, and she's nowhere in sight.

I slam my fist against the wall.

Where did you go? I glance around the room, looking for any small clue she could have left behind. There's nothing.

"I'll find you," I mutter to myself.

I leave the room in a flash and head to my security center to look over the footage.

"She's gone," I announce to the small group of men watching the grounds. Justin, swivels around in his chair.

"She won't get far," he assures me.

After several minutes of scanning footage, my irritation rises. I'm not a patient man. "Anything?" I ask.

"Nothing. It's like she's vanished."

A million dollars' worth of monitors and not one of them has her on it.

"Play back the last half hour. Find her."

Thirty hidden cameras in the halls and common areas. None in any of the bedrooms.

I stalk back to my office, passing by her room along the way.

There's a frenzy outside—the lights are on; the dogs are out. She has nowhere to go.

Nowhere to run.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a flash of red hair rushing out of her bedroom door.

There she is.

I follow her.

She has no idea I'm behind her.

She tiptoes, turning each corner carefully. I stalk her like the prey she is. Oh, Rhiannon.

She thinks she can out master me.

I'll admit, it was smart of her to hide in her room. Then, when the frenzy starts, slip out.

We've been focusing on the outside as she makes her way through the house.

Clever girl.

She reaches the side door that leads to the to garage and waits, finding a small alcove to hide herself. Going for a car, smart.

"Hello, Rhiannon. Going somewhere?" I lean against the wall.

She jumps at my words and then brushes her hair over her shoulder. "Actually, yeah, I am. I'm leaving. This is getting real old, so don't try to stop me, Xavier."

I laugh. "Rhiannon, sweet little Rhi, I'm not only going to stop you, but now I'm going to punish you as well."

Her eyes widen. "I'll put up a fight."

I swoop in and lift her by her legs, draping her over my shoulder.

"Oh, I hope so. I really hope so."



PUNISH ME? It's no use trying to wiggle free. The only thing it's getting me is half naked. All the bumping and jostling has my black tank pushed up to my armpits and my yoga pants easing down.

The dark wood floor of the hallway passes quickly beneath his angry strides. I've no idea where he's taking me, but I'm not giving up without a fight. So, I balance on his shoulder as best I can and reach down his broad back to slip my fingertips beneath his shorts, right to the edge of his briefs. And then... I grip the cotton band and give a yank.

Hard.

Take that, asshole.

"Goddammit, Rhiannon," he spits out.

I nearly let go when he slaps my ass. The sting is sharp, and he lands another one when I tug with all my might. "What are you fucking five?"

"What are you? A Neanderthal?"

Another slap lands before tiles blur as he stalks faster, and then I'm forced to let go when he maneuvers and drops me on the granite countertop of his kitchen.

The air sizzles between us. "What's wrong? The big bad Xavier doesn't like wedgies?" I taunt.

I'll admit, I've never been truly afraid of Xavier until this moment. It's not fiery anger igniting in his blue eyes, it's glacial iciness. Anger I can handle, form a defense against. This cold silence, with his chest rising and falling, scares me.

"Give me your shirt," he orders.

“What?”

“Do it.”

Pick your battles. This isn't one I'm going to win, so I remove my tank, and I really should listen to myself, because I don't place it in his outstretched hand, nope, instead I fling it at his gorgeous face. He's not too happy when he snatches it off his head.

Before I can blink an eye, he twists it around my wrists, binding them.

His eyes drop to my lacy black bra before he steps between my legs, bracing his hands beside me. “You're going to regret that, Rhi,” he warns, barely above a whisper. “Bad girls get punished.”

That line coming from his lips, scares me more than what he's become. It does something to my insides, causes a flutter low in my belly. I shouldn't like the way it sounds. The goal is to get out of here, once and for all, not get turned on.

Before I can think of a plan, he flips me over and bends my upper body against the counter until my cheek rests against the cool surface.

Everything happens so fast.

So fast I can't think.

A drawer slides open and my pants are yanked down, exposing my ass. Something solid and wooden thwacks my left cheek. Five times. Each harder than the last. My ass is on fire, but I refuse to cry out. He repeats it on the right cheek, then drapes his body against my back. I buck against him. My movements come to a confusing halt when I feel his hard cock press against my bottom.

He whispers in my ear, “Ten more to go. Not so funny now is it?”

As much as I dislike him right now, my body reacts to his hand massaging my cheek. His touch is sensual, caressing the tender skin until the burn subsides.

“Maybe I like it,” I pant out, not wanting him to have the satisfaction of thinking he's winning. But, god help me, he is. I'm wet. The more his large hand strokes, fondles, and squeezes, the wetter I get. These are the fantasies I used to have of Xavier. Fantasies I've fought hard to put behind me. I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't take the pain to experience the pleasure of what he's doing right now.

The weight of his body leaves me, and I grit my teeth through ten more punishing spanks.

“Are you done?” I ask, biting back a moan as his fingers erase the pain.

“You have a really nice ass,” he murmurs. “I’ve always thought about it.”

Why did he have to say that? Memories of an uncorrupted Xavier flood my mind. And then the worst thought enters my brain: what if I can save him from this?

He flips me over and lifts me onto the countertop, then leans in to whisper in my ear. “I’m not done with your punishment yet. Although, this may not be quite a punishment.”

“What do you mean?” My hips grind into him a little.

He slides my pants off and licks his lips. “What do you do in a kitchen?” he asks.

“Cook?” I answer like a nitwit.

He shakes his head and runs his hands up my thighs, creating a frenzy of chills to race along my skin. My breath catches when his thumb strokes along my pussy. “You eat.”



“TECHNICALLY, YOU COOK TOO,” she wisps out with wide eyes.

Starved for her, I glide my thumb along her pussy.

“Please,” she says on a whisper.

“Please what? Beg me for it.” I move a little closer and suck along the soft skin above her collarbone.

“I’ll never beg.”

Her defiance turns me on. But, I didn’t abduct her in the middle of the night so I could have my way with her. As bad as I want her, she’ll have to beg me for it.

She’s a sexy, feisty woman, and I am once again no longer in control. Well, I need to get the control back. Let her know that she isn’t the one I’ve been pining after all these years. That I’ve moved on. And I can fuck her and leave her. And she means nothing to me.

I run my hand down her neck, to the column of her throat, and down the side of her chest, grazing my thumb along her breast.

“I want to make you feel so good, Rhi,” I say.

She doesn’t move as her eyes gaze into mine. My cock throbs, and I’m half-tempted to walk away and finish off the job in the shower.

“What do you want to do to me?” she asks, so innocently.

I’m leery for a moment. Is this another ploy to attempt another escape?

I trace my fingers along her ankles, up to the back of her knees, and then, into the inside of her thighs. She doesn’t move a muscle, just watches.

Her black, lace panties is the icing on the cake for my cock. He’s hard and ready to pound his way deep inside her.

I run my thumb over the panel of her soaked panties and offer her a smile. "Are you wet for me?"

She nods, biting her lower lip, and it drives me insane.

She asks again, "What do you want to do to me?"

I slip my finger past her panties and plunge it deep inside her. So fucking wet. "Everything, Rhiannon. I want to do everything you imagined me doing back then."

Her eyes glisten with understanding, and she grinds against my hand. "Xavier..." her voice trails off.

"Give me it. Give me everything tonight."

Her eyes bore into mine as I continue to work her pussy. "Ok."

She gives me her blessing, and I'm already pulling her panties down her legs. I toss the thin, black lace over my shoulder and smile in appreciation.

In one quick motion, I have her legs spread. Her eyes are wild with lust before she closes them.

"Open your eyes, Rhiannon," I demand.

I open the freezer next to me and dish out one small ice cube.

Her leg flinches when I bring the cube to touch her inner thigh. "That's cold."

"Do you like this?" My fingers trace the cube closer to her hot heat.

She arches her back. "Yeah," she breathes.

I follow the ice's path up her leg with my tongue, drinking the wetness from her soft skin. I'd imagined this scenario in my head a million times in the past. I never thought I'd ever be this lucky.

I run the ice cube along her seam and circle her clit.

She moans, loud, and her eyes slam shut. "Xavier, please," she begs. Ah, there it is.

I crush my mouth over her pussy, warming her skin with my hungry mouth. The ice cube clinks against the steel of the sink when I toss it and continue sucking her.

I enter a finger into her again, *she's so tight*, and toy with her clit, sucking it between my teeth.

Her hands fly into my hair, digging into my scalp.

She grinds her body against my face, her pussy wanting more. And I give it to her. But not all just yet. I edge her closer to her orgasm, and then pull back a bit to let the desire build.

I grip her thighs, spreading her legs, and continue eating her in my

kitchen as if this whole fucked up situation doesn't exist.

I suck, nibble, and lick my way to her satisfaction. Who knew Rhiannon would have such a little wild streak?

I'm so fucking hard. So turned on. And all I can think about is sinking into her heat.

I pull back, pushing my fingers in deeper.

"Xavier..." she pants, her voice trailing off.

"Do you want me?" I ask.

Her big brown eyes search mine. "Yes. More than anything."

I plunge even deeper inside her, and she crumbles around me. I kiss her. I kiss her hard and rough. There's nothing I want more right now.

Her orgasm spirals throughout her body as I suck her tongue into my mouth.

"You feel so good."

The aftershock of her orgasm slams through her. Tiny tremors clench my fingers. When her body calms, I free her hands and she pushes me away. Regret settles in her eyes, and she scoots off the counter.

"That was probably a bad idea."

I cross my arms, watching her snatch up her clothes and dress. "Why?"

The irony I'm now asking 'why' isn't lost on me.

"Because I care about you." A feeling I've fought for so long spreads through my chest. "I've known you my whole life," she continues. "We were friends *once*." She stands with her hand on her hip, eyes on fire.

"We still are," I say, lifting her over my shoulder and once again carrying her caveman style. This time, to my bedroom.



FEELINGS I LOCKED AWAY, fight their way free.

He's dangerous. Someone I should run away from and never look back. Not because of his power or his dabbling in my human trafficking, because he has a hold on my heart that will never be released.

He sets me down in his master suite, and I take a mini tour with my eyes. Sleek black furniture, flat screen tv, vibrant splashes of red on the white walls. The one thing I can't stop focusing on is the massive four poster bed. Fit for a King.

I gulp.

He moves toward me, reaches his hands into my hair and pulls my lips to meet his. And then it's so good as he kisses me like he owns me. It's a feeling I don't want to stop.

"I could kiss you all night," he says.

And I could kiss him all night too.

And I want to.

He moves me further toward the bed, his tongue tracing down the column of my throat, into the dip of my collarbone, and then back up to do it all over again.

This all feels insane. Crazy insane.

I've dreamt about having Xavier's hands all over me so many times. And now that it's happening, it feels better than anything. A kind of better I want to keep going all night long.

His breaths get rougher, his grip on me tightens, and I moan along with him.

An unabashed yearning floods through me at full-force. Desires I'd buried so long ago break the surface, screaming and ripping through me. He makes me feel sexy the way he kisses me all over as if he needs to cover every inch. And it turns me on. So bad.

How could I even pretend I don't want him? How can I ever want to leave him after this? And when I do, is it so bad to want to have this to take away with me?

The magnitude of his touch is soul-crushing as he kisses me again. His tongue does this little dance with mine, and he presses his rock-hard body against me.

I need to see him naked. I need to see that muscle that forms the sexy V that always tempted me and trail my tongue along to see where it leads. This thought excites me, more than I already am, and I blush a bit.

"Rhi, tell me you want me inside you."

My words fail me. He's already inside me, imprinted on my soul.

I almost expect him to throw me on the bed, and ravage me, but he keeps paying reverence to the skin just below my ear, electrifying my senses with his passionate lips.

And then, he moves away from me to sit on the bed, eyes blazing.

Having his mouth on me earlier was too many sensations firing off at once, and I won't lie, the thought of being *his* does excite me, but I keep quiet.

"Ah, I see. You don't like the fact that your body is betraying you. You want me, admit it?"

My body isn't the only thing betraying me. Again, I say nothing.

He holds his hands out, and I instinctively move to stand between his legs. "Let me make you feel good tonight."

My chest tightens knowing tonight may be all we have.

His hand moves up my leg, madly churning the desire pumping through my veins.

My body *is* betraying me, and I'm so close to giving Xavier everything he wants. Everything I want.



HER EYES ARE heavy with lust already, and I'm sure mine match. Maybe I can fuck the desire to run right out of her.

"You know I can make you feel better than I already have," I say with a rock-hard dick.

I kiss the fuck out of her as she wraps her arms around me, and she makes this wild, sexy sound that has my dick throbbing with the need to get at her.

"I want you," she moans.

And then it's on. I can't even remember how I get my shorts off and my cock in my hand, pumping and squeezing it.

Her clothes fly off as we move in tandem to the bed, and I rise to my knees, gazing down at such a beautiful sight.

Have you ever been so consumed by desire that you can't fulfill the urges quick enough? That you'll die if you don't get it now?

My mind has left the building, and my cock is running the show. And he wants pussy. Rhiannon's pussy.

Fuck, I can't take anymore.

I hover over top of her. "You make me so hard."

Her eyes are heavy with lust, and I crash my lips to hers. She moans, and her body writhes beneath me.

"Xavier, please," the words tumble from her lips on a breathy moan.

"Do you need my cock slamming inside you? You want me to fuck that sweet pussy?"

Her nails dig into my back. Fuck that feels so good.

She spreads her legs, and her soft hand grips my dick, pumping it, and it

feels so fucking good. “Xavier, please fuck me. Please, I need you so bad.”

I grab a condom and roll it down my hard length. Without waiting another second, I push into her in one passionate thrust.

Ecstasy.

She lets out a thundering cry of passion, and I groan along with her.

And then we’re fucking, and a new type of energy charges through me. It brings me alive, to a higher level, and I bask in the feel of it. In the feel of her.

“Your pussy is so hot.”

She grips my hips, her back arches, and she cries out again, begging louder.

“Is this what you want?” I pound into her.

“Yes.” She moans out long and low, her sculpted legs wrap firmly around me.

“You want to be mine tonight? No one else’s?” I keep pushing.

Her pussy tightens all around me, and she leans her head back. “Yes, only yours.”

My chest constricts at the words I’ve wanted to hear my whole life. Words heavy like an anchor, keeping me in place. “Take this cock deep in your tight, little pussy.” I wrap my other hand around her neck, guiding her face forward just a bit to reach her mouth. I kiss her. And then, I can’t stop kissing her. I want to be fused in every way possible to this girl.

She’s mine. And she wants to be mine.

With her, it’s like I’m able to breathe again for the first time since I left. All those years apart there’s been a black hole inside me, expanding with each passing day.

And with our lips locked, our tongues tangling furiously together, she makes me feel something I can’t comprehend.

I sink further into her heat. She consumes me. Her soft skin encases me in a cocoon.

Her fingernails dig into the base of my scalp as she moans my name and the sound ignites something deep within me. We fit so perfectly together, and her pussy clenching down on my cock is the best feeling. I’m fired up and *everything* about this is just so intense. It’s never been like this, so on fire, so crazy. The kissing, the touching, the sexy sounds she makes when I fuck her so deep. Like a drug I can’t quit.

“Rhiannon, don’t run from me.”

I pump into her; my sanity can't take much more.

I touch every part of her skin—her face, her tits, and every place in between—before settling my fingers to circle her clit. She yells out she's coming, and God, I'm so fucking close to joining her.

My whole-body thrums and pulses feeling her orgasm. All I see when I open my eyes is the gorgeous look of pure ecstasy on her face.

"Xavier," she says, ever so quietly, meeting my thrusts, "I want to feel you come inside me."

Fuuuuck. I come and come and can't stop coming. I really can't, and she takes it all.

I land on my back, breathing intense, and stare at the ceiling.

"That was amazing," she wisps out.

"Yeah, you're amazing," I answer, dazed from the intensity of just how fucking amazing it was.

I head to the en suite bathroom to clean up, and when I return, she's already asleep. And then I do something I've never done before in my life: I pull back the covers and climb in behind her, wrapping her into my chest.

All the years of being unable to sleep, I pass right out.



The next morning the air feels a little different on my skin. The light of the sun streaming into the room looks brighter. Every little thing about today feels different somehow.

I'm back to my teenage years, my hormones in overdrive as I snuggle closer to Rhiannon, not wanting to ruin this moment yet.

She moans a little in her sleep and scoots her ass back, lining it up perfectly with my morning wood.

My arm wraps tighter around her, and she runs her fingers over my skin.

Then reality beats its way between us. What the fuck am I doing lying in a bed with Rhiannon wrapped in my arms? "Get dressed," I say, flipping the covers off and crossing to the bathroom. I slam the door to escape the feelings swirling like an F5 tornado in my bedroom, obliterating everything.

I can't lose focus here. As spectacular as it fucking was, I need to make sure that shit doesn't happen again.

I'm in a very bad mood. You know the kind: a dull headache pressing at

your temples, your body feels like glue is traveling through your veins instead of blood, and your head is high from the fumes of that glue. Yes, that's how I feel. It's like I was hit by a speeding train and left to die a lonely death on the tracks.

But not Rhiannon. No, she flits through the house like a hummingbird—small and energetic—right into the kitchen, with her ass swinging from side to side, to prepare breakfast.

“You know I have someone I can call to make that,” I say, pointing to the eggs she cracks in the skillet.

“I don't mind.” Her voice is so chipper, it lightens my mood for about half a second.

“Hmm, ok.”

She scrambles the eggs and throws bread in the toaster. And I focus in on her ass the whole time. Hey, I like to appreciate the view like any other red-blooded male, but hers is better, because I know I've had it in my hands. I've spanked it, bit it, squeezed it, and claimed it. It's mine. Watching her float through the kitchen, *my kitchen*, makes me believe it's true.

“Hope you're hungry,” she calls out to my filthy mind. “Where is everyone?”

I shrug. “I sent them all home last night.”

She smiles, and I narrow my eyes.

“Don't even think about running.” She stops fluttering about and rests the spatula on her shoulder. “Although, I kinda liked the punishment.”

One track, stay focused. Don't let her ass deter you from your mission.

Anything I say to myself falls on deaf ears when she leans in to grab two Evian bottles of water from the fridge. Her heart-shaped ass calls to me, and I move from the stool and smack it.

“Ow, what was that for?” She's smiling, so I know I didn't smack her too hard. Although I wanted to. Not really. I don't know. I'm in a bad mood.

“It was there and,” I shrug, “in need of manhandling.”

She swats a kitchen towel at me, and I side-step it.

“I have some meetings today.”

She grabs two plates from the cabinet. “Oh, ok. I have some new ideas for some cards.”

This is all very domesticated—very personal—and it makes me uneasy. We eat together as my mind replays last night over and over in my head. What was I thinking?

She heads off to her room the moment my security detail has arrived for the day.

I step in my office, lock the door, and grab my phone.

“Ian Bingham,” he answers on the second ring.



“You did what?” Dean arches a brow at me.

“You heard me. I called Ian.” I lean back against the leather sofa.

“Do I need to remind you how you’re the stickler for plans, and now you’re going off script?” He crosses the length of my study and spins the Diplomat floor globe in its mahogany cradle. “You hear about those Flat-Earthers going around saying the Earth isn’t round?”

I laugh. “Yeah, some big government conspiracy. Maybe Ian’s in on it.”

He spins the globe again. “What did he say?”

“He was pissed,” I smirk, remembering how he whispered the curse words as he simultaneously ordered a mocha skinny latte, “but he agreed to hear me out.”

He moves to the armchair across from me and takes a seat. “So, why the sudden need to talk to Ian?”

“I wanted to see how deep his loyalties lie. Would he take more money for his campaign to drop marrying Rhiannon, or is that a deal breaker for him?”

He lifts a brow. “What’d he say?” His gray eyes focus on me as he waits for my answer.

“Of course, he entertained the idea of more money, but he’s loyal to that fucking prick. Says his dad and Al DeLaurio go way back.”

Dean runs a hand over his jaw, deep in thought. “What did he say about DeLaurio? Any clue as to where or why we have her?”

I laugh. “Ah, it’s we now, is it?”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “Yeah, it’s we. I’m not letting you go down for this if shit goes wrong.”

“It won’t go wrong. Have a little faith.”

“Ian say anything else?”

I nod. “Our flushing out is working well. DeLaurio is in LA, but I already told Ian not to bother and told him our next destination.”

“Did he think you were lying?”

I shrug. “I guess we’ll find out.”

“How’s Rhiannon?”

I shift in my seat. “She’s fine,” I clip out. I’ve avoided Rhiannon all day, not checking on her at all. For all I know, she could have escaped again.

“You sure?” The look on his face says he knows something, but I won’t lead on that anything has happened. It was a one-time ordeal. It won’t happen again.

I could sit here all night long and beat myself up for having sex with her, but I won’t. “Yeah, everything’s fine.”

He stands. “Just be careful with her.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Sure. I’m going back to work.”

When he leaves, a fucked up thought hits me. She’ll be gone soon, so maybe I should enjoy the sweet feel of her while I can. Does that make me an asshole? If it does, then brand it on my chest, because, honestly, I don’t think I can quit her now that I’ve been deep inside her.



I SHOULD BE ASHAMED. But, I'm not. Any silly fantasy I've ever had as a kid about Xavier was outdone by the real deal. Hell, any sexual experience I've ever had in my life has been outdone.

It deserves a shrine. He deserves a shrine. Or a church for people to come and worship him daily. I would attend, every damn day.

Clearly, I need an exorcism. My feelings for Xavier swirl in confusion. If everyone is going to use me, then why can't I get something from it? But that's a lie I tell myself to make me feel better, because today when he treated me like I had the plague, it hurt. I almost made him a card that said, 'Thanks for the screw,' but instead I've moped.

Feeling defeated, I drop down in the oversized armchair that's become my very own chestnut tree to sit and think instead of clawing my way through these walls. I mean, what do I think the outcome is going to be here? My magical hooaha is going to erase years of hatred, and he's suddenly going to realize *he's* the real prisoner here, shutting himself off from anything but revenge.

No, the chances of that happening are as slim as snow in Florida. This situation is so bizarre; one minute he's doing nice things, and the next I'm trying to escape.

Which, I still plan on. Even though Xavier thinks he's devised some brilliant plan, I'm not sure he really knows who he's dealing with. And not just my father—Ian. Saint Ian, that's what I like to call him. He sure has the wool pulled over everyone's eyes. He gives to charity, acts like the nicest man around, praising and sharing himself, but behind closed doors he's

sabotaging those very people he acts like he helps.

It's disgusting.

Although, if Ian's a saint, then my father's the pope. Everyone bowing down to kiss his gaudy pinky ring.

A knock sounds at the door, and I sink back further in my chair, wanting to disappear into the soft fabric.

"I'm here to help make you even more beautiful," Krista's sweet voice sounds through the room. "Xavier says to wear the blue gown tonight."

"I guess he forgot to mention he had another event he needed to use me at." I prop my head in my hand, not wanting to leave this chair, and tuck my legs under me, sighing heavily.

She stops in front of me and takes a seat on the ottoman.

"Listen," her voice drops to a whisper, "I'm not going to make excuses for him or pretend I know what's going on, but you can't give up." She leans in a little closer. "I see the way he looks at you. You are more to him than you realize. Do what you need to do."

I want to believe her. I don't want to be this droopy-owled naive girl who lusts after her captor.

The escape attempts aren't working, so maybe it's time for a new tactic. A new challenge. Maybe, and it's a big maybe, I can seduce the truth out of him.

Or use my body as a tool to help me get the information to Xavier's 'plan' for myself.

And maybe, if I have any input or think it's a bad idea, he'll listen to me. I just need to remind myself getting close to him is about information, and not because I can't stand *not* being around him.



It's so hard to have been fucked within an inch of your sheltered life, and then stand before that person, wondering if you're supposed to pretend it didn't happen. Dressed in the sparkly blue evening gown and heels he lusted after, that's exactly what I do.

He looks like a tall sex god in his black Armani tuxedo with his dark hair perfectly rumpled. All of this makes it even harder because I now know he is a sex god.

“Where are we going?” I ask, casually, as he leads me through the front door to a waiting black Benz.

“Do you like the opera?”

My head whips to him. “You kidnapped me to take me to the opera?”

He cracks a smile. “No, but, I do have an associate I need to meet with there.” Then, his face grows serious. “So, no funny business tonight.”

I smile, wondering if he’s talking about attempted escapes and not bedroom funny business instead. “Scouts honor, I won’t run,” I say, sliding into the back of the car.

He quirks a brow before folding his tall body in beside me. “You’re still not a scout.”

I laugh a little to cover the nerves roiling in my belly when he sits close enough for his broad shoulder to graze against mine. “Promise, no running,” I tell him.

He studies my face for a moment, determining if I am in fact telling the truth. “Good.”

“I feel very *Pretty Womanish* tonight,” I admit, changing the subject.

“You look like her a little, with the wild auburn hair and brown eyes.” His blue eyes undress me. “But, you’re way prettier, like hot-as-fuck woman.”

I laugh. “Did you just make a joke?”

“Not joking at all,” he smirks.

The driver pulls away, maneuvering through the traffic congested streets, toward, I guess, the opera.

This all feels very much like a date. My first date, actually, now that I think about it. Losing my virginity at MECA wasn't to a boyfriend. No, it was to a hipster guy from my class, at a clambake party, just to get rid of it. The second time, same guy, was just to say the cherry popping wasn't my only experience. So, no wooing or dating ever took place.

We pull up in front of the LA Opera, and

Xavier clutches my hand, leading me through a mob of people trying to get inside before the curtain lifts. We’re seated upstairs in our own private box, complete with our very own bottle of Cristal. I let out a deep breath of air. It’s exciting.

“Having a good time?” His thumb strokes lazy circles on my hand.

“Yes,” I say, truthfully.

“During the second act, someone will join us in here, and I’ll have a brief

meeting with him.” He releases my hand. “Just enjoy the show and don’t pay attention to us.”

My mind spins with this information. Has he met me? That's like asking me not to breathe, but I smile. “No problem. You won't even know I'm here.”

He grins a little sexy, mischievous grin. “And don’t worry, I’ll make sure you have a very good first act.”

The luxurious box shrinks to the size of a die. I blush. I'm not used to the overt sexuality. Actually, what I'm not used to is how much I like it.

And then before I know it, his hand wraps around my neck, and his lips are on mine. And he’s kissing me. And, my god, what a kiss. Every kiss is like the first time. I fear for a few seconds someone will see, but then the lights go down and a sweet melody wafts through the building.

Before the damsel in distress can even belt out her first chorus, Xavier pulls me closer and his hand lands on my thigh. Lust charges through me, and everything that could ever be right in this moment is.

Heaven and hell could crash into one another, and I wouldn’t notice.

Xavier’s hand traces the outside of my dress, over my legs, and then swoops underneath to travel his way up to the promised land. His diligent fingers trace the lining of my already soaked panties, and I am more than happy to give him a direct one-way ticket there. All signs point north. No passing go.

His kisses keep coming. Hungry, out-of-breath, torturing kisses all meant for me.

He growls against the base of my ear.

“You drive me insane, Rhi. Do you know how bad I want to rip your clothes off and have you ride my face until you’re screaming louder than the singers on stage?”

My nipples pebble at his words, straining for attention, crying to be free. A scorching, hot-heat travels through my bones, incinerating all common sense, and all I can think about is Xavier making me come. And oh, how bad I want him to. So very bad.

“Do you think you can make me scream that loud?” I ask as the woman hits a high note full of longing. More than anything, I want to hit my very own high note right along with her.

“Oh, I know I can.” Xavier slides a finger through my wetness, stroking back and forth before pushing it inside me. “And for the finale, I’d make sure to have you on all fours—panting, breathless, and begging for more of my

thick cock inside you.”

And it is thick; he's not exaggerating. I moan. I don't want him to stop, but we're at the opera for God's sake.

Xavier doesn't care, he keeps thrumming me like his very own orchestra. Playing all the instruments in harmony. And I'm the star. The star who's just about ready to come all over this beautiful man's hand.

“Are you going to come for me, Rhi?”

“Yes, please, don't stop.”

The sensations build and build, and I bear down on his hand, grinding and rocking.

“I want to watch your face when you come. Fuck, you're so beautiful.”

I no longer care the place is packed with hundreds of people. All I care about is this moment, with this man I've been missing for far too long. He didn't have to take me; he owns every part of me. My body. My heart. My soul. All his.

His thumb circles my tender clit, racing in time with the music, with his expert finger so deep inside me. Working me over. And under. Every direction known to man. It's insane how much I feel right now.

Everything I've bottled away for so long, breaks free with his possessive touch.

“Xavier,” I moan, unable to say anything else, overwhelmed with feelings as the voice on the stage sings about heartache.

He doesn't relent, keeps finger fucking me as if he's never enjoyed anything more.

“Are you going to come on my hand? Or do you need me to kneel down and suck your sweet pussy into my mouth and get you off with my tongue?”

The power of words. My brain is completely useless now.

My heart races to the tempo of what's happening on stage.

“You're so hot when you come. Let me see you. Open your eyes.”

I raise my lids, engulfed by the heated haze settling over his irises. He's so turned on.

My hands brace his cheeks, letting his fire burn me. The intimacy I feel right now is out of this world. It's like its own planet. Solar system. No, universe.

Three dangerous words pop into my head, but I swallow them down as my world spirals so close to that pivotal moment when I'll lose myself completely.

I'm not going to last long, but I try to hold out, not wanting this to end just yet.

Unable to handle the intensity of his stare, I tilt him closer and our hungry lips meet. He moans into my mouth. And I catch every word he silently speaks to me as the voice on stage laments a lost love.

And then I lose control. I buck against his hand, as his tongue plunges deeper into my mouth. Cries of pure ecstasy fly out of my mouth and he catches them with ease with his. Every nerve ending stands at attention, and then crashes back again as the theatre thunders with applause. Xavier smiles when he releases the kiss, and then, he does the most unexpected—he brings his lips to place a gentle kiss on both my eyelids, my forehead, and one on each cheek.

Almost as if he worships my face. I'm too stunned to move. Too stunned to breathe as my body fights for control.

He removes his hand from under my very expensive dress, a dress bought to enjoy a show I haven't even watched one minute of and brings his fingers to his lips. And he sucks. He sucks my release from his fingers.

My eyes watch him closely.

"Later, I want this dripping down my tongue."

"Maybe if you use those bargaining skills."

He leans close to my ear. "Oh, I'll bargain, lie, cheat, steal, beg. I have no shame for what I'm willing to do to taste you tonight."

"That can most definitely be arranged."

My insides do this weird flutter thing as I try to focus my attention to the man now on stage. He sings a sad song in Italian. The emotions overcome me, and I close my eyes, reliving the last few minutes of pure bliss.

The second act starts, and right on cue, the door behind us opens. Xavier turns slightly in his chair to speak in hushed tones with an older man with graying hair. I try my hardest to hear what they are saying. The man in the fancy suit, and glasses too large for his tiny face, nods and leaves just as quickly as he entered.

Now what? Do we go back to our dysfunction?

As if he can read my every thought, his hand ends up on my upper thigh.

And I get that mushy feeling again. Like my heart is expanding and about to burst from just having his hand on me. It's just a hand. But the swarm of eagles Xavier always seems to produce, takes flight in my stomach when his thumb lazily makes small circles along the diaphanous material of my dress.

I need to get control of myself, or the next act, I'll be riding him and his impressive dick all the way into the ending of the show. And I kind of think that's what I'd rather be doing.

Clearly, I'm losing my mind, and honestly, I want to go out of my mind in peace. Without him here touching me.

The things I almost said to him. The promises that were on the tip of my tongue when he brought my body to climax makes my eyes well with tears. The lights go up.

Intermission.

I stand and rush from my seat, telling Xavier I'll be right back.

Like a flood, people begin to seep out into the marble foyer, and I sweep past them and find the nearest...anything.

Xavier is hot on my heels, but I'm not running to escape him this time, just these feelings.

I find a bathroom and step inside a stall, brace my hands on the wall, and take a deep, cleansing breath.

I almost told him I love him.

And I probably do.



RHIANNON STEPS into a women's room, and I wait patiently outside. 'Patiently' is a stretch considering I'm pacing like a goddamn jungle cat.

She didn't hear anything I said in my meeting, did she? No, I made sure to keep my voice low. Besides with all the screaming on stage, I'm certain she didn't hear a thing.

I've never liked the opera, but it's such a convenient place to conduct business you don't want other people to know you're conducting.

In this town of crooks and wannabes, it's hard to have a moment's peace.

Mainly, it's the paparazzi.

While taking pictures of the newest celebrity who got famous for having a big ass, and marrying a rapper, they might capture a trade or exchanging of money or overhear a conversation. Something they weren't looking for but thank their lucky stars they found, because the payout is always higher.

Most get thrown up on gossip rags, and you see two associates you had no clue did business, there and doing business. Most of the time, my men pick up on those things long before it even makes it to the printer.

I adjust my cufflink as Rhiannon finally makes her way from the safety of the restroom. She looks like a tiny little fish in her blue gown, swimming her way right into the open mouth of a piranha. And I am hungry for her.

God, watching her come up there, with my fingers deep inside her, and the way her mouth opened to let out the cries rising from way down inside her throat. Let's just say, it made my already hard cock ten times more powerful.

The thoughts I had. Fuck. I thought about leaning her over the railing,

entering her from behind. Sinking my cock into her balls deep. I thought about making her come all over me and grabbing her ass.

I don't know, watching her come, it did something. Made my heart do this weird flip thing.

"Sorry, I just needed a minute," she apologizes when she reaches me.

"I didn't make you uncomfortable with my meeting, did I?" I should have never brought her along.

All times I conduct my business alone. I never bring along over-listening ears. I'm no idiot. And hell, I sure don't need my lawyers passing out NDA's to everyone I meet. Although they sure like to.

'Nice to meet you sir' a coffee guy would say, and there's my lawyer, Stuart, with a document in hand ready to have him sign for even speaking to me.

But, I couldn't pass up the opportunity of having Rhiannon by my side.

She shakes her head, pale faced. "No, nothing like that."

"Are you feeling ok?"

'Cause honestly what else could be bugging her? Unless it's me. Unless touching her and making her come wasn't something she wanted.

She smiles, and, fuck, I forgot what I was thinking about. It's a contagious kind of thing and I smile back. "I'm feeling fine," she says. "Are you ready to watch the rest of the show?"

Am I? Sure, I can go back, sit in my seat, that's entirely too far away from Rhiannon, and listen to people wail and belt out lyrics I don't even fucking understand for another two hours, or I can take this prime piece of pussy home and open her up and taste that sweet honey she'll have dripping between her thighs.

Yeah, I'll take the latter.

Because pussy is always better. Always.

And mark my words, hear me roar, or whatever the kids of the world are saying these days, I fucking love pussy.

Not just any pussy...her pussy. It's so pink, and her lips are tight, with a barely even there sweet patch of hair. It's lickable. Like finger-lickin-good.

She stares at me for a beat, and I grab her hand. "I have another idea."

Her eyes light up, like she knows exactly what I'm thinking, and I'm glad she does. I'm not trying to hide the fact that she drives me completely crazy. Like off the deep-end crazy.

"Lead the way, Mr. Stone."

And I do lead the way, all through the high-energy streets of downtown LA, all the way back to my hidden castle in the hills.

Before I can even open my front door, it's like my cock has a mind of its own. Like he loves her body just as much as I do. And well why shouldn't he? She's everything.

"No one's here," I say on a step. Closer and closer I move like a thief in the night.

"You promised begging," she says with a deep breath.

I may not have much time left with her, and I want to make sure that well after she's gone, I can bring these memories back to play over and over while I jerk off rapidly.

I planned on eating her out, and I'm a stickler about my plans. So, that's my mission—my goal—as I stalk off in her direction, yanking at my tie.

"Come here." I crook my finger.

She takes a step further back with a naughty-wicked smile teasing her lips.

Oh, fuck this girl. Damn she's making me hot, and she doesn't even know it.

Last night I was on fire, crazy with lust, tonight I want the slow burn of enjoying her. She deserves a man to take his time, to not rush. Even though that's exactly what I want to do right now.

"What do you want?"

She licks her lips. "There was mention of you making me into a meal tonight."

"I am very hungry."

She steps closer, moving over with her hips doing this sexy, painful-to-my-cock sashay thing.

"And what are you willing to give me in return?" she asks.

Right now, the answer would be anything and everything. There isn't anything I wouldn't give to see her below me, taking my dick inside that beautiful pussy of hers. But, I can't give in so easily. I can't let her know since the moment I took her I've been wanting just that. That even after I did get her, it wasn't enough.

"Oh, I think I can offer you a few orgasms tonight."

She raises a brow. "Only a few?"

I smile, and then she smiles, and my heart skips a beat. And I want to promise her all the orgasms. All the things she wants.

“I’ll give you as many as your little heart desires.” I wrap my arms tight around her waist. “Hell, I’ll make you come so hard you can’t move. Then I’ll make you come so hard you can’t see. Then another until you can’t think properly.”

Her eyes meet mine. “I already can’t think properly around you.”

I want to say me too. I want to tell her she has my head so fucked up I can’t even say the words. So instead I kiss her, telling her with my lips what I can’t with my voice. She opens for me, and I feel like I’ve just been given the key to the city. Her city. With so many places to see and things to do.

Her neck.

Collar bone.

Tits.

Inner thigh.

She’s like the Orlando of cities with so many attractions. And instead of rushing around through the I-4 just glancing at things from the highway, I’m gonna get off at every exit, take my time exploring The City Beautiful and stake my claim all over.

My hands slide over her collarbone, up to her cheeks, and into the wild mass of auburn curls I love so much. I wrap my fist around every strand.

“I need to eat you out right here. Right now. I’m starving.”

I move her to the couch, trying my best to get to any part of her.

She falls onto the soft leather, and I’m on top of her in seconds. “Do you know how bad I want to dine on your tight pussy, and taste your dripping, hot come all over my tongue?”

“Oh, God,” she moans.

I slow down, although my heart beats like a loud metal song with thrashing and fast tempos. “Let’s get you out of this dress. I’m tempted to rip it off your body.” And I fucking am.

“You can’t tear it.”

“I’ll buy you a million more,” I husk out, ripping the slit to show off a bit of her luscious leg.

She gasps as I keep ripping the material up her body. “Xavier, I can’t believe you just did that.”

“I need your body more than the cost of this dress.”

Her dress comes off, well, what’s left of it anyways, and her black-lace bra and panties mesmerize me with their beauty for a moment. I’m not sure I’ll recover from this.

“Rhi, is your pussy aching for me?”

“Yes, it is.”

That performance at the opera was just a prelude for what I have planned. I roam my hands down and hook my thumbs into the lace material, trailing it down her long, silky legs.

“Take your bra off,” I tell her.

When she's naked, my eyes can't get their fill of her. I memorize the dips and curves, the soft glow of her skin, and the way her pert nipples beg to be sucked.

And then I lower and suck her tit into my mouth, biting down on the stiff nipple.

God, my heart and cock are telling me to take it faster, but everyone knows slow and steady wins the race. And this is one race I want to qualify for. To win all the medals and badges. And first place isn't an option—it's a necessity.

So, I tell my dick to shut the fuck up, and calm the raging hormones, and suck and keep sucking until Rhiannon pulls me up to kiss her again.

And I oblige, because when a sweet girl like her wants you to kiss her, well, you fucking kiss her. I'm not a fool here. I know what my baby needs. And right now, she needs me.

“Xavier, I can't take much more of this. I'm so close already.”

I reach a hand down and run a finger through her wet heat. She's soaked. Drenched.

“All this for me?” I have to close my eyes to regain my composure. It feels too good, and I dip a finger in, up to the knuckle, and then I keep pushing and curling my finger as far as I can go. I listen as she moans her approval. “Your pussy loves my touch, doesn't it?”

“I'm so close.”

I sit up, removing my finger. No way am I going to finger fuck her again, not when my tongue is so eager to finish the job. “Not yet. I promised to lick your pussy until it's dry.”

“You make me so wet.” She bucks her hips.

I move down her sultry body, my tongue tasting her skin as I go. “That's good to know.”

“Yeah, a piece of vital information you don't need.”

I stop my movements, my head lifting to catch her gaze. “Oh, I need to know. Believe me, I'm willing to do the leg work to know everything your

tight little body has to give.”

She smiles, and I drop my head to her heated skin, continuing with my tongue as I dip into her belly button, spreading her legs, allowing her pussy to come into full view.

“God damn, I’ve never seen anything so hot.”

Her fingers sift through my hair, causing little bursts of heat to ignite deep within.

With reverence, I lick from her pussy to her clit, then suck hard on her lips. I thrust my tongue inside, pushing in as far as I can, and then I go in a little deeper.

“Oh, yes. Please don’t stop.”

And I don’t. I fuck her with my tongue, applying pressure with my hand at the top of her mound, while my thumb toys with her clit. Her hips have a mind of their own as they grind into me, and I like the dirty things they think.

I keep sucking and fucking her. My shoulder pushes up her thigh, and she takes the hint and throws her leg over it.

And then she’s screaming my name, and I love the way it hangs in the air. I push harder into her. Her nails grapple at my shoulders, breaking skin, urging me on. I don’t let up, I keep going and going as she keeps coming and coming. I keep fucking doing it until she breathes a sigh of satisfaction.

Her beast is calmed, but mine is quickly coming to life.

And he wants to fuck. And fuck hard.

My shirt comes off first, then I undo my belt and stand to remove my pants and shoes.

“That’s a menu item I’d like to order every night,” I say, removing my boxers.

“Oh yeah? What else is on the menu?”

I pump my cock with my fist. “Me.”

“I need it so bad.”

I crack a smile. “Well, I’m here to deliver for you, baby.” I lift her from the couch, carrying her through the house and into the master suite.

“Wait,” she says as soon as I’m ready to toss her on the bed and have my way with her.

“What?” I growl out, my body losing the fight to stay in control.

“I want to feel all of you tonight.”

“You will.”

“No, *all* of you. I’m on the pill.” She moves toward the bed, and slides

onto it.

No condom. Fuck me.

I'm so clean, I'm snow. On a groan I tell her that.

As I stalk closer to the bed, I stall. My Rhiannon, *my* Rhi, eyes a deep color like the Earth that's uprooted me, and a smile that fucking engulfs me, sprawled out, willing and ready for me.

This is the moment I should panic and freak out. I should fight with myself and tell myself I'm not good enough for her.

I should run. But, I might die, if I don't have her.

"Rhiannon," I murmur, climbing onto the bed, "I've thought about you way more than I should have over the years. Late at night, taking matters into my own hands." I pump my cock for emphasis.

"Me too."

Her admission blind sides me.

"You used to touch yourself and think about me?"

"So many nights, Xavier."

And there's no going slow now. There's no taking my time.

I poise myself at her entrance, and she winds her long legs around my back. And I slide in, like sliding into home plate for the victory game. And it feels so good. Too good. Skin on skin.

As soon as she pulls my lips to hers, all thoughts of revenge vanish. And my mind's at peace. Now, it's all feeling. The tugs and pulls of our bodies. The way her fingernails dig into my ass cheeks. The contact, the need and want, the desire filling up the room.

The way I can't stop gazing down on her as I pump and pump. Push and push. Fuck and fuck.

I'm ready to throw in the towel, wave the white flag in surrender if she keeps hitting me with that look in her eyes. Desperation. Longing. As if I hung the moon for her. As if I would give my life for her.

I can't breathe, because my chest constricts with words like forever and soul mate. I can't breathe, because for one tiny fraction of a second, I think about all the possibilities of what if.

What if I set her free?

What if I say fuck my plan?

What if I marry her? And then thoughts of Rhiannon as my wife flit through my brain as I keep thrusting with all I have. Rhiannon raising a family I give her. Rhiannon every night in my bed.

She runs her fingers through my hair, and I groan into her mouth, fucking her into the bed.

My one track mind is out of whack, and I zero in on the sight of her fabulous, glorious, too-perfect-for-me tits. The way the nipples point right at me. The fullness. Their light bounce as I slam into her with all my might.

“You have such nice fucking tits. Play with them for me.”

She does, tugging, plucking, and squeezing her nipple, until she moans even louder.

I keep delivering all my promises of making this girl come a few times tonight. I slip my hand between our heated bodies, and find her clit, rubbing it with my thumb, applying just the right amount of pressure, and pushing on it in tempo with each rock of my cock.

I imagine myself with her. And then, I close my eyes—tight. So tight. Tight like her pussy tight. But her face won’t leave me. And it never has. It never will.

“I’m going to come,” she shouts.

“Whose hard cock are you going to come all over?”

“Yours,” she cries.

“That’s right. Remember that my dick is the one that makes you scream and moan. My thick cock is the one you beg for when we’re not touching.” I slam into her again. “And my fucking cock is the one you dream about when we’re not together.”

She shuts her eyes—her lips parted, her hands hanging onto me for dear life, as if I’d ever let her go, her pussy clenching my cock so good—as her body loses control. I damn near lose mine.

“Open your eyes. Look at me.” I want her to remember who’s bring her this pleasure. Who’s making her come.

The feel of her pussy gets painfully tighter. But, I keep rocking in to her. Harder and faster. Before my cock shoots off deep inside her, I pull her lips with my teeth, and slip my tongue in her mouth. I’m so fucking close.

Her brown eyes lock with mine as I pull away from the kiss, and it slays me. And there’s no turning back. Everything I feel for her pushes up from my chest, like a geyser boiling, trying to escape through my mouth. But I can’t tell her any of that shit. Not today. Not ever.

“Oh god, don’t stop. I’m going to come again.”

“Come for me, Rhi. Show me who makes you feel so good. Show me who owns your pussy.” I pump harder. “Damn, you’re so fucking wet.”

She cries out, and I follow right along to the point where nothing else matters.

“Fuck, you make me come so hard,” I grit out as the first wave of my orgasm hits. And she does. So fucking hard.

Together, we fall. Each minute ticking down to that final second that this will all be over.



OH MY GOD. Let me say it again for emphasis. Oh. My. God. I can't breathe or think. His tongue, his hands, those fingers...oh those naughty ten digits. But that dick. It's something out of this world. Like NASA space men brought it back from the planet Well-Endowed and bestowed it unto him. Like the God's all sat around while creating him, and thought, 'let's go big on this one.'

Because that's what it is. But, even more than the length is the way he uses it. And believe me, he knows how to use that massive weapon of destruction. But honestly, the only thing it destroyed is my heart.

Because if I thought I loved him before, then that was all child's play. This feeling swarming through my chest, radiating to every limb of my body, and pulsing through every nerve fiber, is so much bigger than love. What's bigger than love? Xavier's dick. Ha. I kid, but it is.

But, back to my point in all this. I'm feeling a little panicky, because no one can ever compete with this. And I don't want them to even try.

I flee to the safety of the bathroom to collect myself. I need to remember why I'm here. I need to remember that this man has a plan, and I am only a pawn in the grand scheme of it.

But he made me feel things. Made the impossible come alive in me. The squashed, repressed hopes I held onto were all there. In color nonetheless.

And that makes me pause. I've always dreamed in black and white. Knowing full well I can never have the things I wish so hard for. But when the streaks of cherry-red and sky-blue and every other color of the rainbow burst through my vision like an oil painting he did just for me, well, I nearly

cried. It was too much.

I take a deep breath, staring at myself in the mirror. Keep it together, girl. Don't let amazing sex ruin you.

When I enter back into the bedroom, Xavier is lying on his back, arms stretched behind his head, etched abs I want to lick, and a barely there sheet covering his most prized possession from me.

And it turns me on instantly. Greed tears through me, wanting more of all he has to offer.

"Ready for more?" He laughs, and I bound onto the bed.

"Yes, you promised me many more orgasms," I say, my pep talk I just had in the bathroom flying completely out of the window. 'Goodbye,' I say to it as I wrap my hand around his cock and meet his soul-searing eyes.

"Good, because I'm nowhere near done claiming that pussy yet."

And his words must be true, because his dick is already coming to life in my hand.

And for the rest of the night he does just that. He claims me in every way imaginable. He doesn't stop claiming until the soft shine of the morning sun filters in through the blinds. When he finally kisses me goodnight, and snuggles his body in next to mine, right before I fall asleep, I hear him whisper, "I wish this was right," into my hair.



My muscles ache before I even open my eyes against the sun streaming in through the window. Xavier sleeps soundly beside me, and I've got two choices here: I can stay in this sex cocoon a little longer and go back to marry Ian, which is not my choice, or I can do a little snooping, see if I can find some clue as to what my father has that Xavier needs so bad he would go to these lengths.

I lift his arm and carefully slip out from under the navy comforter, snatch his white dress shirt from the floor, and tip toe out.

The house is eerily quiet without the usual team of people moving in and out, and I have no idea when they'll return, so I race to his office, step inside, and lock the door.

I sag against the door frame. Now what? The glossy black desk is virtually empty on top, except his large monitor and a neat stack of file

folders next to it. I'll start there. My heart beats so fierce as I move behind his desk, I'm afraid it's going to wake him. As if it's going to burn me or set off an alarm, I quickly tap a key on the keyboard and jerk my hand back. The monitor comes to life. Should've known it would need a password. Folders next. I thumb through the first, all jibberish. Second, the same. My hands shake as I grab the last folder, and I cut my eyes to the door expecting him to walk through it at any moment. I thumb through the papers and freeze.

One.

Two.

Three.

I rub my eyes to clear them. This can't be true.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

I can't. breathe.

The thin document weighs a million pounds as I lift it from the folder and stare at the signature. Alfred DeLaurio.

Son...

Xavier DeLaurio.

Whaaaat?

I just fucked my brother.

My legs give out, and I sink into the chair and drop my head between my knees. Oh god. Oh god. Why would he not tell me? I am in love with my brother. My brother. No; it can't be.

The things I thought. Fantasized about all these years.

This is beyond warped.

How do I turn it off?

I'm sick. Sick. Sick.

I enjoyed it.

I begged for it.

And he let me.

Oh good lord.

My deep breaths do nothing to stop the hyperventilating that's happening.

All the sex. He knew.

What if I keep loving him?

"What the hell are you doing in here?" his deep voice booms.

I don't move. I can't breathe.

I'm in love with my brother.

His bare feet appear in my vision. A tear drops onto his toe. Why am I

always looking at his feet when cataclysmic things happen? Maybe it's because I'm a servant, serving everyone's sick purposes.

"What's wrong? Look at me," he says.

I'm scared to look at him. What if I still see him with love goggles? What if I'm still attracted to him? Does love stop just like that? This is so fucked up.

He squats, and oh god, touches me. Visions of us tangled together torment me. He knew.

Finally, I lean up and meet his eyes. They're not angry—they're worried. They should be.

I punch him in the jaw. He barely flinches, grabbing my wrist.

"How could you?" It's pathetic my voice doesn't sound angry; it sounds sad and confused—weak. A kitten's mewl instead of a lion's roar.

"How could I what?"

Unable to look at his face that bears no guilt for these sins that are sending us straight to hell, I look over his shoulder.

"Fuck me," I rasp out.

My brain isn't moving him into sibling mode. Oh god, he didn't move me either.

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again." His hand lands on my thigh. "I thought you wanted me too."

"Jesus Christ. You can't want me," I scream. "We're freaks."

"Rhiannon," he starts.

"Stop, please." I don't want to hear his voice. It still affects me, and it's wrong. "You're my brother, and you didn't tell me?" I nearly choke on the words. On the shame. My heart isn't hearing anything I'm saying.

He blinks. "For fucks sake, you think I'd have sex with you if I still thought that?"

"Still?"

"Yes," he stands, running a hand through his hair. "It was a lie your father told me."

Pummeled. I'm always pummeled with this craziness from every direction.

"When?"

"After I kissed you all those years ago." He takes a breath. "After my mom died."

I close my eyes and rub my temples to make my brain function. I can't

believe any of this. Keep calm, I tell myself.

“Obviously he's not my father. But the sick fuck wanted me to think it.”

“And you're giving me back to this sick fuck?” I drop my hands. “I'm just a temporary means to an end, right?” So much for keeping calm.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Yes.”

This must be what it feels like to lose your mind. It's like I'm in front of a funhouse mirror, warping and distorting reality. I want out of here, away from all of the things I can't control. And I can't control myself around him. “Did you know that most of the drawings on my greeting cards have our initials hidden inside?”

This catches his attention, and he meets my stare. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I do this swirly type drawing, and I always add an R for me, and an X for you. Like our very own prescription. Rx.”

He runs a hand down his jaw. “That's pretty fucking cool,” he murmurs.

“No it's not.” I shake my head. “It's a prescription for toxicity.”

He steps towards me, but I hold a hand out. “I should've given up hope after Ian told me you and him ran into each other.”

His ‘what the hell are you talking about?’ look doesn't stop my tirade.

“It's ok. I know you were busy and had a *life*. I just kind of thought...” I let the bitter words trail off.

“Rhi,” he clutches the back of his neck with his hand and rubs, “what did you think?”

“We were friends, best friends, and you vanished. Ok, I get you thought I was your sister...” This is definitely what it feels like to lose your mind, because I'm losing mine right here and now. Five minutes ago, I thought he was my brother and to my horror the feelings didn't shut down, so I'll give him that. But this is all too much. “I just thought you would have kept the charm,” I finish.

“Charm?”

I touch the dove on my neck, yank it off and throw it at him. “Your other half.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ian told me he ran into you at an airport.”

His eyes narrow on me.

“He said you handed him your charm and told him to give it to me.”

“Rhi, I never saw that motherfucker.” He pulls open his desk drawer and slams his hand down on the desk. “And I never gave him *this* charm.”

“You kept it?” There's a tunnel effect happening to me. A distorted long tunnel, shifting and changing, and there's a light at the end, but I'll never reach it.

“Of course I did,” he barks out.

The tears in my eyes spill over. “Are you going to tell me what all this is about?”

“No,” he says.

“How are you so sure this is all lies?” I hope he's positive. But, why would my dad lie about something like this? He always hated Xavier.

“Because I found my real father, and of course ran some tests.” He runs a hand through his hair. “But, didn't really need to. I'm a spitting image of him.”

I brush a loose strand of hair from my face. “I want to go back. Now.” Yes, I've gone crazy, because I'd rather take my chances with Ian and my father on my own terms.

“Rhiannon, come on. You want to go back to the monster?”

I don't say anything.

“Your wedding is in a few days.”

“I know.”

He bites the corner of his bottom lip and then stalks over to me. Clasp my face in his hands, he crashes his lips to mine, taking the last piece of my sanity. I'm dizzy from his kiss as his tongue traces mine. And then he releases me.

“Krista will be here shortly. She'll pack your things, and Dean will take you back.”

When he's gone, I retrieve my necklace, drop to my knees and cry.



Ан, the day of reckoning has arrived.



SEVENTY-TWO STEPS until my life ends. *Mendelssohn's Wedding March* wafts from the strings of the tuxedoed orchestra serenading my death. The white-satin bridal gown and veil cling to me like a shroud.

One.

Two.

Three. I count to calm my galloping heart.

Cold eyes at the end of the aisle lock with mine, daring me to run. The golden wings of the turtledove necklace hidden within the bouquet of white roses fisted in my hand, cut into my palm.

Four.

Five.

The robed priest smiles under the watchful eyes of the marble saints. Murmurs of "So beautiful," and "God bless" turn to wailing shrieks of horror as a shot rings out, dancing across the crescendo of the wedding march.

God isn't here today. And there will be no marriage, only death at this red wedding.

'Cause apparently that's just my luck. My father's men rush the church and Ian follows behind. I glance back to Xavier, my almost husband, standing at the dias beside the priest, with a gleam in his eye and a wicked smile curving his lips.

"Kill him," my father orders, his voice echoing off the stained-glass windows.

Fear claws its way up my spine. Because, even though I had no idea this wedding wasn't to Ian until I got here, that it was to Xavier, even though I felt

nothing amid the swarm of eagles in my stomach, even though I didn't want this wedding either, I would throw myself in front of the bullet to protect him.

Xavier doesn't flinch at my father's words. "Right on cue," he takes a step down from his ledge he was gracefully standing on, "as expected."

My father steps closer, passing through the stand off of men with guns drawn. Shell-shocked, I stand frozen midway up the aisle, not sure which way to move. The room has all but cleared out, leaving only Xavier, his men, and my father with his. Oh, and me. A sitting duck caught in the crossfires, hoping no one shoots.

"You were a hard bastard to flush out. I paraded your daughter everywhere, and it took quite a while to get you to show up. A few more minutes and we would have been hitched," Xavier says ever so cool. So icy. Frigid. "Good thing she's not my sister. Not sure the priest would've gone for that." He moves closer. "Marshall says hello."

My dad halts his steps as Xavier continues. "Must've really killed you that your wife loved your best friend—my father."

I gasp. My heart pounds against the beading of the bodice of this suffocating dress. But, it's ok, I don't dare breathe. The room is silent, only the sound of harsh breathing as Xavier's light chuckle echoes through the space. "That is serious hatred: frame him for a crime he didn't commit, bring his wife and young son under your care." His voice slices through the air with hatred. "Produce fake documents to convince him I'm your son. All while torturing your wife with the woman he really loved under her roof."

My father's lips press into a thin line. "You're insane."

Xavier shrugs, pulling a gun from the back of his tuxedo. "I think we're all a little insane. You're the sickest fuck of all. You killed my mother because she found out the truth: you fucked up our lives to punish your wife for loving another man, and you used us to punish him for something he couldn't control."

My head spins at the twisted mind of my father.

"Shoot him," my father bellows.

No one moves.

"You think these men are here to protect you?" Xavier tsks. "Wrong again. They are loyal to me now."

"What are you talking about?" My father's eyes shoot to the men who now lower their guns. "What is all this? Rhiannon, come with me." He holds

out his hand, demanding with his eyes for me to take it.

“No, that won’t be happening. She listens to me now,” Xavier says.

And when I turn back to face him, the barrel of his gun is aimed straight at me.

Panic rushes over me, a state of fear settling deep into my bones. “Xavier,” I whisper.

He takes one tentative step forward, aiming his black weapon at me.

“It’s time for atonement.”

My confused eyes lock with Xavier’s icy stare. My heart doesn’t dare beat for fear of setting anything off.

My father drops his hand, backing away from me slightly. “What do you want?”

“To set Rhiannon free. You can’t hurt her now. No one can; not even me.”

And he pulls the trigger.

And the bullet hits me dead center.

And there’s blood, so much blood flowing down the white of my dress.

And then it all fades to black.



"As BURNS THIS SAINT, so will burn my soul. I enter alive and I will have to get out dead."

God looks away as Rhiannon thumbs through the red blood of her white dress. My eyes remain on her father's face, watching the look of pure horror cross over his.

And then Rhiannon falls in a crimson and white heap, her bouquet of white roses falling from her grasp.

I step over Rhiannon's beautiful, bleeding, body, and lean over Al DeLaurio who's on his knees trying to bring his daughter back to life.

"You'll pay for this," he threatens.

"I already have." I pass my gun off to Justin by my side.

"Fuck you."

Footsteps sound in the somber church. Footsteps of someone that has been well paid by me to drive the final nail in the coffin. He moves closer, and DeLaurio sneers. "Ah, you remember Francis Jensen, right?" Al doesn't answer. "Of course, you do. The coroner who pronounced my mother dead? Thought it only fitting he should return the favor."

Jensen leans over Rhiannon's body, clinically inspecting her. "She's gone," he says, solemnly.

I lean down to whisper in DeLaurio's ear.

"This is your punishment. Remember this lesson."



THEY SAY WHEN YOU DIE, you hear angels sing. You see a bright light and walk happily into the unknown.

They lie.

I see and hear nothing. I feel nothing. The man I love killed me. Murdered me. Denying me a chance to live the life I wanted. I'll never forgive him. But there is no forgiveness in death.

My mind's hazy from the nothingness before me. This is death. The afterlife. The fifth phase of the moon, and the journey is just beginning. My exaltation—my Heaven or Hell. Let my spiritual evolution begin.

You know what?

It all kind of sucks.

There's an unfamiliar smell, and my body jostles slightly as if I'm being carried away. And I'm cold.

Is this hell?

Has Xavier cast me into the depths of hell by setting me free in his demented, wicked way?

The smell becomes more pungent, and I blink back the tears forming.

"Take it slow," a familiar voice says.

"Where am I?" I don't recognize my scratchy voice.

"Halfway across the country now. You were out for a while."

I open my eyes, and the blackness turns to soft colors of tan and grey. Clouds drift by. Heaven is very bland. "Where is the pearly gate?"

I blink, and Dean comes into focus with a small smile. "This isn't heaven. It's Xavier's private jet. Do you want some water?"

I nod, confusion streaming through me as Dean stands and heads to the back of the cabin. “What happened?” I whisper mainly to myself.

“He was right about the fainting when you see blood.” He laughs, walking back toward me and holding out a small glass. “It wasn’t even real blood, and you were out.” He snaps his fingers together.

I sip the cool water, letting it trickle down my dry throat. “Xavier shot me,” I whisper again.

The image of the gun in his hand, him pulling the trigger and ending my life, brings back tears.

I glance down, wiping at my blood-stained dress. “I’m not dead?”

“Hardly. That was some show, huh?”

“Show?” Is this my purgatory? To be stuck with Dean while he speaks in riddles?

“Yeah, I kept telling him it wouldn’t work.” He runs a hand through his hair, a smile illuminating his face. “But, Xavier was confident you’d faint when you saw the blood.”

“I don’t understand.”

He turns and rifles through a cabinet beneath a flat screen tv. “He’s been planning this all for so long, and what a chance he took with you.”

“How so?”

“The gun was a prop gun, but it sure did the trick. Your dad bought it—hook, line, and sinker.”

I sit up. “My dad thinks I’m dead?”

“Dead as a doornail, kid.”

I take another sip of water. “Why did he do this to me?”

Dean glances at me. “Were you happy? Did you really want to marry Ian?”

“Well...”

He cuts me off, “Because I hear they perform weddings in prison. You can visit him, and conjugal visits might work out.”

The thought of visiting Ian in prison makes me smile for a second, but I would never. “Well...no, but...”

“Your father is a really bad guy. The Feds have been after him for years. So, Xavier cut them a deal in exchange for your freedom from all of that.”

“Freedom how?”

“You’ll see.” He pulls clothes from the cabinet and tosses them on the chair beside me. “You can change out of that dress.”

He turns on the tv, and I get bits and pieces of what happened on the news. My father, in handcuffs, is ushered away from the church by the man Xavier met at the opera. A federal agent. My mind spins from the intricate planning used to take my father down.

“Alfred DeLaurio, alleged mob boss, taken into custody by federal agents.” scrolls across the bottom.

I grab the remote and shut it off. My brain is on information overload, but there's one important piece I still need. “What about Xavier?” I ask, grabbing the change of clothes.

“What about him?”

“Will he be coming to see me?” I ask afraid of the answer.

Dean blows out a breath. “Rhiannon, he has to lay low until the trial. Maybe even out of the country.”

“Oh.”

“Do you understand what’s going on?” He sits down beside me. “You’re dead. You will have a new name, new identity, everything from your old life is over.”

I think back on everything I’ve left behind. My mother. My friends. And then I think about whether the price for my freedom is really what I want?

As if Dean can read my mind, he says, “Look, if you don’t want this, we can always take you back.”

What I really want isn’t sitting here on the plane with me.

“Xavier felt this was the only way. He didn’t want your father to use you from jail, or worse. Who knows if your father will even face prison time.”

“Why didn’t Xavier ask me? Or at least tell me?”

“He couldn’t risk it. He needed it to look real.”

Well, he deserves an Academy Award for the acting job he did in the church. Was it all an act? Everything leading up to it? I know he cares. I know there’s even love there. But not the kind like me. I’m in love with him.

Now, he’ll be busy with being a witness in my father’s trial, and after, who knows. And I’ll do...

“Dean?” I ask. “What will I do?”

“Same thing you always have. You can start your card business, and don’t worry, Xavier has you all set up in a cottage by the ocean in North Carolina.”

“I guess I can start from scratch.” I smile a little. The possibilities are endless, even though finding another backer to fund my cards might pose a

challenge. I head back to the rear of the plane, clothes in hand.

“Rhiannon, or should I say Brianna?” He smiles, when I look back at him. “That’s your new name, Brianna Stoneworthy.”

“Oh, ha ha on the name. Are you serious?”

He holds up his hands, placating me. “Hey, I didn’t pick it.” Then he turns serious. “You do know Xavier was the one who backed your business, right?”

“Inscription Prescription Rx,” I whisper.

Tears threaten to spill once more, and I escape to the privacy of the bathroom. Breathe.



“BRI, THESE CARDS ARE GREAT TODAY,” Sadie says, grabbing the last of the new cards I had printed yesterday and placing them on the shelf of her quaint gift shop: *Cardston’s Cards*.

“Thanks, hopefully these sell as well as the last batch.” People love my cards, and I couldn't be happier. After the shock wore off, giddiness set in. I'm free. I make my own money, and I can spend it any way I want. I can drive wherever the urge takes me. Anything I want. The world is my oyster and North Carolina has plenty.

I watch her position the display and run a hand through my now shorter hair. To go with the new me, I tried dying it a few weeks after I arrived, but in the end decided the natural auburn color suited me better.

Six months ago I was murdered.

Six months ago Xavier Stone ended my life to have me begin a new one.

And now I'm reborn, as Brianna Stoneworthy, a greeting card designer who lives on a sandy beach town in North Carolina. When Dean left me here, he told me to lay low until after the trial, a request I remain loyal to. I won't put anyone in jeopardy.

After saying goodbye to Sadie, I head toward the beach. The light breeze promises that Spring will soon be here.

I wrap my sweater tighter around me, losing my fingers in the long sleeves. It's a different beautiful here than Maine, and I love it just as much. Wild horses and barbecue. Sometimes we have everything mapped out, but it's only a pitstop to the real destination.

The rolling ocean crashes against the shore, and I stand at the edge,

watching the push and pull. Just like my heart with Xavier. God, I miss him.

I've dealt with missing Xavier in my life once before. But now, knowing the man he's become, and everything he did for me, the pain is harder to control. Just remembering his soft touch is enough to bring me to my knees. LA feels a lifetime away, but I would travel there in a heartbeat if I knew we could be together. But we can't. Not with my father's upcoming trial flashing on the national news. I cringe every time it comes on.

Along with all of his illegal dealings, he's also being charged with Hannah's murder.

It's sad how one person's actions can affect so many around them.

It took me a while to fully comprehend my father's selfishness; not caring he was destroying those around him. Even Ian. He was so caught up in the fame and money. The greed of office consumed him.

Xavier is nothing like them.

When the tide begins to rise, I head home to the cozy, one-story, bungalow Xavier set me up in. It's perfect. He even remembered the wrap-around porch.

When I round the corner of the street leading to my house, I spot my mom's car in the drive. Yes, he even saved my mom. And she helped save me. Turns out she was his inside informant. After a stint in rehab, she joined me here in her own house across town.

"Hey, Mom," I greet her, closing the distance.

She smiles, pulling me in for a hug. "I brought you a surprise."

Expecting her to whip out my favorite pear preserves she's become obsessed with making, I glance over in confusion when she nods her head toward my front door. And that's when I see Xavier, in a grey tailored suit, lifting his devilishly gorgeous lips into a smile. The swarm of eagles take flight.

"I'll call you later," mom says, slipping into her car.

My heart beats as wild as the horses that sometimes roam the beach as I approach him.

"Hey, Rhi," he says. Husky. Deep. Sexy. It's been way too long since I heard his voice.

"I think you have me mistaken for someone else," I tease, joining him on the porch. "It's Bri now."

"Oh, that's right. Can I come inside?" he asks.

"I don't know? You armed?" I smile up at him and he cracks a wide grin.

A real one. No longer tainted with secrets.

"I am packing a big weapon in my pants, but I'll keep it contained."

I open the door. "Come on in."

"Nice place." He steps around, glancing at the pictures hanging that I drew myself.

Obviously, I have to get the elephant out of the room. It doesn't fit in here with my sunny furniture. "You shot me."

"Rhi..."

"No, you shot me and you didn't think you should have told me you were going to do that?" I ask, more happy he's here, but a tad agitated about him not telling me his plan.

"I couldn't tell you."

"Why?" I give him my best death stare, and hope it's working.

He rakes his bottom teeth across his lower lip. "I like your hair like this." He lifts his hand, ruffling the edges of my short hair.

I swat him away. "You're not answering me. Like always."

"Well, I didn't *technically*," he draws out the word, "shoot you."

"Same difference."

He steps closer. "I know I'm about ten years and six months too late, but would you like to go to prom with me?"

My brow furrows. "What?"

"Prom?"

"Yes, I know what prom is, but..."

"Would you want to go," he lowers his head, "with me?"

"Where? How?" I laugh a little. "When?"

He sticks his head out the door, and a few minutes later Dean strolls into the house with a garment and shopping bags.

"Get ready, I'll be waiting," Xavier breathes. He's so beautiful, it sends an ache to my chest just staring at him.

An hour later, I'm dressed in a vibrant red cocktail dress and slipping into the back seat with Xavier.

Dean pulls away, racing toward the lights of downtown.

Xavier grabs my hand, and the eagles take flight inside me. This is the best feeling in the world, holding my best friend's hand. And he is my friend. He always will be. We forged that connection long ago, under the stars, out in front of the sun, and beneath the clouds every day.

So, when we pull up to a hotel and enter into the grand ballroom, I smile,

still holding my best friend's hand.

There's no one here, just us and the music that sweeps in through the sound system.

He pulls me close, wrapping a hand around my waist. "Dance with me."

And we sway to the music, both of us wishing this was our reality many years ago. A life we were robbed of by my father.

I know I want this man by my side for the rest of my life, and if we can only have these stolen moments together every now and then, well, that'll be perfect too.

"I've missed you so much," he whispers in my ear.

"I miss you all the time."

"I'm always here for you, Rhi," he says, using my real first name.

He leans down, brushing his lips with mine, and I let myself succumb to his kiss. It's longing and passion all rolled into one. And I want to tell him all the things. I want to thank him for all the things as well.

I tug at the back of his neck, thanking—loving—him with my body.

He's my Xavier. He always was and will always be. Even if we don't end up together in a traditional happily ever after fashion, I'm good with it.

My eyes mist over at the thought.

The off visits every few months. The sneaking around. The never being able to be his wife. And even though I would take it over nothing, my heart still burns for a better future.

"Why so sad, sweetheart?" He lifts my chin with his finger.

"I just want to be with you so bad." And then I take the leap. "I love you."

His eyes bore into mine. "I love you so much more." And then he kisses me again, and I forget everything.

We dance the night away, never once letting the other go. And I don't even notice the time when Xavier leans over telling me it's time to go.

I don't want this night to end. I pray and hope it won't. He caresses the turtle dove necklace against my skin, and I smile at him.

"So, Miss Stoneworthy, should we head back to your place?"

I park a hand on my hip. "That reminds me, nice name, Mr. Stone."

He laughs and places a finger over his lips. "Shh, name's Mr. Doves, Jack Doves. Nice to meet you."

My heart didn't hear him right as it skips a beat. "What do you mean?"

But he doesn't answer, and just keeps talking, "And if you don't like your

last name, then we should remedy that soon with a wedding. I think Brianna Doves has a nice ring to it.”

I know I’m not a squee’ing type of girl, but some sort of excited sound erupts from my lips as I fling my arms around Xavier.

Best life ever.



So, you're probably wondering how I was able to take down the whole DeLaurio crew so easily. Or how I knew without a shadow of a doubt he had killed my mother. Or why.

Money.

Money makes the world go around. It really does. And I knew exactly how to put every penny my mother stashed away for a rainy day to good use.

There was no way I believed for a second, I was related to DeLaurio—ok, maybe a small second. Or minute.

It ruined me when he pulled me aside at my mother's funeral. I knew in that moment, I would fight the rest of my life to make sure this fucker got everything he deserved.

Shannon DeLaurio was an unexpected solider in my war against her husband. She contacted me not long after my mother died, telling me a very different tale.

It was a late Sunday night when she found me, working at some small security systems dump.

Her red hair, same as her daughter's, shone under the fluorescent lights as she stalked my way. At a little diner, she told me everything.

"Xavier, you need to know the truth." She kept glancing over her shoulder as if she feared her husband might appear out of nowhere.

And then she told me things I couldn't make up.

"When I met Al, I thought I loved him, but he's not an easy man to love." She didn't need to tell me that.

She continued, "Your mother and I were best friends, your father and Al

were business partners. Life was great, until it wasn't."

She told me how she fell in love with my father, Marshall, and how it drove Al insane with jealousy. How he wanted to ruin Marshall's life, as well as Shannon's.

Al DeLaurio felt his power was eternal—something he no longer believes, thanks to me.

She explained how he framed Marshall for some petty crime and had him sent off to prison in Detroit.

"Here's all your father's info," she said, handing over some papers with a picture of my father.

It was the first time I had ever seen him.

I don't blame my mother for keeping the truth from me about my father; she was ashamed, and not sure what to think since she was being told lies by Mr. DeLaurio.

"I feel like everything's my fault for loving Marshall, but I was young and stupid. I was in a bad marriage," Shannon explained, asking for forgiveness with her eyes.

"Did he love you too?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. He was always faithful to your mother."

I almost felt sorry for Mrs. DeLaurio; her pain was palpable.

"Al wanted to punish me and your father. He hired Hannah, and then told your father that you were his son."

"Why?" I asked.

She said what I already knew. "Because he's the devil incarnate. He really can't stand to see anyone happy."

"Yeah."

"The more he saw me pull away, the more he wanted to ruin Marshall." She stirred her cup of coffee, lost in memories. "Now, this was years later, after you and Rhiannon were both born, I no longer loved your father, but Al didn't care."

"Why did he kill her?" I asked, almost choking on the words.

"Because she found out, everything." She took a deep breath. "And she was going to expose him."

I ran a hand through my hair to keep from punching something. Anger, and hopelessness raced through me.

"Anything you need, please let me know," Shannon said before she left that night.

And, that's when the beginnings of a plan fell into place.

Al DeLaurio's jealousy had driven him mad. And I couldn't let him get away with ruining our lives.

So, I built my empire up slowly, and maybe sometimes I didn't always have the best judgement with business dealings, but I was always one-hundred percent fucking loyal. Loyal to giving Rhiannon the life I knew she deserved. And punishing that dick of a father of hers forever.

There's nothing more powerful than a man in love. And I have been in love with Rhiannon since forever. And I'll be in love with her for just as long.

So, paying people to infiltrate the DeLaurio mob was my first act. Next, I cut a deal with the Feds as soon as I had a leg to stand on. Then, the plan was set and put into motion. While DeLaurio was so busy coming after me for having his daughter, I was busy greasing the wheels on an already well-oiled plan.

Keeping Rhiannon in my grasp long enough to do so was the hard part. That girl is a fighter. With a light inside her that will never go out. Her father tried to dim it, Ian almost did, but I'm here now to fuel it and let it shine every day until it lights the fucking sky on fire.

It wasn't easy. Took many years to get back to her, and to get to where I could take care of my princess the way I wanted to. But I'm here now, in her home, in her bedroom, on her bed about to show her all the ways I love her.

"You almost ruined everything," I whisper. My hand travels up her dress, to her silky thighs, and I trace over the lace of her soaked panties.

"No, I didn't ruin anything." She smiles, her hand tracing over my face.

"Well, you did ruin one thing," I breathe out.

"What did I ruin?"

"Me."

She leans over, our lips meeting, and I open myself to her.

I pull her to straddle my lap, and with both hands on her hip, I grind her down onto my heavy cock. "Feel that? This is how much you ruin me."

"Xavier," she moans as her body continues to grind against my hardness. I need this. I need her.

"You've ruined me in the best possible way."

She drops her forehead to mine and trembles. "You ruined me the moment I met you Xavier Stone. When you smiled at me under the chestnut tree, I knew you belonged to me."

My hands fly under her dress, ripping the lace of her panties to shreds, tossing it across the room.

Her eyes widen at my possessiveness, and it fuels me on.

“Let me show you who you belong to,” I groan out.

“Only you.”

For the rest of the night, I do just that. I show her we belong together. I make love to her over and over.

And when our bodies have calmed, I lean over and brush a stray strand of auburn hair from her face. “I promise you I’ll keep you safe.”

“I trust you,” she says her eyes shining with love.

“I have one more secret,” I say to her.

“Hmm,” she hums.

“We can’t stay here.” I hope she goes for it. I hope she says yes.

“I figured.”

“Pick a country.”

Her eyes grow larger. “Are you serious?”

I smile. “Yes.”

Her smile widens. “Ireland?”

I kiss her cheek. “How did I know you were going to pick that?” I kiss her lips. “I’ve already got your castle ready, princess.”



THE PLUSH GREEN rolling hills of Ireland make my heart swell every morning when I step outside with my morning coffee. I want to yell ‘Top of the mornin’ to ye’ every single time. And maybe I have a time or two.

When Xavier says he had a castle ready for me, well, he wasn’t kidding. This place is like right out of a Celtic romance novel from the late 1500’s.

Of course, it has all the modern upgrades and amenities.

I thought I would miss my life in America, but the longer I fill my life with the happiness Xavier gives me, the more I realize I don’t miss a thing.

Sometimes I do miss my mother, but she comes to visit, and I just feel very... lucky. Luck of the Irish.

Someone who doesn't have luck is my father. Once they could seize his records for evidence, more stuff popped up. He was as crooked as a zig zag line. Not just him though. Many politicians, Ian included, are up for indictments as well.

It’s like a blood fest in the US government, each backstabbing the other to come out on top. But, you know who’s not coming out anywhere near the top? My father. Even with his team of top lawyers, and his men doing some dirty work, there’s no way my father will get out of not serving his life in prison.

It’s mainly more of a fight to see if he’ll be put to death.

My biggest worry is Xavier.

He still has to go back to testify.

I try to push those thoughts away as I stare at the scenery once more. It’s breathtaking.

I glance over my shoulder to our bedroom, where Xavier was sleeping moments ago, and watch as he brings his sexy, naked body closer to mine.

“What are you doing out here? Come back to bed.” He wraps his arms tight around me, and I lean my head back along his chest.

Ok, there’s only one thing that’s more breathtaking than this view...him.

“I made you something,” I say, reaching on the table beside me to grab the card I made him early this morning. “Here.”

He takes the card with a prince in front of the castle we live in.

“You’re my knight in shining armor, and thank you for rescuing your princess,” he reads inside the card. And then he kisses me, and we both will live happily ever after...

EPILOGUE

XAVIER



SITTING IN THE COURTROOM, staring into the black, vacant eyes of the man who killed my mother is the hardest thing I've ever done. Harder than trying to pretend I didn't have feelings for Rhiannon.

We wait for the jury to enter the room and I fist my hands together.

"Stay calm. This asshole is getting what he deserves," Dean leans over to whisper in my ear.

I nod, straighten my tie, and say, "I just want this over with."

When I left Ireland a few months ago, Rhiannon was worried about everything. My safety. The trial.

And when I kissed her before walking away, I reassured her no one would be stupid enough to fuck with me. And they won't.

I'm the nightmare DeLaurio dreams every night when he goes to sleep in his toilet-clogged four-walled cell.

This is why I didn't kill him. I want him to live in his sins like sitting in a bath filled with dirty water soaking his body day in and day out. He needs to live in fear that I control his life, I control his outcome, and I control his reality. I'm his future. A bleak one filled with hatred, corruption, and always looking over his fucking shoulder. Don't drop the soap motherfucker. Life in prison when I've paid the guards, and his cellblock mates. Yeah, you heard me, our eyes meet from across the courtroom, I own you. Welcome to rock bottom.

Don't fuck with me.

The media has been a complete three-ring circus. Shoving their microphones in my face, asking how I was involved, how I was able to gain

access to incriminating documents, and how I was able to bring down one of the biggest ‘mobs’ of all time.

I didn’t say a word, just smiled with the knowledge staying neatly tucked away until I testified.

DeLaurio’s eyes never leave mine, and I give him a chin nod.

“All rise,” the bailiff begins, and I crack a cocky smirk as I stand.

As everyone takes their seat, the judge clears his throat as he’s handed the verdict. He opens it, and no one breathes, not even me.

Guilty, no chance for parole. Death sentence.

Dean clasps a hand on my shoulder. “Got what he deserved.”

Al’s eyes meet mine one last time before he’s carted away. I glance away with a small laugh. I don’t even want to waste another second of my life on him.

I visit her grave before I leave town, bringing her flowers and a promise to remember that life is not paved out for us, and I’m going to make the most of my time here.

Then, one last stop before I make my way back to Ireland.

The sun blinds me as I pull into the Detroit prison on the East side of town. I sit, my car idling as I wait.

A man with hair the same color as mine, and eyes just as blue, walks toward my car and I smile.

“Dad,” I say as he opens the car door.

“You kicked ass and took no prisoners.” He slides into the soft leather of the passenger seat.

I laugh. “That’s one way to put it.”

He faces me. “I’m proud of you, son.”

It took an eternity to get to here. All the bullshit DeLaurio put my family through, and it’s finally over. I smile, letting the relief flood through me. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Where we going?” His eyes stare out of the front windshield, and I throw the car in gear.

“How do you feel about Ireland?” I ask, speeding away. Because I got everything I came for. And now it’s time to go back to the one person I love more than anything....my turtle dove.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading Taken: A Mafia Romance.

This book was inspired by my group on Facebook. It was started out as a fun, little project where I let my group choose the genre, character names, and plot.

Rhiannon is actually a member of my group, and won a contest to be able to use her name as the main character.

As the project developed, I just felt there was more to Xavier and Rhiannon's story, and with the urging of my readers decided to publish.

Mafia Romance is not usually a genre I write in. I'm more of a Romcom kind of guy.

But, I hope you enjoyed my take on a Mafia book.

Xavier and Rhiannon are both great characters and I have a feeling we will be seeing much more of these two. I had a lot of fun writing this book, and I hope you had just as much fun reading.

Be sure to join my group on Facebook for a lot of craziness, and fun. Exclusive excerpts, teasers, games, and so many giveaways and prize. I'd love to have you join. [Click To Join The Dark Side Now](#)

Bonus Scene

I have a little *Bonus scene* of Dean and Krista:

Enjoy:

DEAN

It's late when I stepped off Xavier's private jet in Chicago, even later by the time I made it to his place.

Now I can stay in a hotel, or I can walk down the hall, and see what Krista, Xavier's assistant is up to.

She's had my heart working overtime for a while now. Sandy-blond hair, light green eyes the color of moss, and a body that just won't quit. But, first I have to find her.

We've always been flirty, but I've never taken it to the next level, but God how I want to. Bad.

Call me old-fashioned but I like to put my time into the pursuit. I like to know that what I'm working for is worth it. And Krista is definitely worth it. And then some.

She saunters down the hall, and I take a second to feast my eyes upon her.

Tight little black pencil-skirt, light blue blouse that hugs her tits as much as I want to. And her cute personality shining through on her face.

"Oh, Dean, I have your usual guest room all ready."

The only thing that would make it better is her wrapped in the sheets on the bed.

"Thanks, you're always thinking of me." I give her my best smile and am rewarded by a soft blush that stains her cheeks.

"Well you're hard to miss."

Oh and I am hard, just for her.

I glance at the billiard room and give a chin nod in that direction. "Want to play?"

Her cheeks blush again and her sweetness is a complete sugar rush to my system.

"Ok," she says and heads that way.

I follow close.

Too close.

I rack the balls, and she smiles her sweet smile. There's an energy in here. Something tangible I want to grab hold of and never let go. Something that makes me feel that she feels it too. Or at least I hope she does.

I want her to.

Her eyes light me up from the inside out, and she leans over the table and my brain stops working.

“Yeah know, I’ve always been a fan of pool,” she says.

“Really?”

“My older brothers would teach me how to play.” She lines it up and breaks and a few solids find their way into some pockets.

“Well, you’re pretty good.” I smile and our eyes meet. “And pretty.”

And so many other things I don’t want to think about. But, I can’t stop thinking about her. Every time I’m in the same room with her, I feel this zap of energy shock me. And the need to touch her gets harder and harder to ignore.

“Thank you.” She leans across the table, and my eyes zero in on the way her blouse hangs open just enough for me to catch a glimpse of the top of her breasts. I don’t want to be an asshole and ogle her while she plays, so I quickly turn away and she makes another shot.

“I feel like I’m being hustled.” I laugh.

She winks. “Maybe you are.”

“I don’t mind. As long as you don’t mind what I’ve got in store for you,” I say all out of breath and huskier than I meant it to sound.

She fixes her eyes on me. “Oh? And what do you have in store?”

I move closer to her, forgetting everything about the no fraternization policy Xavier makes all his employees sign, and I stare down on her. She’s a petite little thing, and I tower over her with nothing but want and need swimming through my veins. “I have a few ideas.” Like bending her over this pool table and having my way with her.

“I’d love to hear them.” And her voice is sexy, sultry, like she really does want to hear everything I can offer her.

“I could show you instead?” Is it hot in here? Because with this sex-as-sin vixen standing here staring at me with her light green eyes I’m about to eternally combust.

She wets her lips. “I’d like that.”

Ding. Ding. Ding. Did she just give me the green light ‘cause I’ve got a condom ready with her name written all over it.

I drop my cue stick, and don’t even care where it lands. And I move closer to this sweet little thing that’s got my head completely screwed up.

KRISTA

Should I tell him I like it rough? I can't believe I just had that thought, but I've thought about Dean so many times over the past few years. Mainly about all things below the belt. But, it's not just that. He's brilliant, and funny.

And the way his gray eyes gaze at me like I'm the last woman on Earth makes my insides tingle.

He doesn't even take a second to think before his lips crash to mine, and his hands wrap around my waist. And it's so hot. Like better than any fantasy hot.

He takes control, stepping me closer to the edge of the pool table, and my body feels as if it could fall apart.

His eyes flare, and I'm shocked when he jerks me around and slams me down on the pool table. My cheek presses against the green felt.

"You like this?" He brings his hand back and swats my ass, hard.

"Yes, I've been a naughty girl?" I cry out.

He smacks my ass again. "You drive me insane, Krista."

He smacks again, a little harder this time. "You like this, don't you?"

"Oh, God, yes," I moan out.

He turns me around to face him, lifting my ass to set it up on the table. And then, he crashes his lips to mine.

And I fall apart. The air is sucked from my lungs, and my chest burns. Begging for more. Begging for relief. For something.

My core tightens, my insides melt, and I cling to him.

Dean wraps his arms around me as his tongue plunges deeper.

I'll never tire of his kisses. Never tire from the way he holds me close and takes control of my body. It's not something I am willing to ever give up.

But, I don't let that thought stop me from wrapping my legs around his body, bringing him closer to where I want him most.

When he touches me all the madness falls away. It disappears into thin air.

I want nothing more than for him to take me right here on this billiards table in the middle of my boss's house.

"Dean," I moan into him.

He swallows it down, his powerful body dominating mine with a simple touch.

He leans me back, and I lay on the pool table as his eyes roam my body.

It ignites my skin. There's a fire in my veins, begging to be cooled.

"Krista, I've wanted you for so long."

Same here. I lick my lips, and his words fill me up.

A deep yearning grows, and my eyes must say it all, because as Dean stares down upon me, he smiles. A gorgeous, sexy grin.

And then it starts. His hands all over me, feeling, touching, grabbing at everything he can. He can't get enough of me, and it turns me on more when I gaze up into his eyes and see the desire pooling in his.

He's so sexy. So strong.

So everything.

He growls as he removes my clothes from my body. He sucks in a breath as he stares.

He licks his lips.

"I'll never stop wanting this."

I squirm a little as his eyes burn straight through me. "Dean." His name is on repeat, and I don't think I could think of another word if I tried.

This is so wrong, but everything about the way he moves feels so right.

Because his touch is gentle. His kisses are sweet. But then a power overtakes him turning his eyes a deeper shade of gray. He burns with desire, and my heart rate picks up.

"Don't stop touching me, please," I beg.

His lips lift. "Never." He leans down, sucking a nipple into his mouth.

I arch my back, the feeling of his teeth too much to handle. My fingers dig into his hair, pulling and threading my fingers through each strand.

His hands cover every part of my naked body, his fingers exploring everything. He slides between my legs, his fingers dipping into the wetness he caused.

"Dean."

His face is utter perfection. The chiseled jaw. The stone-cold expression. The furrowed brow. But it's his eyes. Yes, his eyes show every bit of wonder and complexity hidden deep within his soul.

This is the Dean I want to know.

This is the Dean who has had my body going insane every time he steps into the room.

This is the Dean I dream about.

He unbuttons his shirt, and I hold my breath. I can't wait to see him. To touch him everywhere. To have him inside me.

The most perfect body is on display before me. Broad shoulders. Chiseled abs. Pecs and biceps and every other major muscle is bulging and protruding

beneath his skin. It's a sight I will never forget.

He smiles, as he stares at me behind his hooded lashes. Then out of nowhere he drops his pants and boxers.

"Spread your legs for me."

I do as he says as he nestles his body closer against mine. Without another word, he pushes himself inside me. "Fuck, you feel so fucking good."

He moves in and out, fucking me like I've dreamt about for so long.

And it's better than any dream I've ever had. It's better than any fantasy I could ever concoct.

This is the real thing. Dean inside me, feeling me, spreading me open with his throbbing cock.

And it feels so insanely good.

Everything about this moment feels so ...dirty. It feels so wrong, so forbidden. We shouldn't be doing this.

But instead, my eyes are wide open. My mouth is dry. My chest aches as he slams inside me. It's painfully beautiful as he moves.

I don't want this moment to ever end.

And who knows what tomorrow will bring. Will we go back to employees working together? He's practically my boss. Not practically...he is.

This is a pipe dream, so I want to enjoy every minute of him while I can.

He digs his fingers into my skin, and I welcome the bruise. I welcome the mark of him. I welcome anything he is willing to give me.

But, I am not naive enough to believe any part of this has any real meaning behind it.

Even if I have dreamt about being with him, I know that's all it can ever be....just a dream.

And for this one moment in time, I get to live the dream. Be a part of it. To feel it with every cell in my body.

His power holds me still. His lips drive me insane. He kisses, sucks, and nibbles every part.

My body builds as he pushes deeper inside me.

"Fuck, Krista."

"Oh, God." My body is alive. More alive than it's ever been. And it feels so good. A feeling I don't ever want to end.

He pumps harder. I moan louder. God, this is too intense.

His eyes crash into mine, the neediness hidden deep within his is too

much for me. I close my eyes, and he kisses me.

“Krista, look at me.”

I open my eyes, and he pumps and pushes. Eyes locked, passions bubbling, and an intensity ringing through my veins.

My mind could possibly combust from the sheer panic of it all.

“I’m gonna come,” I shout out.

He smiles as he continues on toward his own release.

“Do it.”

My orgasm rips through me, and it keeps going on and on.

He finds his as well, groaning and grunting as he empties inside me.

As soon as it’s over, my eyes widen. This man is my hard limit. No matter what happens I need to make sure we end up together. I may be his, but he’s more mine than ever.

Stay Tuned for more of Dean and Krista’s love story. To stay up-to-date on all of Logan Chance’s releases, [sign up for his newsletter here](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always there are a bunch of people to thank for all their help.

Thank you to all the bloggers for the countless hours you put into helping authors spread the word. Thank you for your continuing shares, likes, and posts.

Thank you to anyone who has ever shared, liked, commented, posted, and followed me on any form of social media. I appreciate everyone, and anyone who has taken a chance on me.

If you could leave me a few words of what you thought about this book on Amazon, I'd be forever grateful.

Thank you to my editor, Paula, for bringing Rhiannon to life and giving her a voice. When all I wanted to do was lock her in a basement somewhere, you fought for her originality. Thank you. I really didn't think we would make it through this one in one piece.

Thank you for all that you do, and for keeping me sane....and sometimes insane. Ha ha.

Thank you to Lauren V., for all your countless hours of hard work.

Thank you to Sommer, with Perfect Pear Creative Covers. I love this cover and as always you do an amazing job.

Thank you so much to all the wonderful ladies of my readers group on

FACEBOOK. The Dark Side.

When I first started writing this book, it was a Naughty Newsletter Novelette, it was just for fun. My group was voting on things, like the punishment Rhiannon receives when she tries to escape his house. Twenty spankings was the winning vote.

They voted the genre, and names, and so many things. I got to about six chapters before I finally decided to publish. Those six chapters have remained intact (just a few changes), but when I started writing it for a novel to publish, I felt going back to them as childhood friends and showing the love Xavier held for her was important.

It was fun, and I'm happy to see how it all came together. It was a struggle trying to give Xavier a personality and not just make him a bad guy for no reason.

I probably changed the plot a million times while writing this book, and am happy with the way it all finally turned out.

Trying a new genre was a bit of a challenge, and originally my group wanted this to be a dark mafia book. But with a Romcom background (and fanbase) I just had to add a touch of humor into it.

This is not a dark mafia book, I felt it wouldn't hold their story together if he came in killing everyone.

I have been in the works designing a website, complete with a store and many other exciting things that will come to life most likely by March 2018.

[You can check it out here](#)

Be sure to check out the list of all my books available in Kindle Unlimited.

[Join my group on Facebook](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

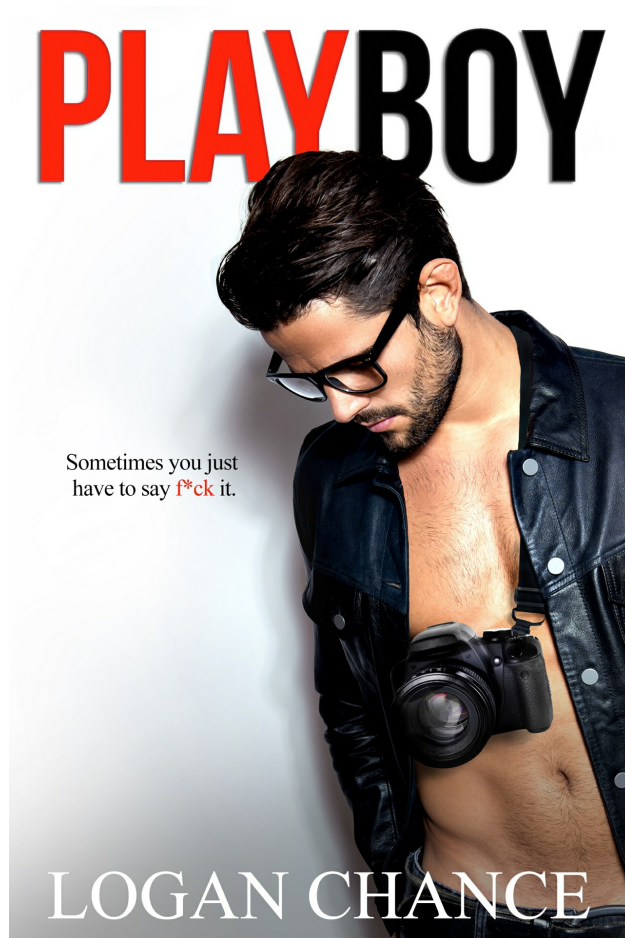
Logan Chance is an Amazon Best Selling Author with a quick wit and penchant for the simple things in life: Star Wars, music, and pretty girls. His works can be classified as Dramedies (Drama+Comedies), featuring a ton of laughs and many swoon worthy, heartfelt moments.

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SNEAK PEEKS



Description

Sometimes you just have to say fuck it. Life. Crazy, right? It moves at supersonic speeds, and sometimes is so demanding, you have to take a step back and chill.

I'm a pretty average guy. I don't have a zillion dollars. Nor a fancy car. I'm not famous. I'm just normal, I guess. Which, in this day and age, is like saying I'm an alien.

My friend's call me Playboy. Hey, what can I say? I like to date. And even though I date a lot...there's still something missing. I work as a photographer for *Bunny Hunnies*, a swimsuit magazine. I snap pictures of some of the most gorgeous women around.

But they're always off limits.
Especially my best friend's little sister, Chelsea. She's the new model on set.
And boy, does she have a mighty nice set...I mean tits, I mean she has a nice
set of personality.
But, she's untouchable...especially for me.



Read On For The First Chapter of Playboy

Prologue

Chelsea

"I just heard," my friend, Gidget, sympathizes, rushing through the door of the dressing room on the set of Skittle Skattle Doo.

I remove my Dodgy the Dog costume and blink back the tears. "It's ok."

It's not, but what else can I say? I've just been let go from a small production of a kid's show. I can't even make it as a dancing dog. You may think I'm being a bit over dramatic, but I'm an actress. It's what I do. While I've been told I have the poise and grace of a young Audrey Hepburn, I have all the luck of a broken horseshoe.

Although, I don't feel very graceful in this furry dog suit I'm currently wearing. Big floppy ears. Bushy tail. You get the picture.

"I know. Don't give up, though. You'll land something even better than this crap show," Gidget, the choreographer of this 'crap' show, says. She's always good at pep talks.

"I've only been here, what, like two months?" I pull up my jeans, and toss a t-shirt over my head. "I really thought when I came back here from Texas, I'd land the first role that came my way."

"This town has a way of spitting people with real talent out." She grabs my costume and places it neatly on the rack.

"Well, I need something to pay the bills," I tell her, throwing my blonde hair in a ponytail.

"You know, you should try modeling. Lots of big stars start out modeling."

"Hmm, my brother does have a friend who works at a magazine," I say.

“But, no. No way.”

“Which one?”

I raise a brow. “Bunny Hunnies.”

Gidget steps closer. “Wait, Bunny Hunnies? Chelsea, you should definitely think about that.”

“Really? I don't know if posing in a men's magazine will help my career.”

She pulls out her phone from the back pocket of her skinny jeans. “Look,” she thrusts the phone in my face, and I see a picture of a shirtless guy with a ton of muscles, “that's Wayne Craig. He's a huge Instagram star...aaaand...he models for that magazine.”

I take the phone and swipe through a few of the pictures. “Well...”

She cuts in, “And June Dellaway got her start in that magazine.”

“Shut up,” I say. June is only the biggest sensation right now. Oscars. Red carpet. The whole nine yards.

“Listen, all I'm saying is, it can help you with money. You need an agent if you're ever going to make it. Hell, even my dog has an agent,” she says, glancing at the pictures of Wayne one last time before putting her phone away.

“Yeah, agents are expensive.” I sit down in the lone folding chair, feeling a bit defeated.

“You should have Declan call that friend of his and get you in.” She points her finger at me.

Well, that's the problem. The ‘friend,’ Jonah Marshall. I've had a crush on him since day one of meeting him. When Declan brought him home after baseball practice, my heart was a goner.

Soft brown eyes, dark messy hair. He was every young girl's fantasy, and I was ‘rugrat,’ Declan's little sister. Even so, my crush only intensified the older I got.

By the time I was sixteen and madly in love, my parents dropped a bomb on my brother and I.

Divorce.

I hate that word.

It's ugly and upended my life.

I was whisked away to Texas to live with my mother while Declan, already in college, stayed in LA with my father.

But I'm back now in La La Land. Los Angeles. The city of my birth.

Population 3,792,621. Two thirds of that are trying to land the same roles I am. And I'm ready for my big break. Since I just lost this job, maybe I will try my hand at modeling.

But, there's no way I will let Declan call Jonah.

No, if I'm going to make it in this city...I want it to be based on my talent. Not for who I know.

In a city full of big sharks and vicious piranhas, I'll be the little fish that swims against the current.

Sounds good, right?

Well, wish me luck, or break a leg. Whatever saying works best for you, because none of them work out very well for me.



Chapter One

Jonah

Name's Jonah, and I'm a habitual dater. Sounds like I'm at some dating anonymous meeting, or something. For the record, I'm not. Is there such a thing?

What's a habitual dater, you ask? I'm not entirely sure. I guess what I'm trying to say is: I date...a lot. I've been told with my height, brown eyes, and just fucked brown hair (their words, not mine), I could be in the pages of the magazine I photograph for. Not to sound egotistical, but getting women has always been easy for me. I wouldn't call myself a manwhore, though.

Sure, I like to have fun with these dates, indulge in some extracurricular activities afterward, but they know the score: I don't do relationships. Sounds cliché, I know. But, I've tried a few of those in the past. Never worked out.

First, there was Tiffani. Started out great, but next thing you know, she hated my friends and wanted me to stop hanging out with them. Second, there was Bryn, who couldn't keep her legs shut. She fucked the entire staff at the restaurant job she had. Male and female.

No, me and relationships are like oil and water; we just don't mix.

Instead, I prefer to play the field. No strings. Lately, though, no matter how appealing the first course may be, most dates end with me slipping out

before the dessert is even on the table.

Like tonight, for example, the blonde sitting across from me has a smokin' hot rack, like bigger than genetically possible. I couldn't care less. She's dull and artificial. Not to mention, she hasn't stopped talking about herself since we arrived. Besides, she failed the quote test. What's that you ask? Well, I'm a die-hard movie fanatic, and I give all my dates a certain movie quote. They get it wrong, well, the date usually bombs.

And so far, it has.

I'm not sure when these things started mattering to me, but they have.

And, honestly, I don't give a shit about what she's saying. Ouch, I know, that's harsh. But, I'm really not an asshole. Well, mostly not. It's just lately this whole game is getting old. Going out with girl after girl. There must be more to life, right?

So, here I am, in this upscale restaurant in the heart of LA, with my Chivas on the rocks and a pained grin on my face while Amy talks with her mouth full of food.

"So, then, my boss said, 'Amy,' " she points her fork at me, "you can't bring your cat to work.' But, my cat told me he misses me during the day," she whines.

"That so?" I ask, barely interested. "Where do you work?"

She stops talking long enough to stare at me with a blank expression on her over made face.

Fuck, did she already tell me, and I didn't pay attention? Bad Jonah. I should be punished, but not by her.

"The bank," she tells me in a 'duh, don't you remember' voice.

"That's right. Crazy how they wouldn't let you bring..." I pause and wait for her to fill in the blank.

"Snookums."

I nod. "Right, Snookums to the bank."

I finish off my steak while Amy continues to drone on about her roommate, Kelly.

Who cares? I glimpse my phone on the white linen tablecloth, wishing it would ring. Wishing for a miracle call of a family emergency so I can bail. When Amy starts to tell me about Kelly's rash from a spray tan, I switch the phone to silent and press it to my ear.

"Hello...what? Calm down. Uh-huh. Shit, ok. I'm on my way." I slide the phone in my pocket, eyes on Amy. "I'm so sorry. I have to go."

She stops chewing. “Are you serious?”

“I am.” I grab my wallet, throwing down enough cash to cover the bill. “This should cover everything. Again, I’m sorry.”

And that's that. I'm out of there and in my Jeep before Amy can say another excruciating word. You may think I'm rude, or hell, think I'm an asshole, but, I never claimed I was a good guy.



“Did you get the prints over to marketing so the models can sign them for the meet and greet?” my overbearing boss Glenda asks.

“When have I ever failed you?”

She rolls her big, brown eyes, and I give her a slow wink.

Did I mention I'm a flirt? Kind of goes with the territory, I guess.

“Today there's a new model starting, so be nice.” She smiles, showcasing a bit of an overbite.

“I'm always nice.”

Glenda narrows her eyes at me, and I crack a smile.

“Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of,” she mumbles under her breath, thumbing through a few pictures of a previous shoot in a folder in her hand.

I swing my legs off my desk, where I was comfortably perched taking my mid-morning break, and check the lens on my Nikon. She's my baby, and I treat her well.

“Oh, and no long lunch today. The shoot is at two pm sharp.” She pivots on her six-inch heels and glides from my office with the sophistication of a former model turned editor-in-chief. The last title is thanks to her husband, owner of Bunny Hunnies. Lucky break. In this town, sometimes it's not what you know but who you know.

But I don't need luck. I've got the dream job.

I stretch my arms over my head and stand. Chattering people pass my door on their way out to the shoot, so I grab my satchel, throw in my camera, and send a text to cancel lunch with my friends. Every Wednesday the four of us, Declan, Booker, Ethan, and myself, meet up. We've been best friends since high school, and ten years later, we're still the four horsemen. That was the name of our band in high school. And no, we don't play a single instrument.

It was more karaoke in Ethan's garage.
We thought we were the shit, though.

"Hi, Jonah," a few of the models walking into the Falcon building call out to me.

"Looking good, ladies." I wink and they giggle and smile.

I know you're thinking it. Have I slept with them? I'm not one to announce every girl I bang, I keep my sex life private, but, no, I don't mix business with pleasure. Zanna, Lyla, and Maria are off limits, no matter how much they try to tempt me.

I jump in my Jeep and head down to Venice Beach. Traffic is a bitch, but I finally ease into a parking spot and settle in to glimpse at the crashing waves. Living in LA is like living on a different planet. It's perfect weather all the time, ideal for photo shoots on the beach.

I spot the production crew down by the shore setting up, so I hop out of my Jeep and slip inside Hank's Franks, a local diner, and order a burger.

"Thanks, Gary," I say to the man behind the counter when he hands me my bag of food. Ah, food. Real fucking food with grease and fat. This is what I need.

I step outside and chomp down on my burger while I watch the crew set everything out along the beach. My eyes zero in on the model. She's far away, but even from here her body's bangin.' She's not as tall as the other models and curvier.

Long blonde hair. Skimpy little pink bikini. Today's going to be a good day.

I finish off my sandwich, wash it down with a Coke, and head over before I lose the best light of the day.

"Jonah, over here," Tim, the shoot coordinator yells. "Meet Chelsea."

I drop my bag near the set and fish out my camera.

Her back is to me when I walk over, and I get a great view of her sweet ass barely covered by her bottoms.

She turns around and my jaw drops. Beautiful blue eyes I've seen countless times before stare back at me. Eyes I've known since I became best friends with her brother, Declan.

"Chelsea Sincock?" Fuck. Her last name suddenly takes on a whole new meaning. To say I'm shocked is an understatement. I was staring at her ass. At Declan's sister's ass. When did she grow up? I haven't seen her since their

parents divorced and she moved to Texas with her mom at sixteen. Eight years ago. Declan mentioned she moved back a few months ago, but I had no idea she was modeling. How could he forget that detail?

“Oh my God, Jonah.” She rushes over to fling her tanned arms around my neck. Her nearly naked body presses up against me, and I shake off how good it feels.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

She releases her hold on me. “I’m the new model, obviously.”

“Like hell you are.” She can’t model for this magazine. I hit the brim of Tim’s ball cap as he ogles her. “Stop staring.”

“Let me have your attention,” I call out to the small crowd of set designers, makeup artists, and other crew workers. “No one’s allowed to stare at her.” But me. “This is my best friend’s little sister.”

Chelsea throws me a stunned glance. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“Nice to know you’ve matured since last I saw you.”

She’s angry, hands on her curvy hips, and it’s cute. Cute in a kid sister sort of way. Because that’s all she is to me, a kid sister.

“Nice to know you have, too,” I shoot back. The tone comes out all wrong. Sounds a little husky and sexual. Her body has definitely matured, and that’s the problem. The pink triangles of her bikini barely cover her breasts. Does Declan even know?

He’d shit a brick if he knew. I need to tell him.

“Let’s get started,” I shout, yanking the cap off my camera and lining everything up for the shoot.

Chelsea gets into position, and I focus on her through the lens. The breeze lifts her blonde tresses, exposing the perfect symmetry of her face. High cheekbones, pert nose, full lips—my camera loves her. Now to figure out what to do with her. I want her in the water with the waves crashing over her body.

“Ok, make your way over to the shore. Dip your toes in.”

She crosses the sand, and her tiny pink tipped toes dip into the waves rushing up the shoreline.

She shivers. “Oh, that’s cold.”

Her smile is perfect, and I snap a shot.

“She’s gorgeous,” Tim whispers next to me.

“Don’t look at her,” I warn over my shoulder. He thinks I’m joking but

I'm not. I scan around at all the crew men's eyes gawking at her. "Guys, no staring," I remind them.

They laugh off my warning like it's some big fucking joke.

I really need to tell Declan. This is not ok. When she was younger, Declan and I would look after her when the kids would bother her. And now, a sense of over brotherly something or other is kicking in.

But, the more I aim my camera at Chelsea, the more I forget she shouldn't be here. She's a natural at this. The sun kisses her skin, making my shot even better.

I loosen up, get into it—moving, shouting demands—and she follows every cue.

It's one of the best photo shoots I've had in a long time. Some of the other models have to be prompted to even smile. Most times, they won't react unless I say something to get them going.

But not Chelsea. No, she's really good.

Doesn't change my mind, though. I'm still telling Declan.

"Get all the way in the water," I direct, standing so close I'm almost right over top of her, snapping photo after photo. She does as told, and the shutter snaps furious and fast through every pose...

Stretched out on the wet sand, the frothy water rushing over her toned stomach.

Snap.

On her knees, beckoning with a seductive smile on her face.

Snap.

The waves crash at her back, and she loses her balance.

Snap.

She rises from the ocean.

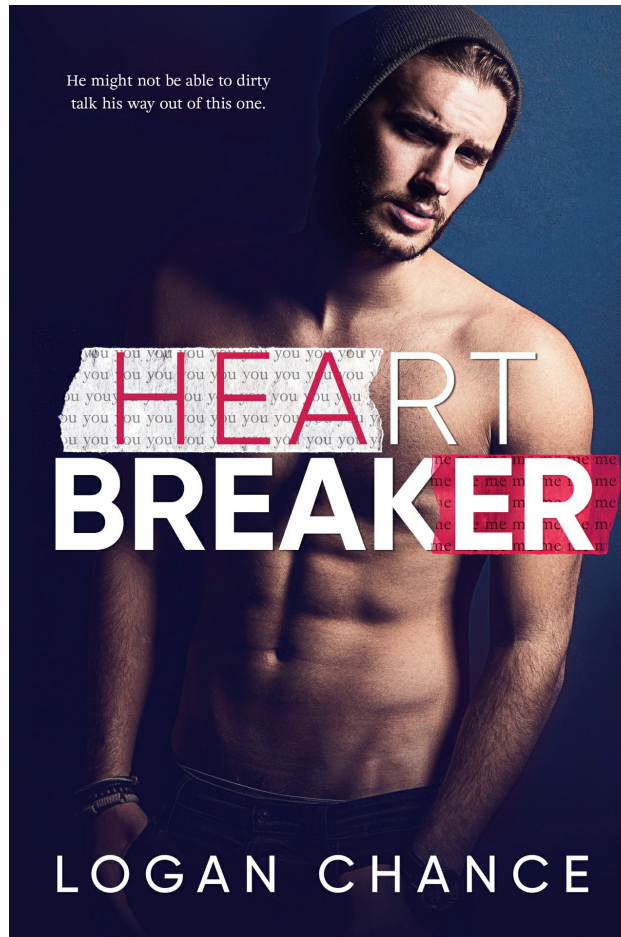
Snap.

I drop my camera and rush forward, throwing my hands over her tits. "Cover your fucking eyes," I shout. "There's been a wardrobe malfunction."

[PLAYBOY is available now](#)



[Heartbreaker is available now](#)



Chapter 1

Booker

Of all the places I've been, this is the last place I want to be. But, here I am. Back at my childhood home. Back to sell this place. To move on and forget it.

It feels as though a million years have passed since I was last here. And maybe in some weird way it has. A million years worth of memories are suppressed neatly in the dark hollows of my mind.

A tall overgrowth of grass brushes across the lawn, the blades nicking my calves. As I trudge through, I can't keep my eyes off the paint-peeled, red door. Majestic and unyielding, larger than any other in this quiet neighborhood, it keeps the world out and its secrets tucked safely inside.

Thump. Thump. My heart pounds.

Welcome back the lock creaks out when I turn the key. Stale air suffocates me when I step inside. The large space seems coffin sized.

“This place is a dump,” I mumble into the stillness.

The house has barely been touched since I left it as a kid.

First order of business, getting the power on. No way will I spend my time fixing up this hell hole without electricity.

As soon as I push the faded curtains aside in the main room, I see it, the ticket seller to this forgotten home—the Pacific Ocean with its dark blue water crashing over sleek, black rocks in the distance.

Life pumps and breathes outside this paned glass.

This view will be the reason buyers flock, hopefully offering more than my asking price.

Anxiety leaves an icy sheen of sweat on my forehead as I walk through the cavernous rooms, assessing. Floors groan under my footsteps. Dust skitters in the air. The marks notched in the doorframe of my old room wink at me as I pass.

Before I head out to the hardware store, I take inventory of the things I’ll need: paint, drywall, tile, grout, a bed to sleep in. A handle of bourbon. It’s going to be one hell of a fixup.

Lucky for me, I have all the time in the world.

The now outdated kitchen, once the artery of this house, needs the most work. I push the back slider open and step out onto the drab patio. The backyard isn’t much to look at, a nine by nine concrete slab surrounded by encroaching weeds. This area needs to be the focal point at showings. People like the illusion of happy—pretty flowers and landscaping. Maybe I’ll hire a gardener. Maybe even plant a bush here or there myself.

The wind tugs at my cargo shorts and black shirt, and I wander to the edge of the property.

Like it always does, the ocean beckons.

The Pacific wants a word with me. I oblige, following the dirt trail down to the shore. The problems with the house can wait. I need some alone time. Just me and my thoughts.

Not even bothering to remove my shoes, I step onto the sand. The sun hangs low in the sky. Soon it will be a myriad of blood oranges and ghostly greys.

I spot the smooth rocks where I used to play as a kid and drift down to the edge of the ocean, smelling the crisp salty air of the surf.

The black rocks off to my right call to me. I take a seat, tilt my face to the sun, and close my eyes. Once upon a time I took long walks with her here. Laughed with childhood friends as we collected seashells.

“Excuse me, Sir. Can you move?” a lilting, annoyed voice calls out.

I open my eyes and focus on the dream before me. Long brown hair, flying in the wind. Sweet, rosy lips. Eyes as blue as the ocean. Pink Wonder Woman t-shirt hugging a set of pretty wonderful tits. A body composed of tight curves with long legs flowing out from a jean mini skirt.

Her eyes narrow on me. “Well?” She gives me a little move along head gesture.

“I’m sorry?” I ask.

There’s not a soul in sight, so I’m not sure why she needs me to move. Or where she even came from for that matter.

“Can you please move?” she repeats.

“No, I can’t.” Fuck this. Public beach. Public property.

“I asked nicely.”

“Noted.” I close my eyes, breathing in the saline air once again, trying my best to tune her out.

“I need that rock between your legs,” she continues, apparently oblivious to my zen seeking state.

Now she’s got my attention. I open my eyes. “Well, I’ve never been propositioned like that before. Let me get this straight, you need the ‘hard rock’ between my legs?” I crack a smile. “Wow, and I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Cat, and that rock is perfect,” she says, not catching my meaning.

“I’ve been told that. A perfect, hard rock between my legs.” I wink, grabbing my crotch with one hand. “I’m blessed in that department.”

She blushes. “Not that.” She shakes her head. “I mean the rock at your feet. I need it.”

She needs a rock? I glance around at about five hundred other black rocks littering the beach.

“Right,” I draw out. “So, Hell Cat, you need a hard rock? Please, tell me more.”

“You don’t understand. That one is perfect for what I’m doing.” She brandishes me with a pleading stare.

“What could you possibly need a rock for?”

“A waterfall.”

Her eyes sparkle when she smiles. I want to keep looking at her, but I don't.

"Well, I'm sure the other rocks will work just fine. A rock is a rock."

"You're not very nice."

I laugh as her cheeks redden with anger. "I know. Some say it's my best quality."

"Well, that's just sad." She sighs. "Let's start over. My name's Cat. I run a little business called Cat's Landscaping Creations. I'm working on a waterfall, and that rock right there," she points to one flat, black rock at my feet, "would be perfect for it. I was just coming back for it after I dropped a few off at my truck."

"Well, I'm relaxing."

Sure, I could move out of her way, but where's the fun in that? I wouldn't get to see her riled up. Watch the expressions on her face change from anger to astonishment. Isn't that what life's about? Acting and reacting?

Her blue eyes hold my brown in a stare off. I pull the rock closer with my foot. A little gasp escapes her before she turns away.

Nimble and agile, like her namesake, she climbs a few more rocks, grabbing a couple and chucking them into a pile. These aren't little rocks she's collecting, so I'm impressed at her dedication.

"Hope you can *relax* when I come for that rock," she threatens, stalking closer to me.

"What the fuck?" I ask as she marches even closer, bending at her knees to grab the rock at my feet. She tugs a little, but doesn't give up.

"If you'd just move this leg." She bumps my leg with her shoulder, and I can't help but laugh a little.

"Need help?" I glare down at her.

"Yes, would you mind?"

Her deep-aqua eyes catch mine, and she really is something else. Unlike the women back in LA with plastic faces and too much makeup, her face is fresh and bare—almost innocent. We hold each other's stare, each of us silent. It would be so easy to lift this rock out of its spot and hand it to her, hell, even take it to her car. Ask for her number. Maybe even offer to buy her a drink. Something. But, I'm paralyzed.

My lips lift into a quick smile. Raising a brow, I say, "I don't mind at all. Would you like me to unzip my shorts?"

She stands in a rush, abandoning the perfect rock. "You're an asshole."

Maybe I am. Truth is, she's irritating me. I came here for peace and quiet, and all I get is this chick talking about waterfalls and rocks.

I pick up the rock, it's kind of heavy, but nothing I can't handle with one hand, and she smiles holding out both hands as if I'm going to give it over.

Something snaps within me, and I chuck it right into the ocean.

"There ya go. Now can I get back to relaxing?"

"What did you do that for?" she almost yells at me. Her indignant eyes are wide. "You're... I can't... Ugh." She storms off, abandoning the little pile she created.

If I were in a different frame of mind, I'd chase after her. Apologize. But, I can't be bothered with some beauty I met for five minutes on the beach. Hopefully, I'll never see her again.

Hours pass. The tide creeps closer to me. Beautiful and deadly. When I can no longer take the jarring thoughts in my brain, I walk once more to the edge of the frothy water, spotting the rock I threw a few feet away. The perfect rock. Nothing's perfect.

I pick it up, brushing off a few grains of clinging sand, and carry it home.

Home. As if this place could ever be fucking home. I grab a bottle of Jim, pour a glass, yes, a glass, and settle in for a night with no power. And no sleep.

[HEARTBREAKER is now available on Amazon](#)



STUCK is the 3rd book in the series, releasing soon. Here's a sneak peek...

You may think I'm weird, or even a little cuckoo. And heck, maybe I am. Who knows? All I know is I'm not like most guys. Why, you ask.

Well, because I actually want to fall in love.

Relationships don't give me hives, and I'm not allergic to being monogamous.

But dating in this day and age is a train wreck if I ever saw one. Too many walls, and lies, and deceit.

It's all madness and insanity at its finest.

And well, I'm done looking.

You can call me a hopeless romantic that's given up searching.

I used to give my heart out to everyone I met. Every girl I dated was worthy of holding my heart, but all I got back was a bloody, broken mess as they threw it back in my face.

So, wishing for love, and what do I get instead? Money. Lots of it. So much money I don't even know what to do with it all.

An inheritance, and no one to share it with. Lucky me.

So now I'm stuck in this life of never knowing if the women I meet even want me for me, or the me with all the money.

So, now I'm stuck. Somewhere in the life I want and the life I have.

What's a man to do? You guessed it, I packed my sh*t up and headed into the wilderness. A wealthy man's wilderness, but the wilderness still the same.

To figure it all out, and to try to teach my heart that loving is for the birds.

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What if the one person you want more than ever is the one person you hate even more?

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The music had all but played out. My life was in turmoil. My only fault was falling for my new boss.

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Theo Sullivan is still the owner, who sold his soul to the devil himself.

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The Sex Me Novella Series

[DATE ME](#)

Erik Murphy, bad boy pilot, has everything figured out, or so he thinks.

His ex is getting married. He needs a date.

Two meddling sisters and One dating app later, Erik finds himself in a whirlwind of online dating.

Will he be able to find a date in time? Will he find something more instead?

Kayla MacPhearson thinks her best friend Belinda Hittle, an extreme introvert, needs to spice up her dating life. Kayla hooks her up on a dating app and sits back to watch the sparks fly.

What happens when it all doesn't go as planned? Will these two find love?

STUDY ME: A Student Teacher Romance

A forbidden Student Teacher affair that will heat up your kindle and melt your hearts.

Study, eat, and repeat. For the life of a medical student Marley Murphy has her work cut out for her.

To make matters worse, her professor Houston Dale is one of the hardest teachers around. His sole purpose is to make each student suffer.

When Marley is asked to be his assistant for the semester forbidden sparks will fly between them.

Houston Dale hates teaching Anatomy. With a secret past he won't let anyone get too close.

But, when his assistant lives across an alleyway and he can see all the naughty things she does in her bedroom at night, Houston can't contain himself.

Forced to choose between his past and present, will Houston be able to be strong enough to withstand the temptation of his student?

This is a forbidden Professor/Student affair. Get ready as Houston and Marley heat up the pages and your hearts.

SAVE ME: A Military Romance

A HOT & SPICY friends to lovers military romance.

Ryan Wagner, is fresh out of the service, and trying his hardest to settle into his life in Miami.

Lizzy Packer hasn't seen Ryan since he left for boot camp.

The boy who left is nothing compared to the strong man who has returned.

As a physical therapist, Lizzy gets to rub her hands all over his strong arms.

It's just a friendship.

A friendship she's cherished since she was a little girl.

But, when the lines blur and then become nonexistent, will she be able to keep her feelings at bay?
What happens when life throws you a curveball, and nothing is as it seems?

For these two, sometimes seeing is just an illusion that one day fades.

BREAK ME

Bad Boy Pollux is on a mission.

Katy needs a fiancé to help her land a promotion. She hires Pollux, and can't fight off her attraction for the mysterious Alpha male.

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But, he'll get what he wants from her.

But, what he wasn't expecting was to get so much more.

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Thank you for reading.