

A close-up photograph of a white rose, the central focus of the cover. The petals are layered and detailed, with some showing a slight yellowish tint. Above the rose is a golden, glowing halo or ring. The background is dark, making the rose and the golden text stand out.

THE

Yafken

SERIES

BOOKS 1-3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LOGAN CHANCE

THE TAKEN SERIES

Box Set Books 1-3

LOGAN CHANCE



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Never trust anyone who has not brought a book with them.

Lemony Snicket

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Taken By My Best Friend

Kidnapping the mafia princess will be the key to my ultimate revenge.

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.

Chapter 1

Rhiannon
8 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.

Chapter 2

Rhiannon
12 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 shooing 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 ok. 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.

Chapter 3

Rhiannon
14 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 ok, 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.

Chapter 4

Xavier

“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.”

Chapter 5

Rhiannon
17 years old

The prom is a big deal in most people's life. In most seventeen-year-old girl's lives. 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 un-kissed 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.

Chapter 6

Xavier

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.

Chapter 7

Rhiannon
2 Years Later
19 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.”

Chapter 8

Rhiannon
24 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.’

Chapter 9

Xavier **2 years later**

It's time.

Rhiannon 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.

Chapter 10

Rhiannon

I'm almost free.

Away from my father and the chains he's trying to keep on me.

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 through the glass, 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.

He crashes his fist through my window, and I slam him with my door.

Red trickles from his knuckle 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 me out of the car and to my knees. 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.

Chapter 11

Xavier

Mafia.

What exactly is Mafia these days? Gone are the days of the 80's where made men would shake down their enemies in the streets. Gone are the days where they handled things out in the open. Mafia nowadays is 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.”

Chapter 12

Rhiannon

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 lifted 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 un-lived in. 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.

Chapter 13

Rhiannon

“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 they never have before. Almost as if 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 of my room, 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.”

Still as bossy as ever. Out of nowhere, he grabs my hand and walks me down the stone path to the small set of woods flanking the front yard. 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.

Chapter 14

Xavier

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.

Chapter 15

Rhiannon

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 WAY 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, with a twinkle in his eyes I can’t turn away from.

“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 CHERRY-RED 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 nor 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 saying their hellos, 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,” Mr. Gordon brags. “I wasn’t taking no for an answer.”

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.

Chapter 16

Xavier

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 jimmy 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. “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 pendulum 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.

Chapter 17

Rhiannon

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 a 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 decorates 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, with 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 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'll 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 gown 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 removing his eyes from 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.

Before I give in to the frenetic beat of primal urges drumming inside me, 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. “Be right out,” I tell him.

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; I should. 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 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 as we approach the entrance. He’s clearly giving the finger to my father by flaunting me in public, 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, 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 tells me.

I shake his soft hand, admiring the unconventional art. “It’s all so... interesting.”

Rabbits, in various poses, 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.*

How could I not recognize him? 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, I devoured every piece of wisdom he fed me. 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. Why would he do all this if he doesn't care about my future? 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, fur 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 instantly 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, with zero coaxing needed on my part for my almost

doppelgänger to switch, I am now dressed in gold.

“I love it,” she exclaims, preening in front of the mirror, marveling at her now red gown. “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.

Chapter 18

Xavier

“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, and I’d 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.

"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 ok?" 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.

Chapter 19

Rhiannon

Third time's the charm. 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.

Chapter 20

Xavier

Fuck. I never should've told her. I can feel her barrage of unspoken questions weakening my armor as my driver whisks us home. The secret filled air in the car suffocates me until we pull up in the drive, and I open the door and can breathe again.

Dean, already privy to her failed escape attempt, stands with arms crossed in the foyer when we enter.

“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. Red, hot anger erupts. I’ve had enough of his reminders of what I can't have. In a flash, I slam him against the wall.

“Don’t ever speak about her that way again,” I spit out. “Do you understand?”

“Fuck, I get it,” he barks out.

His eyes land on Rhiannon, 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. She turns on the radio, and for the next twenty minutes, she's silent, until, knowing Rhiannon, she can't take it anymore.

"Thanks for sticking up for me."

I pull into a field far away from the house and keep the engine running as I turn in my seat to face her. She watches 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. 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. Only I get this from her. 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 and 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.

Chapter 21

Rhiannon

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.

Xavier, silent, continues down the meandering road, and for once, I just let it be. Since this is my first time on the West Coast, kidnapping still counts, I let my eyes soak up the picturesque beauty 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.

We pass a little pizza place, *Mama's Trattoria*, and my mind turns to thoughts of Hannah and her unparalleled love for pizza. The thought of how animated she'd become claiming it was one of the four food groups makes me laugh to myself.

So tragic she'll never get to experience it again or any of the things she loved. Things like hugging her son. All because my father decided her life was worthless.

My brain is still trying 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 and let anyone else get hurt.

I glance at Xavier, studying his tight jaw and clenched fists guiding the car through the rolling countryside. There is no doubt in my mind what he says is true. 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 too 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.

Chapter 22

Xavier

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 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."

Chapter 23

Rhiannon

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.”

Chapter 24

Xavier

“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.

Chapter 25

Rhiannon

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 back 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.

Chapter 26

Xavier

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 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 while I focus in on her ass the entire 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 spectacular 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, and I decide it's time to test the waters.

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 political 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 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.

Chapter 27

Rhiannon

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.

An hour later, walking up to him in the foyer, I have to scream the reminder in my head.

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 ruffled. 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.

Chapter 28

Xavier

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 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.

Chapter 29

Rhiannon

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 Gods 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.



THE NEXT MORNING, 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 in the end, 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 fuck's 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 than stay here and fall further in love with lies. I'm going back anyways, when he gets what he wants. At least, I decide when.

“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.”

Even if I marry him, it doesn't mean I'll give up finding a way out. 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 fly

back with you and take you to the church, when it's time.”

When he's gone, I retrieve my necklace, drop to my knees and cry.

Chapter 30

Xavier

Ah, the day of reckoning has arrived. Today is her wedding and also the day everything changes.

May God save us all...

It won't be Ian standing before Rhi at their wedding, no it'll be me.



Chapter 31

Rhiannon

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 dais 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 arrived at the church this morning, that it was in fact 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 strides 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 soldiers. 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.

Chapter 32

Xavier

"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.”

Chapter 33

Rhiannon

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.

Chapter 34

Rhiannon: Brianna

“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.

Chapter 35

Xavier: Jack

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 walked away, she glanced over her shoulder. “Oh, and Xavier, I love my daughter. I haven’t always been a good mother to her, but I want to be now. I want to see her happy.”

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.”

Chapter 36

Rhiannon

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.



Married To My Enemy

BOOK ONE AND TWO

From *USA Today* Bestselling Author, Logan Chance, comes a powerfully spell-binding enemies to lovers duet ready to capture your heart.

Here comes the bride, all dressed in lies.

Love and cherish are not in Gabriel Prince's vocabulary. He's used to getting what he wants, and what he wants is me—as his bride.

I won't give in to Gabriel's undeniable sex appeal.

I won't fall for his charm. He won't lift my veil of secrets.

I promise to make his billionaire life miserable until he has no choice but to get rid of me.

Happy wife, happy life? I'll let him think that.

Prologue

MARRIED TO MY ENEMY BOOK ONE

All my millions and I couldn't figure out how to send an email after I died. I know you prefer technology, but looks like I get the last say. As always. You'll find I've been busy putting a lock on your empire. The only way to unlock it is with the old ball and chain. Clementine Bright is who I've picked for you.

Chapter 1

Clementine

Funerals are a lot like weddings. Tears. Flowers. Speeches. Hordes of friends and family gathered in their best clothes to mark the end of a life. It's an odd comparison to make, the joy of a wedding to the somber pain of death, but it's eerily true—because marrying Gabriel Prince will be the same as digging a grave and burying myself.

“I’ll take your silence as a yes,” Gabriel says as black-garbed mourners, shoulders bowed with loss, navigate around the arrogant man towering over me.

This is not how I envisioned things when I used to have silly fantasies of my true love proposing. A marriage proposal probably isn't supposed to feel like you're standing before an Armani suited marksman with the fine red crosshairs of a bullseye on your forehead. I'd say that's the last emotion it should evoke. Then again, most proposals don't take place at a funeral.

Fathomless dark eyes wait for the acquiescence they believe is coming, because why wouldn't I accept? Clementine Bright is a minuscule pebble in the behemoth mountain that is Gabriel Prince. It's almost laughable: after all

this time, he still expects to get his way.

And why wouldn't he? He's always possessed that charismatic 'x factor' in his DNA that makes people rush to do his bidding. It's a combination of lethal good looks and devastating charm that has ensured, since we were kids, everyone has always said yes to him. Didn't matter what it was—ice cream in the morning, shorts in the winter, a car before he was legally able to drive—if he wanted it, he got it. And acquiring me as his wife is no doubt just another yes to him.

“Why would I ever marry you?” I question. There are no sweaty palms, no butterflies, no quiver in my voice. I'm willing them away. Gabriel thrives on weakness, so I've heard, and I won't give him any, even if my forced bravado is holding by a tenuous thread.

“We both know why.” His eyes flit with disdain to his grandfather's casket, laden with bushels of flowers.

“This is really not the time or place,” I remind him in a hushed tone.

A swollen cloud blocks the sun, darkening his face. “I don't need grieving lessons. I need a bride, apparently, and that will be you.”

In my clearance sale black dress and heels, I feel like a peasant being given my orders by the prince to obey or suffer the consequences. And peasant isn't far from the truth.

There was a time when I wanted to be a part of Gabriel's entitled world, but that time is not today. “Well, you'll have to find one somewhere else. Trolling a funeral for a wife is a new low, even for you.”

“We can discuss the terms later.”

Before I can tell him later will be never, he stalks away to join what's left of his family in the front row seats. Typical.

I walk closer to the burial site and pick a spot to stand on the fringes of the people who shouldn't care Joseph Prince is no longer here. It's not like he did a lot of good with his billions or was even a nice man, for that matter. A woman in front of me snuffles, dabbing her eyes with a tissue, and I want to

ask her what he did that made him worthy of her tears? I'm not here to give my sympathy to him, despite what people may think. The reason I'm here lies on the opposite side of the cemetery, in the poor man's outskirts, beneath the only thing, besides me, that cries they're no longer here—a weeping willow tree.

For the next hour, I listen as the robed priest extols the virtues of Joseph Prince, and I wait for him to be struck by lightning for lying. A gap in the crowd leaves a clear shot to where Gabriel sits, dry eyed and stone faced. The breeze tugs at his dark hair, but isn't bold enough to whip it into a frenzy like mine. Even the wind knows to use caution with him.

Unable to stomach my bitterness any longer, I turn away and walk toward the path that leads to the person who was buried quietly without the ostentatious ceremony taking place for Joseph Prince. Maybe my emotions are still too raw to have compassion for the sheep wah-ing that their patriarch is gone. He was no saint; he was a wolf, and his fangs were the wealth he used to rip people to shreds. He dined on innocence and sipped their blood like wine, and even in death, he's stalking his prey.

Oak trees cast a net of shadows on the paved path as I walk faster to beat the tears threatening to fall. Who ever decided flowers were the symbol of grief was a genius. The sadness lurking in the petals of fresh flowers adorning the graves is immeasurable. People can't let go. I can't, as I trudge through the vast grounds, carrying my goodbye in my pocket, to the plot now laid with fresh grass.

Crouching down, I peel back the corner and slip a birthday card underneath the sod. So many things left unsaid. So many wrongs never righted. They will be, though. If I have to say yes to Gabriel Prince, so be it.

As I sit and stare at the marble marker, time passes without understanding my world will never be the same.

“Clem,” a familiar voice calls out behind me. The prodigal Prince has returned. Should've known Ronin would show up today. He wasn't sitting

with the family, so he must've been on the fringes like me.

From my spot on the ground, I peer over my shoulder at the diluted version of Gabriel I haven't seen in years. The brothers have the same dark eyes, but everything else is different. Where Gabriel is control, Ronin is chaos. Slightly mussed hair, scruffy jaw, and a perpetual pout all make the expensive suit he's wearing seem like he's playing dress up.

He steps closer and glances down at the marker.

"Fuck," he mutters, sliding his hands in the pockets of his slacks. "I didn't know your sister died."

There's a lot of things he doesn't know. No one knows. And I'll make sure they never find out.

Chapter 2

Gabriel

There isn't a problem in the world I can't solve by throwing a little money at it. Embargoes, frivolous lawsuits, and any other problem I've ever had. But, this is not one of those times. I can't pay off someone to bring Joseph back from the dead and ask him what the hell he's trying to do, so I glare down at the carved Italian-bone casket with my grandfather's frail body resting inside and give him one final farewell. One to carry with him into the fiery depths below. Let's face it, there's no pearly gates where this man is headed. I'm sure he'll have Satan ousted in record time.

When I step away, I don't see Clementine's frost-filled amber eyes in the crowd. Across the graveyard, I spot the one person I did not expect to see today.

My brother. Ronin.

He strides toward the plots on the east side of the cemetery, and I ignore the sympathetic stares being tossed my way to follow him. My shoulders relax the more distance I put behind me and the puppets whose strings are still attached to my grandfather. Until I reach Ronin, with his lazy smile and

wasted dreams, standing next to my soon-to-be bride.

A heated rush of jealousy singses its way through my system. Not because I care that Ronin may be interested in Clementine—no—because he may be interested in something that's *mine*. Because she is, in every sense of the word, mine.

She may not realize it yet, but the moment my grandfather served us both our death sentences, it made her the property of Gabriel Prince. And I don't like Ronin touching what's mine.

I stalk through the fresh cut grass. "Ronin," I call out, "I see you decided to take time out of your busy partying schedule to be here today." His eyes pan over to me, and I never break eye contact as I close the distance. Not even to give a single glance to Clementine, who stands at the grave of her sister, Savannah—my grandfather's nurse.

"Can we not?" he drawls out with a furrowed brow, as if he actually cares about the girl lying beneath the dirt.

"You really need to invest in some cemetery etiquette lessons," Clementine adds.

My gaze meets her bloodshot eyes. She's been crying, and I don't know what to do with fucking tears. I didn't know either girl very well growing up, and only learned of Savannah's death after the fact, but I'm not a complete asshole.

I stop in front of Ronin. He doesn't extend his hand for me to shake, and good thing, because I wouldn't.

For years, I've watched my grandfather clean up his messes. For years, I've handled the Prince companies, while my grandfather coddled my older brother with money, teaching him nothing except the coffers are never empty. He skates through life on my grandfather's fortune, now *my* fortune, thinking the hand that feeds him is forever full.

Oh, big brother, how times have changed.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

“I thought I’d pay my respects.”

“And now you have.” I give a little head nod, hoping Ronin catches my drift and leaves.

“I thought I’d just catch up. Maybe stay in town for a few days.”

“Where will you stay?”

“Grandfather’s estate.”

I barely move a muscle. “It’s now my estate.”

Ronin laughs, easing into his playful mode. The kind he uses when he’s trying to charm the panties off an unsuspecting heiress or socialite. Trouble is, I won’t be biting.

“I’m just here to meet with the lawyers and get my cut.”

Anger ignites a fuse, that travels through my system, threatening to detonate at any minute.

“Your cut?”

Grandfather’s final words as the oxygen tank filled his lungs with air so he could spend a few more minutes here on this god forsaken earth were pretty clear, “Your brother will have nothing now. Take care of him.”

I nodded, promising my grandfather I would do so, even though I never intended to fulfill his request.

“I think you’re misinformed,” I tell him.

The playfulness leaves his brown eyes. “I need to speak with grandfather’s attorney.”

“That you do, and I need to speak to Clementine—alone.”

“No, you really don’t,” she says. “Seems like you two have some important issues to deal with. Feel free to do it elsewhere.”

He turns to face her. “I’m sorry. It was great seeing you again.” He kisses her cheek, and then brushes past me. “See you soon, little brother.”

When he’s out of range, I focus all my attention on Clementine. “Ten million dollars.”

“I can’t be bought.” Her voice carries across the graveyard. “I’m not a

whore.”

“Fuck, Clementine, keep your voice down.”

“Like I said,” she says in a lower voice, “I can’t be bought.”

“Everyone has a price.”

“Not me.” She raises her chin in defiance, stubborn written all over her makeup-free face.

“Meet me at my home tomorrow at noon.” Maybe if I show her some of the benefits of living with extreme wealth, she’ll change her mind.

“I’m not going to your house.”

She moves past me and hurries across the grounds toward the parking lot as if she can escape this situation. She can’t.

I leave the graveyard and pay my death dues all evening.

I loved the manipulating bastard.

I did.

Not the man we buried today, but the grandfather who took in two orphaned grandsons when their parents died.

I have to hand it to him, even after death, Joseph Prince still wants to rule my life.

Of all the people my grandfather could have picked, why Clementine Bright?

She isn’t royalty. She’s not an heiress. She’s nothing.

She’s stunning, though—a natural beauty—with an air of innocence about her petite frame that my grandfather would have pegged for weakness. Is that why he chose her for me? Part of me thinks he fully underestimated her. He always had a weakness for a pretty face. Beautiful women are a dime a dozen, and I’d never fall for a woman like her. Her attitude is one in need of work.

Major work.

The next afternoon, when Clementine doesn’t show, I drive to the outskirts of town, past overgrown lots, to a small house on Pineloch Street. I

smile at the potted plants blooming underneath the light blue awnings on each windowsill.

At least she tries.

I ring the bell.

Clementine opens the door, and shocked doesn't even begin to cover the expression on her face. "What are you doing here?"

"You wouldn't come to my home, so I decided to come to yours."

"How did you even know where I lived?" She steps aside, letting me into her quaint cottage.

"I know a lot of things, Miss Bright."

A small dark-haired child runs up, with his arms outstretched, yelling, "Mommy. Mommy."

She shuts the door behind me, and already I feel like I can't breathe. He plows into Clementine, wrapping his arms around her knees as she bends over to hug him.

This, I didn't know.

Chapter 3

Clementine

Tiny humans have strange effects on people. From what I've experienced, they either morph into baby-talking personal space invaders or stay-away-from-me kidphobes. By the way he's staring at the barely over three-foot tall child in front of me, Gabriel falls into the latter category. He looks like he just lost his fortune.

I'll admit, I'm feeling a little smug. "I'm guessing that proposal doesn't seem like such a good idea now?"

His dark eyes finally pull away from the little boy checking him out to mine. "Is he yours?"

"Yes."

"How old is he?"

"Four, and his name is Tennyson."

"Hi," Tennyson says, holding up four fingers.

"That's a big name for such a little guy," Gabriel tells him.

"What's your name?" Tennyson asks.

"Gabriel."

“Want some pizza?” Tennyson asks, trusting like only a child can. “Mommy got half-cheese, half-pepperoni.”

That familiar protective instinct I get when Tennyson darts into a crowd, or does something equally heart attack inducing, emerges like claws ready to draw blood. This seems like a very teachable moment about the dangers of talking to strangers. If there’s any reason to shove Gabriel out the door, it’s Tennyson.

I’ve been very careful, and now, Gabriel’s grandfather is threatening to blow down my house of cards like the big bad wolf he was before he left this earth to terrorize people on the other side.

“No, thanks,” Gabriel turns down the offer, with a semi-grin.

“Come on, let’s get your dinner,” I tell Tennyson before excusing myself.

That’s all the incentive Tennyson requires to dart away with a ‘bye’ to the man watching us with questions swirling across his face. If only I could toss a few slices at Gabriel and make him run away. Blaze is great pizza but it’s not magic pizza. The hallway closes in on me as I hasten my steps to the kitchen.

Tennyson takes a seat at the oak pedestal table, while I open the Blaze pizza box and then plate him two cheese slices.

Once he has everything he needs, I reluctantly tell him, “I’ll be right back.”

“Is Gabriel your friend?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply, trampling the lie under my feet as I move across the tiled floor.

Rather than face the problem in my living room, I make a quick stop into the small bathroom in the hallway, in hopes of composing myself. Inside, I sag against the door. The reflection staring back at me from the mirror above the sink looks anything but composed. My makeup-free face is entering ghost territory.

I’m a hot mess, but this could work to my advantage, because Gabriel needs to see what he’s getting. I’m not a socialite who walks around in

expensive clothes and heels all day. The faded hoodie and shorts I'm wearing are my mom couture, and the only parties I host are tea parties with miniature plastic cups and a singing teapot. Not at all what will be expected of me, I'm sure.

I take a deep breath and tighten the haphazard bun piled on top of my head before leaving my temporary sanctuary.

When I return, Gabriel lords over my living room, eyeing the framed photos on the bookshelf. I hate to say it, but the back of him is just as impressive as the front. He looks so out of place here in his trim black slacks and pale-blue fitted shirt that were probably tailored to fit his body. An aura of wealth surrounds him, and my average furnishings only amplify the difference in our social status—my polyester to his cashmere.

“So, what did you want?” I ask, moving into the room.

He picks up a lavender scented candle, giving it a sniff, before setting the glass jar back on the shelf. “Where is his father?”

“Gone.”

Smooth and collected he turns to face me. I can't believe this is actually happening. The attorney's letter I received two days before Joseph's death, forewarning me of what was to come, should be proof enough, that yes, this is really happening.

I know my words are futile, but I make the attempt anyway, “Listen, can't you make this go away?”

“No,” is his disappointing and very solid answer. He's not going to budge. It's written in the unwavering look in his eyes and the concrete set of his masculine jaw. Talking him out of this will be like trying to lift Tennyson from the floor in the middle of a tantrum—impossible.

I drop down onto the couch. “We don't even know each other,” I reason, rubbing my forehead to ease the tension in my head.

“We don't need to. Marriages are arranged all the time.”

I look up at him. “I don't come with a dowry.”

“I don’t need one.”

Feeling at a disadvantage from my lower position on the sofa, I stand, trying to take back some of the power I don’t have. My head pounds from all the reasons I can’t say no to this marriage, but I won’t throw Tennyson into this mess without an introduction. “I need some time.”

“You have one week and then our engagement will be announced.” His brown eyes drift down my body, finalizing the deal. “I’ll contact you to meet with me and sign the paperwork.”

“Paperwork?”

“Don’t be naive, Clementine.” He moves closer. “Everything will be laid out in a contract of what’s expected.”

“I’ll see if I can pencil you in.”

“You still have the same smart mouth, I see,” he says, with a wry grin.

“Yes, well you’re still demanding,” I retort, remembering the tall boy who flew his high-tech airplane into my hair and then tried to free it while I waited for my father to finish his business with Joseph Prince.

“Asking you to stop squirming isn’t being demanding.” His eyes sweep over my bun and I can vividly remember his hands working through the tangle, trying to remove the contraption. “Your hair was so thick.”

The fact he remembers the details of our childhood meeting unsettles me a bit. I wouldn’t have guessed he’d remember the incident, given the amount of people in and out of his charmed life.

“You nearly beheaded me. Thank goodness for Ronin.”

Like someone slamming all the windows closed, his face shutters, and the slight smile is replaced with a dangerously thin line. “I’ll see you next week.” He stalks across the living room. “And don’t try to run away,” he throws over his broad shoulder, “I’ll find you.”

I have no doubt he would. Let’s just hope he doesn’t find what’s right in front of his face.

Chapter 4

Gabriel

After battling it out with the lawyers for the past week, the terms have come together for my marriage with Clementine—ten million dollars given after the wedding date, and a fund for more money to be deposited over the course of a year.

Our marriage only has to last a year, a loophole my lawyers found. I'm sure grandfather would have liked for the two of us to remain married indefinitely as his cruel parting joke.

I never understood my grandfather's eccentric ways, and I don't care to study the man after his death. I just want to make sure nothing happens to *my* company. To *my* kingdom. I have big projects on the horizon and an expansion to occupy my time.

So, I'll marry Clementine for a year, and not a day longer, and then I no longer have to worry about a thing.

Easy.

There's a few stipulations as with any marriage, and once Clementine arrives, I can go over the details of the arrangement with her.

“Your one o’clock is here, sir,” Kurt, my assistant, informs me through the intercom in the study.

“Send her in,” I tell him.

A few seconds later, the hand-carved wooden doors open, allowing Clementine to enter the study with me.

Her eyes take everything in, from the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, to the stained-glass window in the center of the far wall, to me, standing in front of my oak desk.

“It’s a great room, isn’t it?” I watch her as she runs a finger over the bookshelf closest to the door.

“It is.” Her eyes light up. “Oh wow, you have Jane Austen. I didn’t think men like the Princes would read her.”

I cross the hardwoods to stand by her. “They’re first editions.”

She turns to stare at me. “I’m impressed.”

“Do books impress you, Clementine?”

“Well, I do like to read.”

“Then let me show you around. I can show you the library.”

She crosses her arms. “No, that’s ok. Let’s just get this over with.”

I lean against the bookshelf. “You don’t want to see where we’ll be living?”

“We’ll be staying here?”

“Yes, I don’t have a home here for your job and Tennyson’s school.” I give her a small smile. “Unless, you’d like to commute in a private jet.”

“Why don’t you live wherever and I’ll live in my own home?”

“Funny.” I push off the shelf and lead her out of the study. “Believe me, if we could do that, I would.”

She follows behind me without a sound.

“This is the library,” I say, opening another set of doors further down the tiled hallway, and ushering her into the room.

“Holy crap.” She makes a complete three-sixty degree turn in the room,

gazing at all the books with wide eyes. “I think I’ll be spending most of my free time here.”

An unexpected sense of pride bursts through my chest that I’m able to give my future wife something she’ll enjoy. And the fact it’s warming up my entire body leaves me dumbfounded. I’ve never cared before about making anyone happy.

Except, my mother, before she died.

“This was my mother’s favorite room too,” I say, remembering her.

Clementine turns to face me with sadness in her eyes. “I never knew her. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Bad things happen to good people all the time.”

“Well, I wish bad things only happened to bad people.”

“Ah, I’m marrying a dreamer.” I step out of the room, leading Clementine further down the hallway to show her more of the downstairs living space. “Tell me what else you dream about?”

“I dream I don’t have to do this.”

“You should be thanking your lucky stars you get to marry me.”

The glint of awe and wonder from the house in Clementine’s eyes is replaced with anger. “Is that so? And why should I be thankful I get to marry someone I don’t love?”

I stop and glance around at the luxurious furnishings, the famous artwork, the pristine upkeep of the house. “Is this not to your liking? Poor little Clementine has to live in a huge ass estate.”

“But, I didn’t choose to live in it. I don’t like having my choices taken from me.”

I turn back around, heading to the staircase, continuing my tour, whether she’s following me or not. I don’t care anymore. I didn’t get a choice either.

And I *always* get a choice.

She’s quiet as we ascend the wide stairs up to the third floor.

“This will be Tennyson’s room,” I say, entering a large loft-style room. A

canopy bed sits in the middle of the room, with a slide from the loft leading down onto the floor beside it. “The stairs to the loft are over this way.” I move to the corner to show her the staircase.

“This room is amazing.”

I lean against the banister to the staircase. “It was my room growing up.”

“Really?” Clementine spins around. “I can’t imagine you as a child. I didn’t meet you until you were almost fourteen.”

“Yeah.” I rub the bottom of my chin as I watch her walk around my childhood bedroom.

She takes it all in, slowly touching my old science trophies on the shelf. “Hopefully, we can build a shelf with Tennyson’s trophies.”

I don’t say anything. The child is four, and we have a long way to go before he’s winning science awards.

I see the moment Clementine realizes she’s made plans for a future where we will no longer be together. “Well, you know what I mean,” she corrects herself. “We can fill it with his colorful artwork from preschool.”

“Would you like to see our room?”

Her eyes widen to the size of a silver dollar. “*Our* room?” She steps back. “We won’t be sharing a room, will we?”

There’s ten bedrooms on this property. Over half of them are never used. Clementine will very well be having her own bedroom, but I like seeing the heated red travel over her cheeks.

Knowing it’s anger, but wishing it was a blush instead, I continue to toy with her, because I can. “Why wouldn’t we share a room? You’ll be my wife.”

“Let’s just sign the papers and get this over with. I can see the room on our wedding night.”

She leaves before I can tell her she will indeed have her own, and I follow behind her, enjoying the sway of her hips, and the slight bounce of her tight ass as she walks. Her hair is long, past her shoulder blades, and I imagine

wrapping it through my fingers.

I think back to when she came over as a teenager. Her father, the head groundskeeper, was working late for my grandfather. Clementine entered into the foyer, giggling at something Ronin was saying. She had tiny freckles on her nose.

She doesn't have them anymore.

We head back downstairs to the study in silence.

"Take a seat," I say, moving to my chair behind my desk.

She crosses the floor to sit in a lavender wing-back chair. "I talked to a lawyer."

"That's cute."

She fiddles with her hands in her lap. "Well, I'd like for someone to be here when I sign the papers."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "It's a marriage, Clementine. You're acting like you're signing your life away."

Her eyes slam into mine with a fiery intensity. "Well, I practically am."

I push off my desk, taking the few steps to end up right in front of her. I lean over, placing both hands on the armrests of her chair, our noses almost touching. "You couldn't ask for a better life than with me."

"Someone's cocky."

"Not cocky—confident." She should be down on her knees.

Images of Clementine on her knees in front of me, my hands wrapping into her soft curls as her pretty mouth takes my cock deep down her throat, slam into my mind as I stare at her uneasiness.

I step back, trying my best to stay on topic.

She shifts in her chair. "Also, I want to ease Tennyson into this. I don't want him to become attached."

For the first time, I feel guilt. "That I can understand."

She nods, but doesn't say a word. I'm not as big a monster as she thinks I am.

“When do we...you know...do it?” Her eyes are bright and wide.

The thoughts of her before me on her knees slam back into my brain. “Do it? Like sex?”

She stands in a rush from her chair. “No, not sex. I meant when do we get married? I will never have sex with you.”

I smirk. “Never say never.”

She folds her arms against her chest with a menacing scowl. “Never.”

I have to laugh to myself at her boldness, and unwavering resolve. She’s feisty, and it pumps my blood south to my dick.

“To answer your previous question, we’ll be married as soon as you sign the papers.”

“Like I said, I want to ease Tenny into this.”

“As you wish.” I hold a pen out to her.

She takes the Montblanc from me. “I’m going to take these home and read over them,” she places the pen on the desk and gathers the contract. “I’d be a fool not to.”

“You have twenty-four hours to sign them.”

She looks up at me with cold eyes, and without a word, crosses to the door and leaves. This must be why my grandfather chose her, she’s stubborn. Just like me.

Chapter 5

Clementine

I could do a lot with ten million dollars. Tennyson would be set for life. And only a year? Is this some kind of trap? My twenty-four hours have come and gone. I didn't return the papers before arriving at work, and I'm not sure if I even will.

"Oh, that looks pretty," my co-worker, and best friend, Erin, tells me as I finish the rose petals on a wedding cake. "You're so talented. Someday, you need to open your own cake business."

Well, technically, I can now. I could open a whole chain. This money is really messing with my head. The fact he said 'everyone has a price' hasn't left my mind. I meant it when I said I couldn't be bought, but maybe I can be rented.

"Someday." I lay down the piping bag full of frosting and wipe my hands on my apron. The three-tiered buttercream and raspberry cake I created doesn't give me the same amount of satisfaction it normally would, because all I can see is my own cake, *if* I marry Gabriel.

"What's wrong?" Erin asks. "You're so quiet today."

I've known Erin for two years—we both started at Let Them Eat Cake on the same day—and in that time, she's become like a sister to me. She was there to help me when my own sister was taken from me all too soon. She also has a son the same age as Tenny, so that helps a ton. But more than anything, she's my person, the only one I trust, and her hazel eyes have just the right amount of concern to have me lifting part of this burden off my shoulders. "I might be getting married."

Her mouth falls open. "To who?"

Even though the bakery is empty, I whisper, "Gabriel Prince."

She gasps. "Clem, *the* Gabriel Prince?" Her shoulders droop, and the hurt on her face is unmistakable. "Why didn't you tell me you were dating him?"

"Well," I stare at the blonde braid draped over her shoulder, because I can't look her in the eye, "it's all very sudden."

"I'll say," she says, crossing her arms. "How long has this been going on?"

"Not long."

Poor Erin. Her mouth hangs open so far, I could toss one of the raspberries from the cake in it.

"Listen," she finally says, "I know I've been telling you that you needed to date, that you're a hermit, but this is pretty drastic." She looks at me like I've got an extra head. "Has Tennyson met him?"

The rest of the story falls out of my mouth at a rapid pace, and she remains silent until I finish.

"Ten million dollars?" she exclaims. "I'll marry him."

"I don't know what to do," I lament.

"Do it," she encourages, with no qualms, "that's what you do. I think we need to sit down." She takes my arm and leads me over to one of the empty tables in the front of the store. "It's one year, Clementine. That's only three-hundred and sixty-five days."

She sits, and I plop down across from her. "Keep going," I tell her,

wanting to be convinced I'm not selling out.

"He's gorgeous," she starts counting off on her fingers. And she's right, he certainly is. With all the turmoil of what's been going on, his sex appeal was the last thing on my mind. But yeah, damn him. "Wait," she says, "will you be having sex?"

"Nooo," I draw out, feeling my face warm, remembering his question in his office.

She lifts a brow. "Why not?"

"It just won't be happening," is the only assurance I can give her.

"Mhm," she says. "Ok, moving on. He's a busy man, so you probably won't even see him that much." She leans in. "Ten million dollars, Clementine. A year is a small investment for the return you're going to get. You can't say no."

"What about Tennyson, though?"

"It'll be over before you know it." She sighs. "A lifetime of security for him is worth one year he won't even remember when he's older. Be the user, for once."

Well that's certainly something I've never done, and maybe it's time I did. Just because I marry Gabriel doesn't mean he gets a complacent wife.

"Maybe you're right." I stand with a smile and a new outlook. "I need to finish that order."

The rest of the day, I imagine every cake I design is my own—without the happily ever attached to it. And definitely no sex. A man who looks like him has plenty of options besides his wife, anyway.

As I drive home later in the evening, I decide the reward is greater than the risk. That night, I write out my own contract, with my own stipulations.

The next morning, after I drop Tennyson off at preschool, I drive to the formidable estate and request to see Gabriel.

My belly is a seesaw as I'm led down a marble floored hallway that seems to go on for a mile, and through a seating area to french doors.

“Mr. Prince is out back,” I’m told by the gray-haired butler.

“Thank you,” I tell him as he opens the door for me.

I step out onto an expansive concrete patio filled with more furniture than my house. Gabriel, looking very human in dark jeans and a black T-shirt, stands in the center of the lawn looking up at the clear blue sky.

I place the manila folder containing both contracts on a table. “Hello,” I call out, gathering my nerve to cross the patio to stand at the edge.

He glances over his shoulder. “Watch out,” he warns, just as something loud and metal whizzes within inches of my face.

“What the...” I exclaim, ducking and throwing my arms to protect my head.

He grins as the object crashes next to his leather clad feet. “Sorry,” he says with too much amusement to really be sorry. “A new toy. It’s a Fold Dragon Drone, top of the line.”

I lower my arms, knowing he’s trying to impress me with his expensive toys. All I can think is how Tennyson would have that contraption broken within minutes. “Ah.”

“It has twelve propellers.”

I nod. “Still haven’t learned to fly one, I see.”

His white teeth flash against the dark stubble on his jaw. “I think it’s just you.”

To my dismay, I want to smile back at his playful remark. Instead, I erect the shield that’s going to protect me through this arrangement. “I have a contract for you to sign as well.”

He stalks closer to me, unphased by my words, and the breeze rumples his hair, completing his casual look. “Ah, and what exactly is in this contract?”

His eyes sweep down my pink tank and jean shorts to my sandaled feet and back up again. Needing distance, I turn away from the force of him and cross to the table where my demands lie. Once I have them in my hand, I dig

in my purse and pull out the only pen I have—a Pusheen the cat pen that Tennyson loves.

I hold it out, along with the papers. “Just sign and date it.”

“I’d like to read over it.” He leans down to whisper in my ear as he takes them from me, “I’d be a fool not to.”

A shiver starts at my toes and rockets up my body, nearly curling my spine. My eyes meet his, and I can’t help but think, the only fool here is me for agreeing to this.

Chapter 6

Gabriel

A contract? I almost want to laugh at her, but instead, I take a seat at the wrought-iron table. Normally, when handed a contract, I call Patrick, my attorney, and let him read through it before I even lay eyes on it. Patrick is smart. Patrick is wise. And he never lets me sign anything until he and his firm give it their utmost attention.

But, Clementine has piqued my interest. And no one ever piques my interests when it comes to contracts. I smile at her handwritten contract as she takes a seat next to me.

My eyes zero in on the words written there:

There will be no sex.

I read the vague line over and over. “Ever?” I ask her.

She straightens her posture. “No, never.”

“With anyone? Ever again, for the rest of my life?”

“Well, no. I guess not.” She touches her bottom lip with the pad of her finger.

I scan to the next item and laugh after I read the words written there:

Gabriel Prince will not come onto Clementine Bright during the course of the marriage.

“What?” she asks, her eyes narrowing on me. “These are good terms and I won’t be lenient on them.”

I set the paper down. “Can I ask you something?”

She composes herself before answering. “Ok,” she says, slowly.

“Everything in this contract is assuming I would try to seduce you.” I lean back in my seat, capping her kitty cat pen and placing it on the table. “What if you try to seduce me?”

Now it’s time for her to laugh. “As if.”

“What?” I scoot closer to her, touching a stray strand of her long hair, letting it run through my fingers. “Imagine you’re all alone one night. You’re feeling naughty and you’re in that place somewhere between sleep and awake, and your hand roams over your body.”

She swallows, and I take notice of her smooth skin, wanting to touch it.

“Your fingers trace over your panties. And it’s been a *long* time.”

She takes one slow blink and then opens her eyes, focusing on mine.

“A really long time since you’ve been touched. Your fingers dip beneath the band of your panties.” I don’t stop with this scenario because it’s a power play. Who breaks first?

Who calls the bluff? It won’t be me. She wants to write a sex contract with it all geared to me being the one who would break first, then this is what she gets.

I live on control.

I never sway once I’ve made a decision about something.

Who does she think she is?

She doesn’t know the rules to this game.

And one thing I would never do is sign a contract for her. Sex or not.

I never planned on having sex with my wife, and I still don’t. But, I would love to bring her to her knees and let her beg for it.

She thinks I would be the one to want her? No, I'll make sure she wants me.

"Imagine yourself running your hands between your thighs. Wishing you had a man's hands on you. Hands like these." I let go of her hair, opening my palm and stretching my fingers out.

She shakes her head. "No," she breathes out.

"It's been a long time. And one night you'll come begging..." I can't even finish my words before her eyes meet mine.

There's a fire burning deep within her. And it's not sexual.

No, it's much worse.

"I would never beg."

"You sure about that?" I ask her again.

She scoots her chair further away from me, her hands grabbing the contract. "How am I sure you won't try something on me?"

I let my eyes run over her tight body, but I don't let the smell of jasmine and memories suck me down into a depth with her where I won't be able to climb back out.

"*When* I slide deep inside you and fuck you until you can't remember asking me to sign this silly contract," I stand, "you'll beg me for it."

She bounds out of her chair, clenching her teeth as tightly as she holds the contract in her hand. "That'll never happen." She brushes past me as she leaves.

I grab my phone, taking command over the drone once again. It lifts from the ground as I fly it over the backyard.

"Was that Clementine?" Ronin asks.

I set my phone down, letting the drone plummet to the ground. "Don't let your mind wander over her."

He leans against the jamb of the double french doors and crosses his arms. "Why's that?"

I walk closer to him. "She's going to be my wife."

He laughs. "I feel sorry for her."

My brother's trying to goad me, trying to push the buttons that once used to make me flame white-hot with anger back in the past. But, now I just chuckle. Yes, a slow chuckle. "Why? Because she'll have a better life than the one she has now? Because I'll be able to give her the life no other man can? Is that why you feel sorry?" My eyes never sway from his as I walk over to him.

"You'll ruin her."

"Like you ruined her sister?"

Ronin slams me against the wall of the house, his hand gripping the fabric of my shirt. "You don't know anything."

I shove back, gripping my hand around his neck, squeezing just enough to let him know who's boss. "Things have changed, older brother." I give him a push before letting go and he stumbles back a few steps.

"I see that." His eyes never break contact. "She's a good person. She has a son."

Now my anger's set loose. "Obviously, Grandfather had his reasons."

He scoffs. "Still doing what *he* says. When are you going to break free from him and do things for yourself?"

He has no clue. I turn away from Ronin, trying to wrap my head around this whole marriage to come. I need to announce the engagement soon, and with Clementine not cooperating this is taking longer than I originally thought.

I turn back to Ronin. "I need a favor."

Chapter 7

Clementine

Papers. Words. All strewn together to create my future. Tennyson's future. I breathe out a sigh of misery.

Gabriel Prince doesn't care if I'm miserable. The man has no feelings. He's too busy being gorgeous. And controlling. He's just a god-like statue of broodiness bending people like me to his will.

"Mommy," Tennyson's light voice says from behind me.

I turn around to see Tennyson in his *Batman* pajamas holding his yellow blanket close to his chest. "What's wrong?"

"There's a monster in my room."

I push the papers aside, knowing all too well about evil doings. "Let's go check it out." I grab Tennyson's hand and lead him back down the hall to his room. "Where is he?" I ask, flicking on the bedside lamp.

He points to the closet while still holding strong to his yellow blankie. This yellow blanket has been his crutch since he was a baby, and I don't have any plans of taking it away anytime soon. Let him grow up to always have his blankie with him. If he needs it, then I will make sure it always stays

around. “He’s in there.”

I open the closet door, knowing full well the umbrella hanging against his shoe rack is the monster in question. I turn on the light to the closet. “Is this your big bad monster?” I ask, pulling the umbrella down and showing it to him.

“Can you lay with me?” He rubs his tired eyes with the palm of his hands.
“Ok.”

I pull back his covers and we both climb in. I sing him a soft lullaby and his eyes drift closed. His light brown hair falls in his eyes, and I push the strands off his forehead.

We lay in silence once my song has ended, and his breathing is soft and slow. He’s asleep.

A knock at the door startles me a few minutes later, or I think it’s a few minutes later.

I move through the hallway, trying my best to smooth down my hair from the sleep I was gently pulled under.

“One second,” I say to the door, staring at the mirror before checking the peephole.

Ronin.

I open the door. “Why are you here so late?”

“It’s not even ten pm yet.”

Well, it feels late. “Come on in,” I say, remembering my manners. I shake off the last bit of sleep as I open the door wider for him to step through.

“I’ve come by to...”

I hold up my hand. “I’m sure I know why you’re here. You can tell him I have his papers and we can go ahead with this ridiculous marriage thing.”

He laughs, his smile spreading from cheek to cheek. “I’m sure Gabriel will be pleased to hear that.”

I cross my arms. “I don’t really care all too much about pleasing *him*.”

He rubs the back of his neck as he moves into the living room. “I know

what you mean.”

“Do you? You’re not the one forced into this stupid...” Ugh, I can’t even get the words out. And I shouldn’t be taking this resentment out on Ronin. Even though he’s bred from the same cloth, it isn’t his fault I’m where I am now.

“No, listen. I get it. That’s why I came over.” He pauses before continuing, “I just wanted to make sure you’re alright.” He steps closer, real concern lacing the edges of his eyes.

I shoo the notion away that anything could ever be anything but alright. “I’m fine.”

He stares at me. “Are you really, though?”

I sigh. “I’m a big girl. I can handle myself.”

This earns me a soft chuckle from Ronin. “It’s been a long time since I saw you. I guess the last time was when I picked up Savannah...” He stops talking.

Tears well in my eyes at the mere implication of Savannah’s absence. It’s been years, but it still feels like yesterday.

He changes the subject. “I see you have a son now. How’d that happen?”

I smile, knowing full well he’s not asking about the actual biological way that children are made. “Just one of those things,” I say with a shrug.

“Listen, I know you don’t want to marry Gabriel. He can be...”

“Daunting?” I finish for him.

He cracks a sly grin. “I was going to say demanding, but sure, daunting works too. I know he can be all the things you will probably hate. And I know my grandfather is a sick fuck. But, think of the money, Clem. Think about your future.”

I’ve already thought about it over and over. And I know I am going to say yes. I just keep hoping somehow something will change. A Hail Mary. A new plan where we can get out of this mess.

I thought this was the 21st century. I didn’t think things like arranged

marriages happened anymore. And screw Joseph Prince for having the upper hand over my future.

“I’ve already signed the contract,” I say.

He taps his hand on the counter. “Oh, ok. I should get going.” He jabs a thumb toward the door.

I thank him for coming over as I walk him to the door. We both step outside onto the porch, and I pull my sweater together in the front to warm me. “Bye, Ronin. I’ll see you at the wedding, I guess.”

His eyes do this strange sweep of me. “If you ever need anything...” He lets the words linger in the night air, because he knows just as well as I do, that with Gabriel, I’ll want for nothing.

Except. “I could probably use a friend.”

His eyes lighten. “No truer words have ever been spoken.”

“And maybe, if I ever need it...” I chew on my bottom lip before finishing, “a getaway plan.”

He winks. “You got it.” His eyes linger on my face again. “You look so much like her,” he whispers. And then he does the most unexpected thing. He leans in, cupping my cheeks with his hands.

My heart beats an unsteady rhythm as his cool, dark eyes meet mine. And then his lips touch mine and I don’t know what to do.

His tongue pushes my lips apart, and he deepens the kiss. His hands are now in my hair, pulling the strands closer to him. His tongue runs along mine and I reach my hands up his chest to push him away.

I break the kiss, stunned.

“I’m not her, Ronin.”

Pain, that looks so much like mine, stares back at me. “I’m sorry,” he says.

And with that, Ronin leaves my house.

Chapter 8

Gabriel

“Everything’s all set?” I ask the lawyers assembled in my office as they read over the final paperwork that will chain Clementine to me for the next year.

“Yes, sir,” Patrick tells me. “The marriage contract is ironclad.”

“Good. That will be all.”

After they’re gone, I stare at her dainty signature on the papers. I suspect even if I had chosen my own bride, the details would have remained the same. A simple prenup with an added addendum for all the monies Clementine will have once we separate.

It’s crazy that we already know the date of our divorce before we even say our vows.

Beside the expensive legal documents sits her single page of self-made demands. I pick it up and skim over her contract, reading through her sexual no-no’s and wonder if she’d be this way with anyone she’d marry.

I doubt it.

She has a spark inside her that could start an inferno, if I’m not careful. I see it flare every time I’m around her. It almost amuses me, in a sick way,

when I see her getting all riled up at something I say. When you've bent enough people to your will, it's like discovering a rare tech gadget when you come across someone who won't.

It makes me want to keep pissing her off. It makes me want to show her all the things she's missing out on—my tongue, my fingers, my dick.

But, this isn't a game. I need a wife, not a playmate. Clementine won't be my bride because I want to fuck her.

So, I pick up my Meisterstück platinum-coated pen, trying not to smile when I remember her cat pen, and sign on her dotted line.

Instead of having my personal assistant make sure she receives it—because what's the fun in that—I grab my cell, scroll through my contacts and bring up her name.

“Come meet your husband,” I text her.

“I'm at work,” is her swift reply.

Her work ethic is admirable, but I can't wait until she won't need her job and can meet me on a whim when I so demand it. An extensive background check into Clementine revealed all the basic details of her work resume. Her cake making job—although cute—could never pay her what she'll be getting from me. She could work all her life and never come close to what she's being offered.

“What time will you be off?” I answer her back.

“Soon.”

Soon? That's not a timeline I can deal with. My hands immediately gravitate to my temples, and I press the pads of my fingers into the throbbing skin. Not even married yet and already my soon-to-be wife stresses me out.

I call for my driver. “Stefan, bring the car around.”

I stand and shrug on my Westmancott suit jacket before securing the paper that's so important to her into a manila envelope.

The sun dips below the horizon just a touch when I step onto the front porch of the estate and watch the black Bentley Mulsanne drive up the

cobblestone circular drive. Stefan parks, steps out, and then opens the back door for me.

I slide into the leather backseat, placing my phone on the center console. “Take me to Let Them Eat Cake.”

His blue eyes meet mine, but he doesn’t question. “Yes, sir.”

He pulls away from the oversized mansion.

My grandfather had great taste. I have better. I like the finer things life has to offer. Some may call me pretentious, but I don’t like to put a label on things.

When we arrive, of course, she’s not there. Everything has to be as difficult as possible when it comes to her.

“She’s at the Henderson/Miller wedding across town at the Hilton. Delivering their cake,” the older woman behind the counter informs me with curiosity in her dark eyes. “Are you wanting to order a wedding cake? Clementine is my best. I’m the owner, Dena.”

“Yes, I guess I’ll be needing one.” I smile, doubting Clementine will want to make ours. “Thanks. I’ll be in touch with her.”

Much sooner than she thinks. Dena gives me a business card, and when I re-enter the car, I let Stefan know wherever this Henderson/Miller thing is, that’s where I need to be. He nods and pulls away from the small store, heading in the direction of downtown.

Twenty minutes later, he pulls up in front of the Hilton, and I step out.

“Wait here,” I direct Stefan, clutching the contract in my hand. “This shouldn’t take long.”

Just inside the glass doors that open to the lobby, there’s a small stand with an arrow pointing the way toward the wedding. Ignoring the stares thrown my way, I head across the marble floor hall with quick strides to a wide hallway with another directional sign to the nuptials of people I don’t know.

When I open the ballroom doors, all eyes are on me, but not for the same

reasons they usually are.

At the other side of the large space is the bride and groom, standing under an arched white trellis.

The preacher stares at me. “Sir, do you have any just cause why these two should not be married here today?”

Shit.

“No, carry on.”

I step back through the ballroom door as a hand wraps around my bicep, leading me out. “What are you doing here?”

I look down at a frowning Clementine. Her face is a complete juxtaposition to her cheerful lemon yellow dress.

“I brought you something.”

I hold out the manila envelope, trying not to gawk at the way her breasts fill out the silky fabric hugging them.

Instead of her gold eyes lighting up, they darken and narrow. Almost like she doesn't trust me. And why should she? She doesn't know me.

“What is it?” She glances down at the papers in my hand. “More contracts?”

I smile, stepping closer. “Is that any way to treat your fiance?” I hand over the manila envelope. “It's your sex contract.”

She closes her eyes, breathing through her nose. “You shouldn't have brought this to my work, Gabriel.”

And she's right. I would murder someone if they interrupted me during a business deal.

“I signed it.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but no words come out for a full minute. “I don't know what to say.”

I lean in, and immediately regret it. She smells like warm cake. “Now, if you want sex from me, you'll have to beg me for it.”

Her cheeks flush. “There will be no begging.”

I raise a brow. “You have my word, I won’t touch you.” I step back, straightening my suit coat. As I walk away, I peek back over my shoulder and against my better judgement, stoke the flames a little more. “Unless you ask me to.”

Chapter 9

Clementine

I don't ever plan on asking Gabriel to touch me. I watch him walk through the corridor, toward the exit, as if he owns the place. As if he owns me.

When I can no longer see him, I open the envelope and there's a note inside.

Engagement party Friday. Show up early at 3pm.

The rest of the note is the details of the party, and my eyelid twitches. I fold it up, and head back to the kitchen so Erin and I can get out of here.

Thirty minutes later, on the car ride back to the store, high on residual happiness from the event we just left, Erin chatters about all things wedding. And then proceeds to make my stomach drop. "You'll have to start planning yours soon," she says. "What kind of dress do you want?"

My heart beats in time with the blinker as I wait to make the left into the Let Them Eat Cake parking lot. I guess this is it. This is really happening. And not the way I imagined it would.

When you've been creating wedding cakes as long as I have, you start to think of certain elements you want at your *own* wedding.

I remember being twelve-years-old and Savannah and I would dress up in our mother's gowns and pretend we were getting married.

And I was always marrying Prince Charming. But, Gabriel isn't the prince. He's the villain in this fairy tale.

"I don't care." I blow a random strand of hair out of my eyes as I park. "Is it weird? It's weird, right?"

"Are you kidding me?" Her eyes are huge when I look over. "Take advantage. He's only the hottest man on the planet."

"It doesn't matter that he's hot. It's not a *real* marriage."

"Are you saying vows to each other? Are you both saying, 'I do?' Then, it's a wedding."

"You're right. But, it won't be like that."

"Maybe not in theory. But..." she pauses, and gives me a mischievous grin, "why make it easy on him?"

"What do you mean?"

She twists a little in the passenger seat to face me. "I foresee a huge event. One he should be involved in every step of the way." Her brow raises for emphasis. "Flowers, cakes, menus, every stressful detail that I'm sure he doesn't want to be bothered with."

I laugh a little. "I'm sure he'd rather hand that off."

"Exactly." She smiles.

"I like that idea." I blow out a breath. "I better go. Can you give Dena the invoice?" I pull it out of my purse and she takes it from me. "Also, want to come to my engagement party on Friday?" I ask her.

"Sure, Troy will be at his dad's house for the weekend." She unfastens her seatbelt. "I still can't believe you're getting married."

I roll my eyes a little. "Don't remind me."

She smiles. "You never know, you may come to love him."

My mouth hangs open at her words. "Never. I would never love him."

I could never love a monster.

IT'S THREE TEN WHEN ERIN, TENNYSON AND I PULL UP TO THE GRAND ESTATE that will soon be my home. Gabriel wanted us to show up early at three on the dot to be here when the party starts. So this is *my* early. That's actually pretty good considering the slight meltdown that took place when I told Tennyson he needed to wear his 'nice' clothes. After a ten minute compromise consisting of agreeing to his black *Batman* cape, life returned to normal. Pick your battles.

As I pull around the circular drive, a regal man in a black suit stands at the edge of the blacktop, ready to take my car.

"Is there always a valet on hand?" Erin asks, gawking at the behemoth house.

"Probably," I answer.

When I stop, he moves around the car and opens my door. "Good afternoon, Miss." He holds his hand out, waiting to help me out of my car. It's all very pompous, but I do it.

"Oh, ok. Hi." He smiles, and I take his hand, getting out of the car and then opening the back door. "Just let me get my son." I lean in and unbuckle Tenny from his car seat. "I want you on your best behavior, ok?"

He nods. "Best behavior."

I clutch Tennyson's hand in mine and we head toward the front entrance as the valet drives my car off to the unknown. I can't believe I'll be living here. It's all so *cold*. The breeze flutters Tenny's cape and I almost laugh at the way he reminds me of a young Bruce Wayne marching up to his soon-to-be empire.

"I'm *Batman*," he says to the very tall man who opens the door.

"Yes, you are," he says back with a smile. "And I'm Kurt, Gabriel's assistant."

I like him.

He smiles at us as we step into the mansion. “Mr. Prince is waiting for you in the study.”

“Ooh, the study,” Erin says, her eyes meeting mine with a hint of laughter gleaming in them.

“Thank you, Kurt.” My heels clack against the marble-tiled floor.

“This place is like a museum,” Erin says. “Where do you even get floors like this?”

“It’s Diamond Emperor marble flooring. Joseph Prince imported it directly from Spain,” Kurt says as he shows us to the study.

“Imported, huh?” Erin says.

He nods and tells us about the ivory banister on the staircase that Mr. Prince had imported from Egypt. As he leads us to the back of the mansion, he points out various things that must have cost a mini fortune to import here to the States just to put in his home. It’s all so out of my realm.

“No touching,” I whisper to Tennyson when he reaches for a vase on a pedestal.

“Where are we?” he asks.

“We’re here for a party.” I can’t bring myself to tell him yet, this is where we’ll be living soon.

“I love parties. Will there be a clown?”

I smile at his love of clowns. After this, I can hire him a hundred clowns for his birthday party. “It isn’t that type of party, sweetheart.”

We all enter the study, where Gabriel sits behind the desk, looking ominous, dressed in a black suit, with a stark white shirt underneath the jacket. His hair is gelled to such perfection, even a male hair model would be jealous of it.

I give a quick gaze down at my simple black dress and take a deep breath to say hello, but before I can get a word out, Gabriel glances up and smiles.

“Hey,” he says a little breathy, like he’s actually happy to see me. The slight smile is suddenly replaced with his cold mask he usually wears as he

grits out, “I said three pm.”

“Try being on time with a four-year-old.”

Gabriel stares at Tennyson as I hold my breath. “Nice cape.”

“I’m *Batman*,” Tennyson says as he holds the cape out.

Gabriel stands and I introduce him to Erin. After we chit-chat about the upcoming party that is set to start in a few hours, Gabriel suggests Erin take Tennyson to the indoor playground.

“Does it have a slide?” Tennyson asks with a big smile and hopeful eyes.

Gabriel leans over to speak directly to Tennyson. “It sure does.”

I smile, and the four of us walk downstairs.

“My grandfather had the playground put in when Ronin and I were young.” Gabriel glances back at us as he leads us further down the hallway. “You should see my house in Cali.”

“Is that where you live?” Erin asks him.

He nods. “I have nine houses scattered across the world. But the one in Northern California is my favorite.”

“Why?” Tennyson’s little voice asks.

Gabriel laughs at Tenny taking an interest. “Because it has the most toys.”

Tennyson’s eyes light up and I squeeze his hand gently. “Not those types of toys,” I say to him.

Gabriel stops walking to glance at me. “Oh, there’s tons of toys for the whole family. I have over twenty different types of drones. One of the tallest rock walls ever made. I have a glider. An indoor basketball court.” He shrugs. “All that’s missing really is a circus.”

Oh no. He’s mentioned one of Tennyson’s favorite things. “I love the circus,” Tennyson shouts.

We all laugh.

“Well, one day, we’ll have to go,” Gabriel says, and I nearly stumble over my feet.

I don't know how I feel about him making plans with my son like a father would make with his own child. It feels surreal.

And I can tell Erin thinks so too, because her eyes meet mine and her eyebrows raise a little.

We make it to the indoor playground, and it's bigger than any home playground I've ever seen.

"Sorry, it hasn't been used in a while," Gabriel says as he flicks on a light.

There's a rope ladder, with a twisty slide that dumps right into a ball pen.

I'm kind of jealous they get to stay down here and play while I help prepare for the party.

At least that's what I think I'll be doing. Gabriel didn't really say, but he didn't suggest I stay down here.

I mean, he wanted me here early for a reason, and now I'm wondering what it could be.

"I just need your mother's help with something really quick. Would you want to play down here until the party starts?" Gabriel asks Tennyson.

Tenny's eyes brighten as he nods over and over again.

Swift and efficient, Gabriel goes through the motions of getting everything set up for Erin and Tennyson. He calls an attendant, who appears within seconds, asking for water bottles for the two of them.

The man nods, rushing from the playground.

"If you need anything push this button and he'll return," Gabriel says to Erin, handing her a remote control looking device. "Have fun."

"Thank you so much," she says back.

I help get Tennyson settled, and then walk over to Erin. "Are you ok here?"

"Of course. Go handle whatever you need to. We'll be fine."

"Ok, I'll come and get you before the party starts."

Erin smiles. "I can't wait."

Gabriel and I leave them in the indoor playroom, and I follow him through the hallway.

He stops once we are a distance away from it and steps a little closer to me.

“Press will be showing up a little later to get the details of our engagement,” he says.

“And just what are the details?” I’m sure Gabriel isn’t going to tell the world his grandfather constructed the whole thing.

“We met, fell in love, and are now getting married.”

I cross my arms. “Ah, so now we have to pretend?” I step closer, meeting his eyes. “The contract said marriage, it never said anything about pretending to be happily in love.”

“Clementine, do you know how many women would kill to be married to me?”

“Well, let them marry you then.”

His eyes narrow. “I will not parade a wife in front of the world who appears to despise me.”

“But...”

He cuts in, “Hate me on your own time. Hell, I know I’ll be doing the same thing. But, to the public, we’re in love.”

I try to reign in the anger. This was never part of the deal. “I don’t understand why it even matters.”

He steps closer, leaning in until we’re practically nose to nose, bracing his hand against the wall behind my head. “I have things going on that require finesse. Business deals that are in need of fine tuning. I will not have a wife defying me.”

“Defy?” I whisper.

“To the public we are in love. If you refuse, I’ll sue you for breach of contract.”

“You can’t...”

He raises his hand, and cuts me off, “I can and I’ll win.”

Now it’s my turn for my eyes to narrow. “You’re impossible, Gabriel Prince.”

He steps away, and glances over his shoulder. “I know.”

Chapter 10

Gabriel

She most likely hates me. I'll show her what real hatred is. I'll break her. "Follow me," I say before I get too far away.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

I hit the button on the indoor elevator to take me to the third floor. "To get you a new dress."

She glances down at the dress she has on. "What's wrong with this?"

Nothing at all. As a matter of fact, she looks more beautiful in her simple dress than any woman I've ever seen. "I have billions, you need to show off the fact that I have money to spare."

The bright light of the elevator highlights sparks of red in her auburn hair and I probably shouldn't be looking forward to seeing her in what I purchased.

"You just have dresses laying around?"

"I had my assistant buy you a gown."

Her amber eyes are cautious as the elevator door opens and she finally uses those long, golden legs to exit. She doesn't say anything as I lead her

down the hallway to my personal bedroom.

“This way,” I say to her as I open the door.

“I just want to point out, my dress looks just like everyone else’s at parties like these.”

I shut the door behind her and lock it. “We are *not* everybody else.” I walk across the room toward the oversized oak armoire where a white garment bag hangs from the top. “This is what you’ll be wearing.” I slide the zipper down and pull out the flowy red Dior dress that cost a small fortune.

She steps closer. “Ah, it’s beautiful.”

A jab of pride hits my chest at impressing her, but I stifle it down and choke the life out of it as I clear my throat. “You need to make an impression. You’re now an extension of me and everything about you will be critiqued.”

“Can’t wait.” She reaches out to touch the silky fabric. “How do you know it’ll fit?”

I drop the dress on the bed, and turn to face her. She lets out a tiny yelp when I grab her waist with both hands. “Because I can guess your size.”

Her eyes war with mine. “Oh, you’ve been with that many women that you’re an expert on sizes?”

I lift an eyebrow. “Yes.”

She’s right, I have been with my fair share of women, and holding onto her waist shouldn’t have my dick spurring to life, but it does.

I drop my hands. “That’s not the only thing I bought you.” I step over to a white box resting on the dresser and pick it up. “Here.” I walk back over to where Clementine stands in the room. “Look inside.”

She takes the box from me and lifts the lid, her golden eyes widening. “Oh my god.”

“You can’t half-ass it.”

“This is just…” Her eyes are about as big as the round diamond nestled in the box as she stares at it.

“Put it on. Let’s make sure it fits.”

“Is it real?” she asks as she pulls the engagement ring out of its box.

I raise a brow. “Of course it’s real. Now try it on.”

She slides the platinum band on her ring finger and holds her hand out to get a better look. “It’s a perfect fit.”

I smile with pride. “Good.” I cross the room. “There’s more.”

“More gifts?”

“I expect you to be the part one-hundred percent.” I hand her a pink little bag. “Here.”

She peers inside the Guia La Bruna bag and gasps. “You bought me underwear?” She pulls the black-lace bra and panty set from inside.

“Yes,” her look of outrage is undeniably appealing, “I need my wife in the finest things.”

Her eyes narrow. “Well, I’ll have you know my underwear is just fine.”

“Look, I’m not criticizing your clothing...”

She tosses the bag on the bed. “Well, you are.”

I scrub a hand across my jaw. “That wasn’t my intention...”

Before I can say anything else, she lifts her little black dress and removes it, revealing expanses of golden skin. “You don’t like what I’m wearing? It’s not good enough?”

I step away from her luscious curves before I throw her on the bed and take off the lacy-red bra and panties lucky enough to be on her sexy as fuck body.

“You want to play with fire, Clementine?” I take a seat in the leather club chair next to the bed. “Try it all on for me. Right here.”

“You want me to get dressed in front of you?”

I shrug. “Yes.”

“No way.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Her eyes look like they might explode. Her whole face is red, it looks like it might explode too. “Well, you’ve never seen *me*.”

“Potatoes, pah-ta-toes.”

“I will not get dressed in front of you.”

“Afraid you might turn me on? Afraid you might like it?”

Her breathing comes heavier now. “Careful, Gabriel. You might be the one that gets burned.”

She slides down the red-lace panties, and I inhale a quick burst of air.

“Here.” She flings them at me, and I catch them, putting them in my pocket, acting like seeing her bare pussy doesn’t affect me.

It does.

Clementine grabs the black panties from the tissue paper in the pink bag and slides them up her legs, resting the sheer material on her hips. I have to give her credit, she’s a worthy adversary.

My eyes land on her breasts, swelling from the cups. “Now the question is, are you brave enough to try on the bra?” I meet her liquid gold stare.

Flames shoot from her eyes and she reaches behind her and unclasps her bra, sliding one strap down from her shoulder, then the other. She chucks it at me. Fuck. Her rosy nipples are stiff and begging to be sucked. I clench my teeth, ignoring my hard cock.

Clementine twists to retrieve the matching bra and without looking away from me, has it on in two seconds.

Her body is tight as fuck, and I lick my lips, my eyes roaming over her body. I’m not shy about it either. And I don’t have to be.

“Does this turn you on?” she asks with so much confidence it’s sexy.

“Not a bit,” I lie through my teeth.

She picks up the red dress and tosses it over her body, smoothing it down her legs until it touches the floor.

My dick is as hard as a rock, and it pisses me off she’s affecting me this way. I can’t let her know she’s turning me on. But fuck, I can’t turn away either.

“I have one more present for you.” I grab the box from the nightstand

beside me. “Come closer.”

She takes three steps until she’s standing right in front of me. If I wanted to, I could reach out and touch her, maybe run my hands over her perfect little ass.

I open the shoebox, and pull out a Louboutin heel with a thin crystal strap. “Put your foot up here.” I spread my legs, tapping my hand on the chair for her to place her foot there.

She does as I tell her. “Am I Cinderella?” she asks.

“Am I your Prince Charming?” I slip her old shoe off and place the new one on her foot. I’m tempted to run my hand up her calf. But I don’t.

“No,” she whispers.

I stare into the gold of her eyes. “Other foot.”

She places her hand on my shoulder to steady herself, and her hair hides our faces in a cocoon. Her breathing is fast and ragged. She lifts her other foot, and I remove her heel.

My cock throbs, begging for some action. My hand betrays me, and I caress her calf in my hand, massaging it with my fingers and palm. Then I go a bit higher, my eyes holding onto hers.

“Too hot for you, Gabriel?”

“I’m fireproof, baby.”

She bites her bottom lip and it damn near kills me.

What the fuck am I doing?

Whatever this is, I don’t stop. I can’t stop now.

I trace my hand up the underside of her thigh. And then in one fast action, I stand and lift her up, turning to drop her on the bed.

I climb her body in a flash. She clutches my jacket in her hands, and our bodies rub against one another as I bring my lips down to mere millimeters away from hers.

“Let me make one thing very clear.” Her eyes widen as her breathing comes out in short pants. “You play the part, Clementine. And if I ever hear

of you kissing my brother again there'll be Hell to pay." I drag my lips down her face, digging my hard-on into her stomach. "For both of you." And then I get up and walk out of the room.

Chapter 11

Clementine

My body is a traitorous bitch. I try desperately to catch my breath. I can't believe that just happened. I've never been touched like that before. His touch was rough, yet gentle. Hard, but soft. I've never been that turned on in all my life.

I climb off the bed and smooth down my hair with shaky hands. How did he know about the kiss?

I didn't ask for Ronin to kiss me. And the thought that Gabriel thinks he can bully me with fear about my friendship with Ronin pisses me off.

Before I head down for the party, I glance around the room. Above the mantle over the fireplace, is a picture of two young boys with a dark haired man and woman. I walk closer and recognize Gabriel and Ronin, not much older than Tennyson. Gabriel clings to the woman's side with a wide grin. It's unsettling to see an innocent Gabriel before life had a chance to taint him. It makes me think of my own son, and what kind of man he'll grow up to become.

Metal catches my attention, and on the far end of the mantle sits a drone.

Such a boyish hobby for the man Gabriel is. I run my finger over the cool material of the back propeller.

“These drones cost more than my house,” I mumble before I leave his bedroom to find Tennyson and Erin.

I wander through the house, getting a bit lost, as I check out each elegant room after the next.

When I make it to the top of the staircase, strangers are assembled behind Gabriel, and their eyes land on me, watching me descend each step. Gabriel waits for me at the bottom of the stairs with Tennyson. They hold hands like father and son, and a lump forms in my throat.

I try to swallow it down, and plaster on a fake smile, playing the part Gabriel requested.

“Are you ready to meet the world?” he asks me. “These people are going to ask us some questions.”

I shake my head, trying my best to play the part, but there’s so many people in my face all at once, and I can’t do this.

“You look pretty, Mommy,” Tennyson tells me.

I smile at him. “Thank you, honey.” I look at Gabriel. “I need to talk to Tennyson privately.”

His dark eyes bore into mine, and then he gives a slight nod. “This way.”

Still holding Tenny’s hand, he leads me into his office and rests his back against the door, while I spend the next ten minutes explaining that the party is for mommy and her friend, Gabriel. And how we’re getting married for a little while, because Gabriel needs my help. He’s four, he couldn’t care less.

“Do I get to bring all my toys?” he asks when I tell him we’ll be living here until we’re done being married.

“Of course,” I answer.

And that’s all he needs to hear. His grin makes me feel a little better. Gabriel’s does not.

“Ready to do this?” he asks.

“Yes,” I lie.

When we return, questions fly from every direction, asking how Gabriel and I met, and how we fell in love.

I smile until my cheeks hurt, while Gabriel answers questions like a pro. He never once falters, or trips over his words. Meanwhile, I can’t make anything come out of my mouth. So, I just become a mute accessory on his arm, waiting for it to be over.

After another fifteen minutes, the interview ends, and we head back to the ballroom to feign happiness.

“I can’t believe this is your life,” I say to Gabriel as we step into the space filled with people ready to celebrate our impending forced marriage.

He kisses my hand, and even if it’s for show, the warmth from his lips causes an eruption of goosebumps. “It’s our life now.”

We spend the next few hours in a whirlwind of introductions. Gabriel’s esteemed guests include an assortment of politicians, CEOs, and anyone with a Roman numeral at the end of their name.

“Wow, you look...wow,” Erin says, as soon as I get a break from my duties. “Like you were born to do this.”

“I definitely wasn’t born to do this.”

We find a secluded corner away from the activity and I lean my back against the wall while Tennyson investigates what’s beneath an empty table nearby.

“You’re doing great,” she says. “I almost forget it’s not real.”

Me too. I still feel Gabriel’s handprint etched in tingles on my lower back, the spot he’s kept his hand since we walked back in here. “Thank you for coming. I don’t think I could’ve done this without you.”

“I’ve met some interesting people.” She leans in. “I told them I was in the amenities trade.”

I laugh.

“Hello, Erin,” Gabriel says, joining our seclusion. “I hope you’re having a

good time.”

“The best,” she says. “Your hors d'oeuvres are top notch.”

He smiles. God, he’s so gorgeous when he smiles.

“Well, I have connections, if you’d like to take some home,” Gabriel says with such charm it makes my body melt.

“Don’t tempt me,” she replies.

“I’m bored,” Tennyson says.

To my surprise, Gabriel laughs at his honesty. The action causes a startling transformation to his face, removing the stone mask and revealing a very appealing side of him in its place. A side that is human. A side under different circumstances, I might want to explore.

“We should go soon,” I say to Gabriel, wanting to run away from this unwelcome attraction over a laugh. “This is a long day for him.”

Gabriel’s eyes meet mine and sear right through me as if he knows what I was thinking.

“I’ve got an idea,” he says, looking down at Tennyson. “I have a movie room. Want to watch a quick movie while your mom and I finish up?”

“Yes,” Tenny exclaims.

“I’m up for a movie,” Erin says. “I’ll stay with him while you two do your thing.”

“I need my cape,” Tennyson says.

Gabriel smiles, again causing a strange reaction in me. “Yes, you do. Let’s go get it.”

He and Tennyson walk to the center of the room where his cape is draped across the back of a chair at a round table adorned with fresh flowers in reds and pinks.

“You have to admit,” Erin says, “that was nice of him. He could’ve ignored the fact Tenny is bored.”

“I know,” I say, confused.

When they return, he leads us out of the ballroom and makes a call to

alert his staff to get things ready. Tenny can barely contain his excitement, bouncing down the stairs that lead to a room filled with five rows of oversized leather recliners and a projection screen on one wall.

A smiling woman, with a dark bob, stands by a popcorn machine.

“This is Leah,” he introduces us. “She’ll take care of you.”

“Have fun, sweetie.” I give him a kiss. “I’ll be back soon.”

“No rush,” Erin says, reclining with a smile.

Gabriel leads me out and back toward the party.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

His dark eyes flit down to me and he shrugs it off, sliding his hands in his pockets.

“I remember being a kid at functions like this bored out of my mind.”

Thankfully, his long strides slow, so I don’t have to rush to keep up. “And now? Do you enjoy these things?”

“Fuck no,” he answers.

“Then why do you do it?” The chatter from the party drifts closer to us as we turn the corner. “It’s not like you need to impress anyone.”

“For reasons you wouldn’t understand.”

When we reach the entrance, I sneak a peek at his profile, and see the moment the mask slips back into place, blocking the life from his face.

His hand returns to my lower back as he guides me to different clusters of people. In a messed up way, it soothes me.

After a painstaking round of mingling, he leans down to whisper in my ear, “We need to dance.”

His husky voice causes my body to rebel once again, and my nipples harden.

I look up at him. “I think you’re supposed to ask me.”

His brow raises. “Would you like to dance?”

“No.”

He chuckles. “Exactly.”

Before I can object, he takes my hand and leads me out to the dance floor. All eyes are on us as he pulls me flush against him. My hand lands on his chest, and I stare at the black tie around his throat, to avoid looking at him as our bodies sway with intimacy against each other. If I thought the meet and greet was torture, I was wrong. This is.

Finally, I glance up at him, and the look in his hooded eyes makes my heart pound against my chest.

One year. I can do this for one year. And watch my life change forever.

The soft music from the band wraps itself around us, and I can't breathe until it finally ends.

I step away. "I just need a few minutes of me time," I tell him.

He nods, and I smile for the people watching, and will my legs to walk—and not run—away from him.

I find a spot with no one around to let out the breath I've been holding and watch as Gabriel's tall body moves over to a group of suited men.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" a feminine voice says.

I turn and am met with a pair of cold green eyes and one of the fakest smiles I've ever seen. "It is. Who are you?" I ask.

She sidles closer in her elegant black dress that sparkles beneath the lights. "Veronica." She eyes the rock on my left hand. "Gabriel's ex-girlfriend."

Talk about awkward. "Nice to meet you."

"I wasn't expecting an engagement." Veronica glances over her shoulder at Gabriel. "Do you know everything?"

"Everything?"

She looks back at me. "Not everyone is capable of being Gabriel's wife."

A man with buzzed dark hair approaches Gabriel, leaning in to tell him something. Gabriel glances in my direction, a scowl forming over his features.

"I'm sure they aren't."

She tilts her blonde head, studying me. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” Her riddles are using up the last of my patience. “If you’re not going to tell me, I’m going to go, because although these shoes are to die for, they’re killing my feet.”

“If you’re a smart girl, you’ll figure it out.” She gives me a patronizing grin. “Here’s a hint...”

“Veronica, it’s time for you to go,” Gabriel says, appearing at my side.

“I was just meeting your new fiancée.”

“And you did,” I tell her. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Dealing with scorned exes is the straw that breaks my back. I leave them and the party behind and walk toward the theatre. I’d say my duties have been more than fulfilled.

“Hey,” I say, when I enter the dim room. “How was the movie?”

Tenny pops up on his knees and looks over the back of the chair at me with a wide grin. “Good.”

“It’s time to go,” I say to him.

“I’m hungry.”

“I’ll pick you up a Happy Meal on the way home,” I say, hoping bribery works to get him out of this house as quickly as possible.

“You ok?” Erin asks, standing.

I nod and try to act like nothing’s wrong.

“I just need to get out of here.” And fast.

My spur of the moment attempt to escape is blocked by Gabriel, leaning against the door frame.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“I need to get Tenny home,” I answer.

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” Tennyson says again, tugging on my arm.

“Why don’t we go to the kitchen and eat.” Gabriel’s hand reaches out to take Tennyson’s.

I hesitate, but then follow, only because I need to know more about

what's behind the mask, so I can form a defense and come out unscathed.
Wishful thinking, I'm sure. And one more lie to add to my list.

Chapter 12

Gabriel

Maybe I should've let Clementine leave. Tennyson's small hand in mine feels odd. I can feel all of his trust and innocence in his grip.

"Let's see what we can find you," I tell him as we enter the massive kitchen bustling with servers.

"I want a hot dog."

My whole body cringes. "Oh, you won't find anything like that here." I spare him the details of how hotdogs are actually made.

Together, we walk hand-in-hand toward the granite island where food pans rest, filled with fancy appetizers waiting to be arranged on silver trays and fed to the sharks in the other room.

Erin takes a seat on a stool and Clementine moves beside her, watching us. I feel like this is a test. I try my best to look for the most kid-friendly item. There aren't any. I make a mental note to correct that in the future.

"What's that?" Tennyson points to a chafing dish filled with bite size filet mignon.

"Steak," I tell him. "Very good steak."

“I’ll have that,” he says.

“You got it, buddy.” I grab a china plate and pile it high. I have no clue how much a kid is supposed to eat. If Clementine and Erin’s faces are any indication, probably not that much.

“Ketchup?” Tennyson asks.

I glance around and spot an attendant. “Do you have ketchup?” I ask the young lady.

Her eyes widen. “Um, I can find some.”

She rushes off in search of ketchup, and I smile at Clementine with pride. I can handle being a stepfather just fine.

I lead Tennyson over to a table beside the patio doors and sit him down.

The blonde server returns with a ramekin of ketchup in her hand. “Anything else, sir?”

“Maybe a glass of milk for him.”

She nods and disappears again.

Clementine and Erin take a seat at the table. I should go back to the party, but I don’t.

Everyone is here. Everyone. The press. The gossip columnists. The senator even showed up to congratulate me on my pending nuptials. But, it all feels so empty. Maybe it’s the fact I’m not really into the whole charade. All I can think about is my grandfather, and why on earth he’d subject me to this.

“Was the party moved to here?” Ronin calls out from across the room.

He makes his way over to stand beside me, saying his hellos, his eyes lingering on Clementine, and I want to remind him that Clementine is mine. I’ve never in my life felt this protective over anyone before.

I want to mention the kiss. The kiss I witnessed from the backseat of my car as Stefan and I sat by watching. But, I don’t.

Ronin looks over at me. “I was hoping I could ask a favor.”

“I’ll be right back,” I say.

Clementine and Erin both nod, and Ronin follows me out of the kitchen

and to the library next to the living room. I shut the set of double wooden doors and rest my back against them.

“I’m in a bit of trouble,” he tells me.

“Go on.”

“With the Blackstone family. Bishop Blackstone, to be exact.”

I push off the doors. “What exactly happened?”

He moves away toward the bookshelves. “I owe him money. Big money, and he also wants...” he stops, with his back to me.

“What does Blackstone want?”

Ronin rubs the back of his neck. “He wants to come to your wedding.”

I let out a short laugh. “Absolutely not.” You don’t invite your worst enemy to your wedding. “How did he hear about it? Our engagement was just announced today.”

He turns to face me. “Good news travels fast, bad news travels faster,” he answers, speaking in fucking riddles.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “How much?”

“I owe him twenty million.”

I roll my eyes. “Why?”

“An investment gone bad. I’m afraid of what he might do. I’m afraid of him coming to the wedding.”

“I’ll get you the money. You pay him, and let me handle the rest.”

Ronin looks like the weight of the world just lifted off his shoulders, but I get the sinking feeling he’s not telling me everything.

“Thank you, Gabriel.”

“Listen, I’ve been more than nice with you. I asked you to convince her to sign the papers, not kiss her.” I step closer. “If you pull another stunt with Clementine, next time, I won’t be so nice.”

He nods. “Got it.”

“Do you?” I ask him, my eyes never leaving his.

“Yeah, man. I got it.”

“Now, go pay Blackstone. Don’t mention the wedding or anything else to him.”

Ronin nods again and leaves the room.

I pull my cell phone from my pocket and dial Stefan. “Follow Ronin,” I instruct.

“Sir, do you want me to contact Dean?”

“Not yet.”

Dean’s my security manager. He’s handmade all my security systems and heads up my security team. There’s no one on this planet I trust more than him. And if I ever have a problem, he’s usually the first person I call. But, I don’t have a problem...yet.

When I leave the library, I immediately spot Clementine leaving the kitchen. She’s beautiful. I never really realized it until the other day. And now I can’t stop realizing it.

Her red dress dances around her feet as she walks with Tennyson at her side, and Erin talking animatedly in her ear.

Before I can even take a step closer to her, Aaron Craig, US Senator, appears. “Nice party.”

I shake his hand. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

He raises his champagne flute as a cheers to me. “Nice fiancée, too. I’ve never heard of her before.”

‘Heard of her.’ That’s what everyone’s thinking right now. Who is this woman? Why would Gabriel Prince choose a woman like her.

Little does anyone know my grandfather is controlling us like puppets from the grave.

“I’ve known her for years.” I smile.

“Ah, ok. Well, congratulations on the marriage. I’d love for you to come by my office sometime soon.”

I shake his hand again. “Sure thing. Just call Kurt and we can set something up.” It’s an election year, and I know very well why he wants a

meeting—campaign money.

Half the people who set up meetings with me want an investment, donation, or employment. The other half want me to buy something. It's a never ending cycle, when you're as wealthy as I am.

On my walk toward Clementine, I smile and nod to guests who have drifted out of the ballroom, but my heart isn't in it. I'm ready for the party to be over and get my soon-to-be bride moved in.

If I could have all her belongings moved in by tonight, I'd be happy. Hell, I'd buy her new stuff, but I know I can't rush these things.

I know Clementine doesn't want to be rushed. They cross toward the main entrance of the house and I lengthen my strides to catch up to them.

“Leaving?”

She turns. “Yes. I think Tenny has had enough excitement for today.”

“He can take a nap in his room,” I offer.

She debates for a second before smiling. “No, it's ok. We really should get going.”

I walk her to the front of the estate, not really wanting her to go. It's odd how well we worked together tonight.

The valet drops off her Ford and she buckles Tennyson into his seat.

When she closes his door, I say, “I want you to start packing, so you can move in immediately.”

Either Clementine is too tired, or finally defeated, because she doesn't put up a fight. “Ok.”

She crosses around the car, and slides in the driver seat.

“She's not as tough as she looks,” Erin says in a low voice.

“I'll go easy on her.” She studies me a moment and then smiles, before getting in the car.

I watch them drive away, before heading back inside.

Erin is wrong. Clementine is as tough as she looks—maybe even tougher.

Chapter 13

Clementine

As I drive away from the Prince estate, tears fill my eyes. I'm not even sure why. I'm not sad. I'm not anything.

I think it's a purging of my life before this moment. Everything I've gone through to get me to where I am today.

I worked hard, and now all of my dreams will come true by this time next year. I can finally give Tenny the life I've always dreamed of for him.

I won't lie, I used to fantasize about winning the lottery. Well, this is my lottery. This is my chance to better my life, and I won't stand on the sidelines and watch it fly by me. I won't sit in solitary counting down the minutes until this farce of a marriage is over. No, I want to embrace it. I need to be positive.

Erin chatters about the party as I drive through town and into my driveway. Tenny is fast asleep by the time I turn off the ignition.

Without waking him, I carry him inside. Erin waits in my living room as I put Tennyson to sleep in his bedroom and then change into shorts and a T-shirt. When I return, she's sitting on the couch.

“So I guess I’ll be moving in with Gabriel.”

“When?”

I sit beside her and prop my aching feet on the table. “Immediately.”

“Is that a bad thing?” she asks me.

“Well, I have to pack.”

She glances around the house. “What will you bring with you?”

I survey my tiny home. “I guess just our personal belongings.”

“I have a friend you can rent this place to for a year.”

“Really?” She nods and gives me the details, vouching for their reliability. “Erin, thank you.”

“I’ll still get to see you, right?”

“Oh my god, yes.” She’s my rock, and I may be moving up in social status, but I won’t abandon my best friend. “I still plan on working for Dena.”

Erin smiles and stands, moving across the room into the kitchen. “But you won’t need to work.”

I follow behind her. “I know, but it still makes me feel like me.” I shrug.

“So, when’s the big day? You need to start planning this wedding.” Erin grabs a bottle of red wine from the counter.

I step closer, opening the side drawer and producing a wine opener before grabbing two wine glasses from the shelf. “I haven’t even thought about it.” Erin pours our wine, and I clink her glass with mine. “I don’t even know what I want.”

“Imagine a dream wedding where there’s no limit when it comes to money.”

“I never really wanted the big lavish wedding.” I sip my wine. “Can I confess something? I’ve never really told anyone.”

“Tell me.” She takes a drink.

“I’ve always kind of thought Gabriel Prince was cute.” My cheeks flame white-hot. “When we met years ago, I may have had a tiny crush. Until, he flew a drone into my hair.” I down the rest of my wine.

“Aw, it’ll be true love.”

I shake my head. “No, not now. I can’t stand him.”

Erin places her hand over mine. “It’s one year. And then you can move on and find the love of your life.”

I fill my glass half full with more wine. “I just hope I don’t miss my Prince Charming while I’m dealing with the devil.”



THE NEXT DAY, I FINISH PACKING THE LAST BOX OF STUFF I PLAN ON TAKING with me to Gabriel’s. It’s not a lot. After I dropped Tennyson off at daycare, I stopped and picked up boxes and once I started packing, I realized there’s no need for half my things. All the things I’ve become attached to or that have sentimental value are coming with me, the rest will be staying.

I texted Gabriel earlier to send a car over for my things, and in just a few hours I’ll be living with him.

My stomach is in knots when I pick up Tennyson and then drive to the Prince estate.

“Are we almost there?” Tennyson asks from the backseat.

“Yes,” I answer with a smile, even though inside I’m a wreck.

This morning, I had a long talk with Tennyson about us moving and our ‘adventure.’ To my relief, he’s excited he gets to stay in the ‘big house with the movies.’ Life’s so simple when you’re four.

“Remember I told you how we’d be staying here?” I know once he sees his new room he’ll no longer care why we’re staying here.

When I pull into the circular drive, Gabriel stands outside, wearing jeans and a black button down dress shirt.

His arms are crossed over his broad chest, and his eyes watch me. His stare is always so penetrating, like he can read my mind and see into my soul all at the same time.

I park the car, turn off the ignition, and step out. I open the door for Tennyson, and unbuckle him from his car seat. He runs toward Gabriel.

“We’re staying here,” Tenny says over and over as he bounces around with his yellow blankie held tight to him.

“Hi,” I say to Gabriel as I open the trunk of the car.

“Leave it,” he says. “I’ll have my men bring in your things. And I can introduce you to the staff.”

“Oh, ok.” I walk away from the car, taking Tennyson’s hand in mine on my way to the front door. “Lead the way.”

Gabriel steps aside to let us enter the front door, and when I do, there’s a line of people standing in the foyer.

“This is Stefan.” Gabriel clasps the shoulder of a tall man with light brown hair. “He’s my driver, and he’ll be driving us when we’re together.” Stefan smiles a warm smile, and I shake his outstretched hand.

“Hello, Stefan.”

Gabriel moves to the man standing next to Stefan. He’s shorter, a little older, with a balding spot on top of his head. “This is Mayer, he’ll be your driver. He’ll take you anywhere you need to go.”

“Oh, well I have a car and don’t mind driving myself.”

Gabriel’s dark eyes meet mine. “Clementine, my wife doesn’t drive herself.”

“Fine.” Pick your battles, I tell myself. I shake Mayer’s hand, and try to remember the names as Gabriel introduces me to more people. June, the head housekeeper. Sarah, the head chef.

“And this is Amy. She runs the house.” He motions toward the petite brown-haired woman with a no funny-business type smile.

“Hi, Amy.” I shake her hand.

There’s a few other housekeepers and workers he introduces me to, and by the end of it my head spins.

“Let’s get Tennyson to his room.” He steps closer to an older woman

with kind grey eyes. “This is Faye. She’ll be Tennyson’s nanny.”

“Nanny?” My head shakes a bit at the idea of Tenny needing a nanny.

“She’s here to make sure Tenny is safe and well-cared for at all times.”

“Well, that’s what I do.” I meet his stare head on. “I’m his mother.”

Gabriel smiles, turning me away from the crowd of people. “I never said you weren’t a good mother. Faye is here to care for Tennyson while you’re busy being my wife.”

I cross my arms. “I didn’t realize being your wife took so much time.”

He sucks in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Clementine, this is your life now. Dinner parties, charity events, and you have a wedding to plan.”

Pick your battles. And I’m picking this one. “Fine, he can have a nanny.” I smile at Faye. “Although, my son comes before parties and charity events and wedding planning. I don’t think he’ll need her much.”

He eyes me for a moment, and then gives a nod. “Well, she’s here if needed, ok?”

“Sure.”

We continue our trek up the marble staircase, and when Gabriel opens the door, Tenny takes off into the large room, tugging his yellow blanket at his side.

“Look, Mommy,” he says, gazing at the bed now covered with a *Batman* comforter.

“Cool,” I say, smiling that Gabriel remembered Tenny’s love for *Batman*.

“He won’t even need the yellow blanket now. He has a new one.”

“No.” I smile, obviously Gabriel has never dealt with a child’s crutch. “This is the yellow blankie. He doesn’t leave home without it.”

Gabriel eyes me and then the blankie. “Oh.”

“It’s very important to him.”

“Understood.” He smiles. “There’s a slide here,” Gabriel says, showing Tennyson the staircase in the small alcove off the side of the bed.

I laugh as Tenny runs up the stairs and slides down the big, off-white

slide.

We spend the next twenty minutes showing Tennyson all the features of his room, and the walk-in closet.

He loves it all. And then worry kicks in, because I don't want him thinking this is a permanent thing. And I certainly don't want him getting attached to Gabriel, but I fear he already may be.

Chapter 14

Gabriel

This is bizarre. I've never lived with a woman. We leave Tennyson in his room, with Faye, after spending an hour or so for them to get to know each other. Clementine was nervous to leave him alone with her, but after speaking with her and learning of her credentials, she eased into this a bit more.

"You have to understand, Clementine, I would never let any harm come to you or Tennyson while you're with me." I want to add, even when you're not.

"No, I know. But I'm a hands on mom, and I won't stop that."

"I understand."

I like that about her. A lot of the women I come into contact with wouldn't think twice about it.

We continue through the estate, and I show Clementine the private kitchen where we'll make our food if we want to eat. There's a main kitchen near the back of the house where the chef prepares our meals, but this kitchen is if we want a snack, or something different.

I let her know the details of the house, when meals are served, when the maids clean which areas, and when the groundskeepers work on which area of the lawn. There's a schedule, and nothing has really changed since I was a kid.

"Should I be taking notes?" she asks, on the elevator ride back up to the third floor.

I smile. "Only if you want to. Like I said, Amy runs the house. If you want to change something up, or know anything, you ask her."

"Amy, right. Ok."

"You'll get used to it, promise." I didn't even think about how life-changing this must be for her.

"Is Ronin on the property?" she asks as we exit the elevator and make our way to my master suite.

"He left early this morning. He has business to attend to."

It kind of makes me a bit irate she's asking about him at all. I understand they're friends, but friends don't kiss. And I still have no idea whether she liked it, or wants to do it again.

I promised myself I would make her want it. Gain that power. But, now it makes me want to come on stronger, which means we need to plan this wedding quick, so we can get divorced even quicker.

I open the double doors and she steps inside, eyeing the neutral decor and chandelier hanging from the tray ceiling with wonder.

"This is the suite where I'll be staying," I tell her.

"I won't be staying with you." She moves across the dark hardwoods, taking in the fireplace across from the bed, gravitating toward the large floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the back of the estate. "Wow, that view."

"Yeah, it's phenomenal." And I don't mean the valley and greenery nestled between the mountains she's admiring. The backside of her is as appealing as the front. My eyes travel down her auburn hair that hits just below her shoulder blades, to the jeans she's wearing that hug the swell of

her ass.

“That’s why I chose this room. The land around here is too pretty not to wake up to it every morning.”

She turns to me and touches her hand to her neck, accenting the graceful lines. “So, we’ll be sharing that?”

I look over at the bed with its custom built mattress, knowing exactly what she’s asking. “Is it not to your liking?”

“I just meant I didn’t know if you and I…” her words fall away from her.

“Clementine,” I say, ready to come clean with the fact we won’t be sharing a room, but once again, I don’t. “I mean, we will be married. I guess to keep up appearances we should sleep in the same bed. It would look unusual to everyone if we slept in different quarters, don’t you think?”

She reaches out to trail her hand across the cream-colored comforter, and her amber eyes hit me square in the gut. “Can’t you tell them I snore?”

“Do you?”

“No,” she says.

“I mean, this bed is huge. I’m sure you can stay on your side.”

“Of course I can. Can you?” She gives a little wink as she moves into the en-suite bathroom. “You won’t be here much anyway.”

I follow her and lean against the jamb of the door. “Who says that?” I ask.

“I just figured.”

Her eyes say everything as she takes in the corner whirlpool tub.

“Yes, there will be times I may have to leave the country. And yes, those are super jets in that tub.”

“Oh. The only jets I have in my tub are Tennyson’s.” Her cheeks turn a little pink and I grin at the sight.

These are luxuries I’ve always had access to. At this point, I don’t even think about them. For some reason, I like that it’s all new to her.

“Why don’t you relax and take a bath, and I’ll make sure Tennyson has his dinner.”

Clementine's lips press together. "No, that's quite alright. I want to be with Tenny his first night here."

"You plan on sleeping in his room?"

She moves toward the door. "I'll sleep on the slide if I have to. Besides, we're not married *yet*. I won't be staying with you until we are husband and wife."

I smile, pushing off the door jamb. "I figured you'd feel that way, so I've had a room set up for you across the hall from Tennyson's." I reach an arm out, resting my palm against the frame, blocking her exit. "Until we're married."

Her amber eyes look up at me, and she lets out a breath she'd obviously been holding since we stepped foot in this bedroom. "Good."

I drop my arm and step away. "I'm not as big of a monster as you think I am." She brushes past me. "I have a few things to work on, while you and Tennyson get settled. Let me show you the room you'll be staying in."

She nods and we exit the bedroom, walking side-by-side down the long hallway. Her steps slow as she studies the famous artwork hanging on the walls.

"Are you an art lover?" I ask.

"Not really," she answers. "They remind me of the artwork on the walls at Tennyson's school."

I laugh a little, looking at the Van Gogh, and a few original Monet's grandfather collected over the years. "Maybe we can hang some of Tennyson's with these." I'm sure Grandfather would roll over in his grave to have a child's drawing next to his prized 'Salvatore Mundi.'

"Could you imagine? He'd love that." She giggles, and then immediately looks like she wants to take it back.

I kind of want her to as well. The pure sound seeps in my pores, swishing my insides like the blobs of color on the wall. Abruptly, I turn away and resume the walk to the room across the hallway from Tennyson's and say my

goodbyes to her.

“I’ll see you tonight at dinner. If you need me, you can text me.” And then I walk back down the corridor, past my bedroom, and into the west wing of the property, my brain still haunted by the sound of Clementine’s laugh.

I enter the office, and focus on the Richard de Kooning painting that cost a fortune, hanging on the wall behind my desk. The splashes of reds, blues, and yellows cost more than Clementine will be paid. I pull out my cell and instead of making sure Ronin paid Blackstone—which should be my first priority—I make a call for custom made frames to add some new artwork upstairs from a very young artist.

Chapter 15

Clementine

I've never been so excited to take a bath in all my life. I could swim in this thing. Tiny flames from the lavender scented votives arranged around the tub reflect on the whirling water.

I can't believe I'm actually in this place. It's like a fairy tale wrapped in a nightmare and tied with a surreal reality. After dinner—without Gabriel—I read Tennyson a story before bed and then sat in the rocking chair in his room for a little while to be sure he was completely out. He handled this transition like a pro. Me not so much.

I remove my clothing, and my eyes drift closed as soon as I sink into the hot, bubbling water. The muscles in my neck relax, and I weave my fingers through the bubbles, letting the music playing softly throughout the bathroom reenergize me.

The pressure of the jets work out the knots in my muscles like a masseuse. This is something I could get used to.

“Clementine,” Gabriel says as he enters my en-suite, “I wanted to...”

“Get out of here,” I squeal, sitting up and rearranging the bubbles just

enough to cover the important areas of my naked body.

“I just wanted to say...” He stops mid-sentence, his eyes roaming over my body under the soapy water.

“Get out,” I reiterate. “Tell me over a text.”

“I’m sorry.” He turns around so he’s no longer facing me. “I just came to tell you I had some clothes picked out for you. All of the new clothes are hanging in your closet.” He sounds almost pleased with himself.

“New clothes?”

“Nothing too crazy, just a few new items to play the part,” he says, still turned away from me.

“Oh, thanks.” I scoop more bubbles toward me, letting my eyes roam over his broad shoulders and down his back. “Do you ever get tired of wearing a suit?” I’m hoping he says yes, because it’s troubling how hot he looks in one.

He turns around, his large hand roaming over his double-breasted jacket. “Sometimes.” His eyes linger, watching me as the bubbles dissolve into the water around me.

“Goodnight,” I say, once I realize he doesn’t plan on leaving anytime soon.

He chuckles a bit. “Sleep tight.” And with those words he leaves.

I sink lower, letting the water rush over my head. The room is silent, the water blocking out the music playing in the bathroom, but my thoughts are way too loud.

When I re-emerge, I try not to think about the way Gabriel looks in his suit. Or what’s beneath the shirt and tie. His hair was a little mussed, like he’d been running his fingers through it. It makes me wonder if he’s stressed about this wedding, or if by the end of any normal day his hair looks like that.

Guess I’ll find out.

Guess I’ll find a lot of things out.

One thing I’d like to figure out is why his grandfather chose me. It’s not

like I knew the man like Savannah did as his nurse. She used to come here every afternoon and take care of him. I would tell her time and time again not to become friends with the devil, but it's like she took my advice and did the opposite. She'd spend most of her time here at the Prince estate, waiting on Joseph Prince each day.

Savannah was my best friend. There wasn't anything in the world I wouldn't do for her.

We were only a few years apart, and she often times hung around the more popular crowd in school as I hung back, keeping to myself. I've always felt that way. Like I'm on the outside looking in. I don't try to isolate myself away from people, but it's just something that happens. When I'm with a crowd of people, I find myself remaining quiet, watching, listening, learning from other people. It isn't a mental decision to try to stand on the outside, it's just something that happens.

I think that's why I like decorating cakes. It's quiet when I focus on my designs and try to make it all come together. There's no one else in the kitchen when I bake, and create. It's soothing.

Like this tub. I let the water turn almost cold before I finally step out.

A silk robe hangs on the bathroom door, and I slip it on after drying off.

Savannah fills my mind as I climb in bed. I cry myself to sleep, letting the memories bleed out through my tears on the pillow.



“TELL ME EVERYTHING GABRIEL RELATED,” ERIN SAYS, AS I LOOK OVER THE orders for the day.

“Well, there's not a lot to tell.”

“Your life is so different now,” Erin says.

I shrug. “Not really. Not as much as you think. Just location, really.”

It's true. It's been three days since I moved into his house—if you can

even call it a house—and I haven't seen him once since the night he walked in on me taking a bath. I haven't even heard anyone utter his name. My days have been filled with getting Tennyson ready for preschool, dropping him off and going to work like nothing has changed. And not much *has* changed. Well, except that Mayer is now my driver. This being married to Gabriel will be a cinch if he's never around.

The bell on the door chimes, and I glance into the green eyes of Darla Rothchild, bridezilla, and hide my cringe. Behind her is her fiancé, Jordan Masters, Erin's childhood friend.

Last week, the two of them came into the shop to book a cake tasting appointment, and to say Erin was shocked to see him would be an understatement.

Jordan's crystal blue eyes, accented by black rimmed glasses, land on Erin before moving to his fiancée. "Slow down, Darla," he says as Darla barrels toward Erin and I behind the counter.

Her bag brushes against a display of candles, sending some to the floor. She keeps moving.

"What does he see in her?" Erin whispers next to me.

"We're here for the tasting," Darla says, stopping in front of us and brushing her red hair off her shoulder.

I plaster on a smile. "Absolutely, follow me."

Jordan picks up the candles, placing them back, then runs a hand through his jet-black hair, leaving it sticking up in an array of madness. He ambles across the store until he stands next to Darla.

"Hi, Erin," Jordan says before turning to follow me into the tasting area where we have a table with a white-linen tablecloth for couples to taste cakes before ordering one for their wedding.

Erin doesn't answer, and I wish my boss hadn't booked this appointment. It's clear Erin isn't happy about Jordan's impending wedding, even though she says she hasn't seen him in years.

“Where will the wedding be held?” I ask as they take a seat.

Darla rolls her eyes just a tiny bit. “Well, we wanted to get married at the Juniper. Buuuut,” she draws out the word, “someone bought out all the dates for this month in the off-chance they would get married on one of the days.”

The Juniper is a five-star, five-diamond hotel with extravagant ballrooms that house weddings for the rich and famous. It’s *the* place to have your dream wedding.

“That must have cost a fortune. Who would do that?”

“Gabriel Prince.”

I’m speechless.

“Darla wants to get married by the end of the month,” Jordan says. “Not really sure what the rush is.”

“Not sure what the rush is?” Darla’s voice escalates after each word. “I told you Daddy wants to make sure we’re married before he moves you up at his company.”

I decide to change the subject before a fight breaks out. “So, cake,” I say with pep in my voice to get everyone, including me, back on track.

Darla smiles. “Yes, cake.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes with your samples.”

I head into the back kitchen and grab my phone. I send off a quick text to Gabriel, “Did you book every day at the Juniper for our possible wedding?”

He takes seconds to answer, “Yes.”

“Why? Maybe I don’t want to get married there.” Let me get one thing out, I would love to get married there—and may have even dreamed about it a time or two—but, I hate having my choices stripped from me. And this is all so fast.

“Clementine, you’re testing my patience. Where would you like to get married then?”

My fingers fly over the keypad of my phone. “At the Juniper.”

He doesn’t answer for a while, and right when I’m about to set my phone

down and get back to work, the usual chime of my notifications is replaced by my ringtone.

Gabriel's calling me. Butterflies take flight low in my belly at the sight of his name flashing across my screen.

"Hello," I answer.

"Are you fucking with me?" I can hear the annoyance in his voice. "You just said you didn't want to get married at the Juniper, but then seconds later you said you do. If the Juniper is not to your liking, I've also put deposits down at the Four Seasons, the Ritz-Carlton, and the Carlisle. We can also have the wedding at the estate. You choose and pick a date this month."

"You're going to let me pick?" I ask.

"Yes. Choose whatever you want and I'll be there to say, 'I do.' Just plan the whole thing with whatever you want."

Since choosing not to get married isn't an option, I answer, "Two weeks. Saturday at the Juniper. You can cancel the other dates."

"Done."

The finality of his one word resonates in my bones as I hang up the phone and set it on the counter. I've never hyper-ventilated, but this must be what it feels like. I breathe in through my nose and slowly out of my mouth. In two weeks it will be official. I'll be Clementine Prince.

When I have some semblance of calm, I plate three slices of cake—traditional vanilla, red velvet, and pink champagne—blocking out the fact I now have to do this for myself.

When I return, Darla is gone, and Jordan and Erin chatter away at the front counter.

"Where's Darla?" I ask, setting the samples on the counter.

"Outside. She got a phone call from the Juniper. They had some openings," Jordan says. "I should check on her."

He gives Erin a half smile before heading toward the door.

"You and Jordan looked cozy," I say to Erin, once he's out of the shop.

“We were just catching up,” she says, avoiding my eyes.

I run a hand down her back and say in a soft voice, “Erin, he’s getting married.”

“I know.” Her face isn’t happy about the fact that he is. “But, not everyone getting married is in love. Look at you and Gabriel.”

“I think Gabriel and I are a unique situation,” I say, gently.

“I know.” She blows out a breath. “I’ve just always had a thing for Jordan.”

“I know you have.”

“And he’s not happy with her.”

“Erin, you don’t know that.”

“I just wish things were different,” she says.

I give her a hug. Sometimes, life isn’t fair. I know all about wishing things were different. Unfortunately, wishes don’t always come true.

Chapter 16

Gabriel

Most of the time, people come to me when I need something. Today is one of the rare instances where I'm too impatient to wait. My private jet lands at the Dubai airport, and I charter a helicopter to take me to Dean Maddox's man-made private island off the coast.

He couldn't just buy a house somewhere exotic, no, he had to have an entire island. I get it, though. When you're in his line of work, privacy is important. And so is me speaking to him about the wedding.

After the helicopter lands, I exit and walk to where Dean stands near the helipad on his little oasis. "Must be something pretty important for you to fly all the way out here."

I shake his hand. "I'm getting married."

"Oh, shit." He laughs a little and we hop into his golf cart so he can take me over to his main house.

"Place looks great," I tell him once he pulls up to his sun-bleached palace. The sprawling house opens straight to the beach, with floor-to-ceiling glass walls that disappear to let the breeze in, allowing the white curtains to wave

in the wind.

“Let’s hope it stays here. I’ve had to bring more sand in to keep the whole damn thing afloat.”

“Yeah? I’ve been hearing there’s been a few issues.” I exit the cart and look up at the palm trees.

Dean laughs. “A few?” he asks, sarcastically.

I follow him inside, glancing around at all the white furniture decorated with sea-green pillows. “It’s a really nice place, though.”

“Yeah, I invested for one of the bigger islands. I love it.” He moves toward the kitchen that overlooks the main room. “Did you want something to drink?”

“Got a beer?” I take a seat on a metal stool at the counter and realize I probably need something stronger, because the first thought that went through my mind wasn’t how cool this place is, it was ‘Dean could never have a kid in this house.’ Everything’s white. Floors, furniture, walls. Even his kitchen is immaculate, with white state-of-the-art appliances and cabinets surrounded by granite-white countertops.

He opens the fridge and pulls out two Heinekens. He pops the top off one and slides it toward me. “Now tell me about this wedding of yours.”

I take a long swallow of the ice cold beer, letting it coat the back of my dry throat before I launch into the whole deal with my grandfather using this marriage as a ransom over my livelihood.

“Damn.” He takes a pull from his beer and his grey eyes set on mine. “So, the girl. What’s she like?”

“Clementine?” I shrug. “She’s infuriating.” I smile.

“Yeah?” Dean’s voice raises a bit, like he’s reading more into my answer. “Infuriatingly sexy?”

I stare at the label on my beer. “I’m not going to lie. She’s a fucking knockout.”

“But?” He sets his green bottle down. “I hear a but coming on.”

I lean my head to the side, looking for the right words. “But, nothing. She’s not like most women.”

“How does she feel about the upcoming nuptials?”

“She hates it. Said no when I first asked her.”

Dean smiles, raising his beer to clink with mine. “Ah, so she’s a smart one.”

I laugh. “Yeah, she’s pretty smart.”

I slide off the stool, stepping away from him and outside into the warm breeze to sit at the outdoor table shaded by an umbrella.

He follows and takes a seat next to me. “So, why did you come? Want me to run a background check on her?”

I shake my head, staring at the blue sea, lapping the shoreline. “No, I’ve run the basic profile on her. I’m not worried. It’s Ronin and Bishop that have me worried.”

“Ah, I see.”

I look over at him. “I want to hire you to run security for the wedding. Keep an eye on things.”

He’s a tech genius. Dean grew up poor, on the wrong side of the tracks, and with his friend, Xavier Stone, was able to figure out security systems. Together, they built one of the biggest security firms in the world.

There isn’t a system on the planet the two of them can’t hack into. Which makes gathering intel on certain parties a lucrative business for the two of them.

Dean leans back in his seat. “I don’t really do weddings.”

“Listen, I know this isn’t your thing. But, I don’t trust anybody else.”

Dean studies me. “Ok, I got you.”

“Thanks, man. Ronin said something about Blackstone wanting an invite. So I think he’s up to something.”

Dean shakes his head with a smile. “Man, your brother needs to stop dealing with Bishop. That man is pure evil.”

“I’ve tried telling him that.”

We’re silent for a minute or two, just watching the sun slowly set over the horizon, until Dean lets out a deep breath.

“I love it here,” Dean says, taking a sip of his beer. “I think I’ll die alone out here.”

“You never know that.”

“I do.”

“Maybe you’ll end up married like me.” I crack a smile.

He points his bottle at me. “Yeah, but that’s not a real marriage. I think I’m the type destined to be alone forever.”

“Me too.” It’s true. I’ve never met anyone I could see myself falling for. Or better yet, marrying. I’ve always been a loner, someone to fight the world alone.

“It’s guys like us that’ll never find love.”

“Speak for yourself,” I say with a laugh. “You’ve never once been in love?”

“I was close once.”

“What happened?”

“A lot of shit. I guess she just wasn’t the one.”

I’ve never understood the phrase, ‘the one.’ Maybe because I’ve never been in love before. I’ve never had time for it. Too busy building and running my grandfather’s empire, just to have him dangle my company on a string like a puppet so I have to work even harder to keep it after he died.

If it weren’t for my grandfather, I’m sure I’d never have married. “Marriage is overrated,” I tell Dean.

“Marriage is undervalued,” he responds. “Having someone to share your life with, well,” he glances at me, “there’s no price on that.”

“That’s where you and I differ.”

“This Clementine is nice?” he asks.

I shrug. “She’s a nuisance.”

“You’ll be married to her soon. You shouldn’t close yourself off to the idea of falling in love.”

Dean is one of my closest friends, but he’s crossing a boundary. He apologizes before I can let him know he’s said something wrong.

“I just want this wedding to go off without a hitch.”

Dean laughs. “Well, there will be *one* hitch.”

I chuckle. “You know what I mean.”

“You can count on me.” He winks.

I thank him, shaking his hand, and together we walk back to the chopper that will fly me back to Dubai.

“Whiskey,” I tell the flight attendant on my private jet as I take off from the Dubai airport to head home.

The flight attendant hands me a glass of Balvenie fifty-year old whiskey and I take a sip of the warm liquid as we fly over the ocean, making our way back to my grandfather’s estate.

When I return home, the house is quiet and still with everyone sleeping. I creep past Clementine’s doorway, and think about knocking to let her know I’m home. I even put my hand up to touch the hard wood of the door. But, I don’t. Instead, I turn away and head to the confines of my own room.

I’m startled when I open the door and see Clementine, wearing pink pajamas, sitting on my bed.

“What are you doing in here?” I ask her. I’m not going to lie, her being in my room late at night, with nothing but her sexy night clothes on, is not upsetting at all.

“Something isn’t right.” She gnaws on her bottom lip, an action I’m coming to realize means she’s nervous.

“Tennyson? Is he ok?”

She relaxes a bit. “He’s fine. He’s having a sleepover with Troy at Erin’s.”

I step into the room, closing the door and flicking on the light switch. “So

then, what's wrong?"

"You're going to laugh." She stands.

I move further into the room, removing my tie and setting it on the dresser. "Try me."

"Well...", she twists her fingers together, "I think there's a ghost in my room."

"That's absurd." I unbutton the top button to my shirt.

"See, I told you you were going to laugh."

I turn to face her, removing my cufflinks as I talk, "I'm not laughing. It's probably my grandfather come back to haunt us all."

"That's not funny."

I stare at her and realize she's really afraid of something. "Listen, it's an old house. It has a lot of dead space that air gets trapped into and makes creepy noises."

"I don't know. I can't sleep."

I twist my neck a little to ease some of the tension I feel from the long flight home. I'm dead tired, but the idea springing to mind of having Clementine sleep in my bed with me makes my dick come to life a bit. I can't even bring myself to suggest such a thing, so I just stare at her.

She finally speaks after a few moments of silence, "Maybe I could sleep in here?" Her voice rises a little on the last word.

I unbutton another button. "If it would make you feel safer."

"Well, your bed is huge. So it's not like we'll even touch."

That's not the only thing that's huge. "Ok," I breathe out.

"Which side?" she asks so innocently it makes my hardening dick harder.

"I usually sleep in the middle."

"Oh." She bites that damn lower lip again. I wish she wouldn't do that because it kind of turns me on. Ok, that's a lie. It a lot turns me on. "I'll just sleep in a little ball off to the side."

"Clementine," I say, "it's ok. I can sleep on either side."

She inches to the bed, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks. I turn around, unbuttoning the last of the buttons and remove the shirt. I drape it over the dresser, undoing my belt.

When I turn back around, Clementine is snuggled under the covers.

I bite my bottom lip, remembering exactly how she looks with nothing on. “I’m just going to get ready for bed.” I step into the en-suite and slam the door.

I rub my dick through my pants, trying to ease some of the tension building there. She turns me the fuck on, and I try to give myself a little pep talk to be able to go back out there and just *sleep* next to her.

I breathe in deep through my nose as I remove my dress slacks. When I step out of the en-suite, I hit the light switch and the light is replaced by the soft glow of the moon filtering in through the windows.

I can still make out Clementine, waiting patiently in *my* bed and I cross the room and pull back the covers.

“Where did you go?”

I slide into the bed, and lay on my back.

Clementine turns to face me, laying on her side and tucking her hands under her face. “Your trip. Where did you go?”

“I had a business meeting in France, and then stopped by Dubai to visit a friend.”

“Ah, a *friend*.”

I prop up on my elbows a bit to glare down at her accusation. “Yes, just a friend. His name’s Dean.”

“Oh.” She scoots a bit closer. “Thank you for letting me sleep here.”

Lying here next to her is a big mistake. Dirty thoughts keep creeping into my mind. Like her riding my cock. Like her sucking on my dick. Like me sucking on her tits.

I squeeze my eyes shut to keep the images at bay and change the subject to keep my mind from wandering. “You’ve never told me about Tennyson’s

father.”

She stiffens beside me, and I can no longer hear her breathing. “There’s really nothing to tell,” she finally says. Then, she flips over and says, “Goodnight, Gabriel.”

“Night.”

I don’t know how I’m supposed to sleep now. Her breathing continues until it evens out and I can tell she’s asleep. I pound at my pillow, tossing around a while until I fall fast asleep. Hopefully the ghost decides to visit tomorrow. Actually, I’d consider putting him on the payroll if he gets Clementine in my bed every night.

Chapter 17

Clementine

By the time I make it home after a busy day of work, all I can think about is the whirlpool tub in the en-suite in my room. It's my new best friend. It's been a few days since the 'ghost debacle' occurred that had me spending the night with Gabriel in his bed. If he'd said no, I was ready to beg. I felt safe having him next to me, but the next day, when the maid told me the air vent in my room makes a funny noise, I felt a little foolish I let my imagination go wild. Like when Tennyson would be scared of monsters and I would have to go debunk them in his room late at night.

Either way, I haven't returned to Gabriel's bed, and I don't want to—much.

I go through the routine with Tenny, reading him a story before bed, making sure he has Mr. Giraffe to sleep with, and by the time I make it to my room, I'm exhausted.

I remove my shoes by the door, and unbutton my blouse as I walk across the cool hardwoods toward the en-suite.

"We need to talk," a low voice says from the corner of the dark room.

I jump a bit. “You scared me, Gabriel.”

“Did you think I was a ghost?” He grins, sitting in the wingback chair in the shadows.

“No. Mia explained it’s the air-conditioning.” I fumble to re-button my blouse as I perch on the edge of the queen mattress. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Are you and Tennyson settling in well?”

“I think so.” I don’t want to tell him the truth that Tenny and I are liking this more than we should. It’s not like I’ve taken him on a shopping spree, and I won’t, but it’s the little things here we’ve never had access to before that are spoiling us—movies, whirlpool tubs, acres of land, on and on.

“Good. We have a party to attend tomorrow night.”

“Oh, ok.”

He stands from the chair and flips on the light. He’s stunning in his navy slacks and white dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar. As he steps closer, his scent reaches me first. A tantalizing combination of saffron and woody notes. It smells like what you imagine a gorgeous man fresh out of a GQ catalog would smell like. “This is for you.” He hands me a black card, and I take it from his fingers.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for anything you need. Just use this credit card from now on.” He strides toward the door. “And buy a dress for tomorrow night.”

“What kind of dress?”

On his way out, he throws a glance over his shoulder. “Make it sexy.”

I can play this game. I’ll find the sexiest dress on the market. Or not. I may soon be his wife, but he will never bully me.



THE NEXT DAY, SINCE I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW WHERE TO FIND A DRESS THAT A

billionaire's fiancée would wear, Erin pointed me in the direction of Lane's Exquisite Shop. A hideaway boutique for the wealthy. And now here I am, staring at the glass storefront, with my heart pounding, feeling a little like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. It's only a dress, but I just know the moment I enter the store they'll call me out for not belonging. I don't belong. Not really.

"I'll be waiting here," Mayer says, after opening my car door.

"Thank you."

I step away from the curb and head through the double-paned door into an open, airy loft-style store. Colorful dresses hang on racks in the center of the space.

"May I help you, Miss?" asks a blonde woman who towers over me in her five-inch heels. I'd like to think she's looking down her nose at me because of our height difference. I'll give her the benefit of the doubt.

"I'm looking for a dress," I respond.

Another lady walks toward the front, takes one look at me, and her mouth opens into an 'O.' "You're the fiancée." She turns to her co-worker. "Do you know who this is, Brittany?"

Brittany shakes her head, eyeing me up and down, with confusion.

"This is Gabriel Prince's fiancée."

Brittany's pupils turn to dollar signs as she stares at me. "Oh, I didn't know."

The other store clerk walks closer. "What's your name again?"

"Clementine," I almost say it like it's a question.

"Yes, well if you need anything, my name is Janet, and this is Brittany." She points to the blonde standing next to her.

I smile. "Well, Janet, I need a really sexy dress. My soon-to-be husband is taking me to an event tonight."

"Oh, I bet it's the charity ball at that art gallery," Brittany says.

Janet snaps her fingers together. "I have just the dress." She bounces

away with a little dance in her step, calling over her shoulder, “Follow me.”

She leads me to the back of the store, past all the racks of clothing, past two very plush off-white chairs with blue stripes, and even further into the dressing room territory where there’s a row of doors.

“Do I just go on in?” I ask, after she opens one of the doors for me.

“Yes, I’ll bring you the dresses. You’re going to feel like you’re in a fantasy.”

She gets my size and then hurries away. I step inside the pint-sized room with three walls of mirrors and take a seat on the soft-leather club chair. Little does she know, this isn’t a fantasy at all. Yet, that doesn’t stop me from playing out the fantasy late at night.

Ever since I slept in his bed, I keep imagining what it would be like if he kissed me. I keep replaying the evening at our engagement party over and over in my head. The night I changed in front of him. How his eyes ate me. How he couldn’t turn away. How he didn’t even try to hide the fact he was full on staring.

It was sexy.

It was hot.

It made me want to forget the fact I hadn’t been touched in years and I wanted him to rectify that. But, no. Never.

Janet returns with various items draped over her arm. “I brought you three.” She places the first on the bronze hook on the inside of the door. “This one is your basic ‘little black dress.’ An ‘I just want to blend in, but not really’ type dress.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

“This one is more ‘Hi, I’m here.’” She hangs a sparkling silver dress on the hook. “And this one is ‘Hey, bitches, this is why I’m going to be having wild sex tonight and you’re not.’” She places a scrap of red material on the hook and winks.

“Thank you.” I laugh a little. “Is that enough to cover me?”

Janet smiles. "It's enough to cover the important parts."

After she leaves, I remove my clothes and try on the full length black. It's stunning—demure, yet not—with a slit that opens all the way up the feather light gossamer skirt to my upper thigh and sheer fabric intermingled throughout the bodice. As I check out my exposed back, my phone vibrates.

I pull it out of my handbag to see a text from Gabriel.

"Find anything? I can make you an appointment with Hannah at *Couture*. She has things you might like."

Just how many women does he dress? I would imagine it's a lot.

"Not yet," I reply. "I'm trying on things now."

"Let me see."

I stare at his request on my phone, and I'm not sure why I comply, but I do. Part of me wants him to see me in this dress. I snap a selfie and send it.

"Damn. Purple bra today?" is his reply.

I glance in the mirror at the lavender bra strap showing across my back. Clearly, I need to learn the art of the selfie.

When I slip into the second option, I remove my bra before taking a picture of the low cut sparkling dress and sending it to Gabriel.

"Your tits look phenomenal in that one," he replies, causing me to gasp. "Looks better with no bra."

A warmth sears my chest as I type out my reply. "You like this one?"

"Yes. It's very sexy."

I stare at myself in the mirror. It is sexy. But I want to try on the red one before I decide. I slip into it and oh my. It's barely enough to cover me.

My phone beeps again with a message from Gabriel. "Get the silver."

"Actually, I think I'll get the red."

His reply comes back instantly. "Let me see the dress."

I ignore it. Because I want him to be surprised.

"Clem, let me see."

I laugh a little and shut my phone off, sliding it back into my purse.

I suck in a deep breath when I turn back around to face the mirror. This can't be me.

I twist and turn to see the dress from all angles. It's a little red lace number—very little—and it hugs every curve I have, like it was custom made for me. Two straps hold up the plunging neckline that forms a deep vee in the front. The skirt, with intermittent crystals throughout the lace, is sheer in spots and hits mid-thigh.

“Come out and let us see,” Brittany says.

I'm afraid to open the door. I've never worn anything this revealing before in my entire life. “Ok.” I gather my nerve and step out.

“Wow, and I'm not just saying that because I have to. You look sinful,” Janet says, pulling at the dress just a bit to make sure it fits right.

“Is it *too* sexy?” I ask, not wanting to look like an escort Gabriel hired for the night.

“No, not at all. This dress was made for you,” Brittany says, stepping back to get a better view of me from the side. “It's daring, but still classy. Gabriel Prince won't know what hit him.”

“Good.” Because that's what I want. Maybe Gabriel will make a move on me, so I can sue him for breach of contract and get out of this whole wedding thing.

“We have a Jimmy Choo heel that would be perfect with it.” Brittany points toward the front of the store, and my mouth almost salivates at the mention of new shoes.

The last time I went shopping for fancy things was probably for my high school prom. I didn't even have a date, so I begged my sister to go with me. She finally conceded when I told her I'd bake her cupcakes whenever she wanted for life.

I try the shoes on while still wearing the dress, and Janet picks out jewelry she says will ‘complete’ the look.

The price of everything causes a mild panic attack, but I hand over the

credit card Gabriel gave me, telling myself it's a small price to pay for being forced into this arrangement.

As a matter of fact... "Can I get the shoes in black, too? Size eight?"

Tennyson is having a sleepover at Erin's tonight, so she needs to be compensated as well.

After Janet hands me my purchases, I leave the store feeling much better than when I entered.

"Would you like to get your hair done?" Mayer asks as he opens the car door for me, taking the bags from my arms and heading off toward the trunk.

I glance at my phone, checking the time. "I have a few hours before I need to get Tennyson."

Mayer shuts my door and heads to the front, sliding in the driver seat. "Anywhere in particular you want to go?"

I shrug, leaning back against the cool leather seat. "I don't really have an appointment anywhere."

Mayer smiles at me through the rearview. "That won't be a problem. I'll put in a call to Sonya's Salon. She'll make time for you."

"Is that rude to just make someone move things around?"

"Not when she can tell people Gabriel Prince's fiancée is a client."

"Oh," I don't really say much more than that. I'm not used to people doing things for me at the drop of a hat. "Honestly, I can style my own hair," I tell him.

But, Mayer doesn't respond because he's already speaking to someone in his bluetooth earpiece.

He pulls away, and I watch the scenery roll past my window as he drives me toward Sonya's Salon.

"Wait," I say, at a red light, pointing to a quaint shop on the side of the road. "Can we go there?"

Mayer looks over at the blue, cottage-style building. "A kite shop?"

"Yeah, just to check it out," I say.

Mayer makes the right into the near empty lot, and parks.

“Be right back,” I tell him. I hop out before he can get my door, because waiting for someone to open it for me is just too strange.

The door chimes when I enter, and a burly man looks up from stocking a shelf near the cash register.

“Hi.” I wave to him.

“Hi. Need help finding anything?” he asks.

“I’m not sure yet.”

He smiles. “There’s a lot to choose from.”

I’ll say. I know Gabriel loves his drones, so I wanted to grab Tennyson a kite to fly in the yard. I thought it would be simple, step in here and buy a kite, but there’s just so many different types.

“What would I get for a four-year-old just starting out?” I ask.

He smiles and the crow’s feet adorning each eye deepen. He moves closer to me and grabs a kite from a wall display. “This here is a good starter kite.”

“Perfect. I’ll take it.”

He leads me back to the cash register. “It’s a lot of fun,” he says as he rings me up, extolling the virtues of kite flying.

I nod. And then I try to imagine what Gabriel finds so fun about flying his drones around. Is it the control? Is it the feeling of freedom watching it soar? If I had to guess, I would think it’s the control. Gabriel likes it. Well, I’ll be the one thing he won’t be able to bend to his will.

Chapter 18

Gabriel

I don't know if I'll ever get used to sharing a house with Clementine. Having her around is torturous. It's making me do crazy things, like almost firing a maid for telling her there was no ghost just because I wanted her in my bed every night.

I've only ever had to really care for myself, and maybe it's turned me into a selfish asshole. But, I don't see it that way. I've grown accustomed to a certain reclusive lifestyle. Sure, there's a lot of people around me, but still, I've always been solitary. They're here, but I don't let them in.

I make my own waves. I always have.

I've had a lot of doors opened for me because of the Prince name, but I believe I would have been successful either way. I've always been the one to work for what I want. I could've gone the way of my brother. Women, drugs, alcohol. Sure, he says he's clean now, but I don't trust it.

Just like I don't trust his newfound obsession with Clementine. She's mine to protect now. And that means protecting her from my own brother as well.

I shrug on my tuxedo jacket. Tonight, Clementine and I will act like a real couple, so she had better be prepared. I know it wasn't part of the deal to pretend to be in love, but this is *my* future. *My* reputation. *My* life. If people found out I was forced into a marriage to someone I barely knew, the press would have a field day with that nugget of info.

I march down the hall to her room, and knock on the door.

Within seconds, she opens it, and my mouth opens to speak, but no words come out.

It's because of *her*.

Clementine stands before me in the hottest, fucking little red number I've ever seen. It droops way low in the front, showing off her hot-as-fuck cleavage. I clench my jaw to keep my tongue from sliding between her breasts. Her auburn hair falls in seductive waves past her shoulders. I'm shocked I'm still having this sort of reaction to her. I mean, I've seen her in her bra and panties. And even without anything at all. So, this reaction should be out of my system by now, but my eyes can't get enough of her. Like all my synapses are firing at once and can't process what I'm seeing quick enough.

"You look..." I can't decide which word to use. I want to say she looks stunning, amazing, gorgeous, irresistible, completely and utterly fuckable. But, instead I tamper down my hormones and tell her, "...you look...sufficient."

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I can see she doesn't care for my word choice in the tight polite smile. She stares at me a moment, letting her eyes peruse my black tuxedo before responding, "Thank you. You'll do."

"Are you ready to go?"

She nods. "Yes, Tenny is with Erin and Troy tonight. So, I'm good to go."

I turn away from her before I do something crazy, like kiss her glossed

lips to test their softness. “Let’s go. Stefan has pulled the car around.”

I can hear the click of her sexy heels behind me and know she’s following. My long strides have her almost running to keep up, but I feel I need to get away from her before I do something stupid.

“Will you slow down?” she calls out from behind me.

I stop and turn to face her. “We’re late.”

“Well, then you’re going to have to carry me out of here, because I can’t keep up.”

The idea of kissing her weighs heavily on my mind. Her pouty lips taunt me to remove her lipstick with the pad of my thumb.

“This is going to be a long night,” I mumble under my breath, slowing my steps so she can keep up.

“Oh, wow. I’ve never ridden in a limo before,” she says, as we step outside.

Stefan opens the back door, and I hold out my hand to help Clementine slide into the backseat. I follow in after her. “It’s one of those types of events,” I tell her. “We’ll have security with us.”

“Security?”

As the car pulls away, I settle back against the soft leather seat. “Safety is always a priority when I go out.” I point to the minibar. “Want something to drink.”

She shakes her head. “Better not. I don’t want to be drunk before we even arrive.”

“Speaking of...when we get there, I’d like us to pretend to be a couple in love.”

Her eyes narrow. “We can be in love and not have to be all over each other the whole night, right?”

I smile. “Yes, we’re not teenagers. And it’s not acceptable to be making out like we’re in the back of the roller rink on free skate night. But, if I place my hand on your back, or lean in for a kiss on the cheek, I want to make sure

you're not going to slap me."

She holds up a hand. "I won't slap you, Scout's honor."

I laugh at how cute she is. "You were never a Scout."

She shrugs. "I was a Brownie."

I raise a brow. "I thought that was a dessert."

She laughs and it fills the limo, sending something I can't quite identify racing up my spine. "It's also the name of troops before they're old enough to become a full-fledged Girl Scout."

I smile at her. "I take it back. I guess you are a Scout."

Stefan pulls away from the estate, heading downtown toward the charity gala. Usually, I show up for these events alone, make my donation, and head home. I've never been one to stay long, or mingle and bullshit with the rest of the elite in this town. I know I have a part to play. Being this wealthy comes with obligations, and being a Prince comes with even more. But, the truth is, these parties bore the fuck out of me. And there's a small part of me that's kind of happy I have someone to go with. A very small part of me.

"Did you enjoy your shopping today?" I ask her.

Clementine's honey-colored eyes light up to a brighter shade of yellowish-brown. She really does have some amazing eyes. Like brown met green in an explosion of yellows and honey.

"I did."

"Did you buy anything else besides the dress?"

She lifts her leg just enough to show off her sexy shoes. "These."

I almost want to put her leg in my lap, take the shoe off and begin a journey of my hand up her silky skin. But, I don't. I glance out the car window, as if watching the passing trees is so much more interesting than her. "Anything else?"

"I got a pair for Erin. And bought Tenny a kite."

I turn back to her. "A kite? Why?"

"Why not?"

“I just figured kids his age liked toys more.”

“Have you ever even flown a kite?”

“I have. That’s what started my love for flying drones.”

“And here I thought you didn’t love anything.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Why would you think that?”

Her eyes meet mine. “Well, just how you are, I guess. You’re always brooding and moody.”

I laugh. “Is that how you see me?”

“Yes.”

I nod. “I see. And what do you think I’m brooding over?”

“Life.” She shrugs. “Probably everything. I think if things are out of your control it bothers you.”

I scoot closer to her. “And you enjoy chaos?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She’s like a magnet, drawing me to her. “You don’t like being in control?”

“I do,” she breathes out. “But, I don’t get angry when things don’t go my way.”

“You weren’t angry when I asked you to be my bride?”

She licks her lips. “I was upset, sure, but I don’t brood.”

She’s the flame and I’m the idiotic little moth flying straight toward her. I inch closer. “When you said you hated me, that wasn’t brooding?”

Her eyes drop to my mouth. “I don’t hate you.”

Her lips are so goddamn red, like a cherry, and I want to taste them to see if they’re as sweet as they look.

The low thrum of being turned on beats throughout my body. “I don’t hate you either.”

And then, maybe because I don’t want Ronin to be the only person who gets to kiss her, maybe because I’ll go crazy if I don’t, I lean in and crash my mouth to hers.

Our tongues meet and she tastes so goddamn good.

The cues her body is throwing in my direction has me lifting her to straddle my lap. My cock hardens instantly. I have to get inside her.

I deepen the kiss, pulling her body down on me, grinding her hips into me.

I'm not letting go of this girl until someone drags me away from her.

I want this.

She wants this too.

The only thing rolling around in my cloudy, turned-on-brain is I need to feel her pussy.

I need to know how wet she is for me. I need to know if she wants me.

So, I trace my hand down her body, releasing her lips to kiss her neck as my hand treks toward her pussy.

I run my fingers up her thigh, until I'm met by the lace of her panties.

My eyes meet hers. "Do you want me to finger fuck you before we get to the party?"

She licks her lips and then closes her eyes, her head falling back as she moans out, "Yes."

I groan and slip my finger under the band of her panties to feel along her wet seam. She's so fucking soaked. "You like the way I touch you?"

She keeps grinding her pussy into the palm of my hand. "Yes, don't stop."

I suck her neck as I push a finger inside her. She's tight as hell, but I keep going in further as she rides me in the backseat of this limo. I can't wait to see her get off. "Will you be loud for me when I make you come?"

My cock lengthens as it pushes at the zipper of my pants. I can't remember ever being this hard for a woman.

Clementine finds my lips, tangling her tongue with mine. She runs her fingers over the stubble on my jaw as I slip a second finger into her tightness. Since the moment I saw her in that red dress tonight, I have wanted *exactly*

this.

Chapter 19

Clementine

I deserve to go to Hell. Legit Hell with fire and brimstone and all that stuff. Because I'm more than enjoying myself right now as I shamelessly ride Gabriel Prince's hand in the backseat of his limousine.

He feels so good. And it's been so long. We haven't even gotten married yet, and here I am throwing myself at him like a girl without any self-will. I'm going to Hell. It's official. I'll be spending eternity with Joseph Prince.

Gabriel's earlier question about control and chaos erupts in my mind. This is a test. And I'm flat-out failing. With a big, bold 'F.'

The fire in my veins is replaced with ice in a flash.

I stop kissing him and slide off his lap, pulling my dress down. "We can't do this."

I'm so mad at myself. What a fool I am.

He sits, staring at me, breathing just as heavy as I am, with the outline of his cock pressing against his pants.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to slow my speeding pulse. "It won't happen again."

I can't even look at him, so I focus on the bright lights of the city, passing us by. Focus on the demanding chaos outside my window. People stand on street corners. Cars whizz by in a blur. Everyone's rushing around the city like they have somewhere important to be.

"Clementine," Gabriel says, after a few minutes of silence, "I shouldn't have touched you. I lost control."

Him saying that shocks me a little. *He* lost control. I thought he was trying to control me the whole time.

"Just don't do it again," I whisper, my mind trying desperately to understand what just happened in the back of this limo. I'm not going to pretend I didn't enjoy it. And I think that's what scares me the most.

When Ronin kissed me there was nothing. No fireworks. No marching band. But, the moment Gabriel's lips touched mine I felt a spark ignite deep within me that if left unattended would set my heart on fire.

They were harsh, yet, just a bit tender. His tongue moved inside of my mouth with purpose, like he was trying to memorize it all.

And I know I've memorized the feel of him, because I'm telling you, I will never forget the way his touch felt against my heated skin.

I was so worked up.

I was so turned on.

I was ready to come all over his fingers in seconds.

I'm glad I didn't. The mood in the back of this limo is already awkward enough without adding post-coital bliss feelings to the confusion I feel sitting next to my soon-to-be husband.

The truth is, I don't know this man at all.

And worse, I don't know what to expect. With past boyfriends, I've always known what I was getting. I always knew the end was near before it ever began. But, with Gabriel, he's one surprise after another.

The car pulls up to a contemporary art gallery, and we wait for Stefan to make a show of things. It still feels odd waiting for someone to open my door

when I have two fully functional hands that can do it myself.

But, I play along.

Gabriel exits the limo first, holding his hand out to me. I touch his hand, the same hand I was grinding against not even minutes before, and exit the limo, pulling at the end of my dress to lengthen it a bit.

Janet and Brittany are damn good at their job. I was so confident in my selection, until Gabriel knocked on my door.

When I first opened my bedroom door for him, it felt like he wanted to lick my dress off with his tongue. I guess he's just one of those people, the type with deceiving eyes. The kind with eyes you think are eating you alive, but they're really just calculating their next move behind the pupil. He's like the hardest puzzle, and I don't know why I'm trying so hard to figure him out.

Hand-in-hand, we walk the red carpet up the steps of the gallery and inside where people mingle amongst the framed artwork. This is one of those places that pretty much has its own zip code. Kind of like the Prince's estate.

Gabriel places his hand on the small of my back, intensifying the ache between my legs, and moves through the crowd with ease, as he navigates us toward the bar near the back of the room. The chilly air inside the cavernous space does nothing to cool my *still* overheated body.

"Senator Dupree, let me introduce you to my fiancée, Clementine," Gabriel says, as he shakes the hand of the grey-haired politician sipping from a glass of champagne.

"Hi, Senator Dupree. So nice to meet you," I greet him.

Gabriel and the senator launch into a conversation about his upcoming campaign, and I drown it out. Instead of listening to their talk of donations, I scan the party filled with men in suits and women adorning their arms. Every man in a suit has a few men standing guard beside them, ready to do their bidding. At least that's what I think they are.

Even Gabriel has a few men staying close, but not too close. I people

watch for a few minutes before I spot a picture that calls to me.

My feet move on their own, until I'm standing right before it. Blues, reds, yellows, and greens dance together in a playful banter of wits and strength. The reds are winning, taking up most of the canvas with their heavy brush strokes.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a man behind me asks with a thick Southern drawl.

"It is."

I peek over my shoulder, to see a lean man with longer than average sandy-blond hair and a mustache to match, holding a glass of some brown liquor on the rocks. He's older than me, by about twenty years, and has a large set of brown eyes that resemble an owl. "Reminds me of sex."

I widen my eyes. "Excuse me?"

He laughs a rich, hearty laugh. "Doesn't it look like a canvas filled with a lot of angry sex to you?"

I chance a peek over at Gabriel who still chats away to a group of people. I stare back at the painting, wondering if it indeed looks like sex. It's been so long since I've even had sex, but I remember the limo ride here. "Yes, it kind of does. Like the colors are all fighting for their own presence."

The man smiles. "Precisely." He studies me for a moment. "You're marrying Gabriel Prince, right?"

I smile. "Yes. That's right."

He assesses me, taking a sip of his drink. "Bishop Blackstone sends his best wishes."

My heart stops. Everything around me moves in slow motion. "What?"

Before the man can say anything more, Gabriel is once again at my side with his hand resting on the small of my back. And I have to say, it makes me feel safe.

"What are we talking about here?" Gabriel asks with a smile, essentially staking his claim over me. But, for once I don't mind it.

I welcome it, actually.

“Sex,” the man says.

I swallow and blink.

Gabriel takes a moment before he answers. “I don’t think I’ve caught your name.” Gabriel holds out his hand, ready for the man to answer.

The man shakes his hand. “Names aren’t important around here.”

I don’t dare mention that this bushy old man mentioned Bishop Blackstone.

I purse my lips into a thin line, hoping more than anything the man with the big moustache walks away.

After a minute, my wish comes true, he winks at me and walks away with another hearty laugh.

“What did he say to you?” Gabriel asks as soon as the man is out of ear shot.

I shake my head, and flourish my hand. “Oh, nothing. He was telling me how this painting is like angry sex on a canvas. I really like it.” I can feel myself beginning to ramble. I sometimes ramble when I’m nervous, and ... “I need a drink.”

Just as I say the words, a server passes with a silver tray of champagne glasses. Gabriel grabs two and hands me one.

“Find out who that was,” Gabriel says to one of his men who appears out of nowhere.

“That’s not necessary,” I say. “He was just a harmless old man.” But, I’m sure he’s not harmless. He most likely works for Bishop, and that’s one thing I don’t want Gabriel to discover.

I know Bishop.

I’ve known him for many years.

And he’s *not* a good guy.

He’s the type of man your mother warns you about when you’re young. The boogie man who comes into your home and steals everything until you’re left with nothing. Only, Bishop comes into your life, stripping you

down, until you're left with a shell of the woman you used to be.

Sometimes people sell their souls to the devil.

And Bishop owns many souls.

He travels the world. He's into export/imports, or something like that.

Gabriel's dark eyes roam over me, thinking, contemplating, and I can see the exact moment he makes a snap decision to trust me. "Ok, nevermind, Jonas," he says to the same man standing at his side.

I release an audible breath, trying my best to paint on a fake smile. "Thank you."

"I have to talk to that man over there," Gabriel tells me, pointing to a bald man across the room. "Think you can stay out of trouble?" He winks.

I square my shoulders, thrusting my nose into the air. "Of course, I can. I'll just keep admiring this painting." I jab a thumb over my shoulder at the painting behind me.

He leans in. "Thank you." And then he kisses my lips, taking my breath away.

I turn back around to face the painting, staring at the softer pink strokes of paint on the canvas. I wonder why the artist even included them? The reds, blues, and greens are the true stars of this painting, but the pink strokes call to me. Like the supporting characters in a grander love story. It makes me sad for them. It makes me mourn the fact they can't have their own story. That they can't be in the spotlight.

I sip my champagne, and then my phone jingles in my purse. I pull it out and glance down at a text message from Ronin.

My eyes swiftly scan the party, making sure Gabriel is still across the room with the man he said he needed to talk to.

I swipe my phone on, and open up the text message.

Just three little words are written there, "You're in danger."

Chapter 20

Gabriel

Fuck.

I want to leave this art gallery with my dignity intact.

Have you ever had your strings pulled like you're a marionette puppet? My grandfather is my very own built in marionettist. A master puppeteer, pulling at my strings with my upcoming nuptials, moving me along in a manipulated dance where I assume the position of the jolly idiot while I picture my grandfather laughing maniacally.

I have good days, and I have some bad. Today is one of those bad ones. The only good comes from the woman pretending to be in love with me while we charm the designer pants off all the elite socialites of this city.

Was she pretending in the limo on the ride over?

Was she playing the part of my dotting fiancée when she moaned out my name?

Was I pretending?

That is one question I know the answer to.

I wasn't.

I wanted her to come all over my hand. I wanted to keep kissing her all night long as I slid my cock deep inside her pussy.

But, neither of those things happened. And now, I'm lost in a fantasy where it did happen, and my cock hasn't stopped being rock hard since.

I lost control, something I vow never to let happen again.

I stand in this art gallery, not entranced by the art hanging on the walls, which is where my attention should be. No, here I am more concerned about my bride-to-be talking to some cowboy about sex. Of all the people to talk to Clementine about sex, I never thought it would be some old fuck. My blood boils as I try to remain in control.

Control. That's something I practice in everything I do. It isn't enough to be in control, but to be controlling too. To have power over every outcome, good or bad.

Since my grandfather's death, I've been more out of control than I've ever been before, and a lot of it has to do with Clementine. She's been pushing me to lose my control, and she doesn't even know she's doing it.

And this cowboy, I don't like the look of his bushy moustache. He sticks out like a sore thumb as he dominates Clementine's attention with his cowboy hat in this sea of tuxedos. He has a criminal air about him, and a smarmy smile I want to punch off and bury six-feet under.

I won't lie, I never wanted this marriage. I didn't. But the minute that boot wearing, big-buckle fuck said he was talking about sex to *my* fiancée, something happened. It's like a switch flipped. It's like a fuse ignited and I was useless to stop it. I wanted to plot out all the ways I could watch the asshole die. And I pride myself on being creative.

When Clementine asked me to let it go, it went against everything ingrained in my DNA. Every bone in my body begged me to hurt him for disrespecting what was mine. It was hard to let something like that go. Yet, for some odd reason I did.

I dropped the inquisition for her.

It's called trust.

I've never trusted anyone.

But for some reason, I trust *her*. For now anyway. And if this feeling is an indication of what trust is going to do to me, I'm smart for avoiding it as long as I have.

For the rest of the evening, I play the part of generous benefactor, shaking hands with the different artists, and introducing my fiancée around, keeping her close and enjoying having her near. It almost becomes like a dance, the two of us, standing too close, mingling. All while the flashes of the media cameras subtly blind us. And without seeing the pictures, I already know they're stunning.

I work the room, like I was born to do, making sure to perform my duties as Clementine enhances my charm. I'm a Prince, and this is what I've always done as long as I can remember. Play the part. Be the philanthropist. Be the best. Be Gabriel Prince.

"You ready to go?" I ask Clementine, when the event winds down.

"Yes," she answers, her eyes scanning the crowd like she's looking for someone, and I bristle when I picture her searching for a man. A man that isn't me.

She's been switching her attention from the attendees to staring at a painting that looks like an angry burst of bright colors.

"You really like that painting?" I ask her.

She gives me a faint smile. "I do. It's very moving."

And now it's hers. She just doesn't know it yet.

I nod to Kurt, calling him over. "Buy this one," I whisper into his ear, pointing at the painting Clementine's had her eye on all night, "and tell Stefan to get the car pulled around."

"On it."

Clementine can call it a wedding gift. I'll call it unable to resist making her happy.

I lead her out to the car and slide in after her. She scoots all the way to the edge of the seat, leaning against the window, staring out and putting way too much distance between us for my liking.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, as we pull away.

The city lights illuminate the fake smile on her face. “Besides the obvious that we’re being forced to marry? Nothing. Why do you think something’s wrong?”

“Just making sure. I didn’t know if you were able to hear me, from so far away.”

The diamond on her finger flashes when she raises her hand to her temple. “I think I just have a champagne headache.” She turns to continue gazing out the window and it’s probably for the best she’s ignoring me.

I wanted a redo of what occurred on the way to the art gallery to happen on the way home. It’s all I’ve thought about all night, even while I was imagining hurting that John Wayne wannabe. The way her lips felt so silky soft against mine. The way her body felt rubbing against me. My dick comes to life just thinking of Clementine’s legs straddling me in the back of this limo.

I didn’t want it to end, and all I want right now is for it to restart. I want to show her what I can do with my tongue, my fingers, my cock, my creative mind. But, looks like I’ll be enjoying my hand later tonight instead.

The rest of the ride home is silent, and when we arrive at the estate, she rushes off to her room before I can even say goodnight. Before I can convince her to ride my face, or my cock.

Like a stalker, I watch her ascend the stairs, and then I move through the foyer into the living room. I yank off my tie and toss it on the leather sofa, along with my jacket, and grab my VTOL drone from the coffee table. Since there will be no fucking, I take it out into the back courtyard for a little late-night fun before I use my hand and pass out. I just need to clear my head first. From *her*.

Stars dot the night sky as the drone takes flight. I maneuver in and out of all the shadows of the sprawling house. The 18th-century-inspired elegant mansion may look like it was transported from another era, but it's all by design. It still has every modern convenience you could imagine, complete with a courtyard visible from every room in the house. With a Bacchus wall fountain and a private terrace overlooking a jasmine tree, the romantic courtyard is reminiscent of a backdrop from *Romeo and Juliet*.

I walk further across the lawn and relax—until I turn around and see Clementine standing in her room upstairs. Undressing. So much for clearing my head.

Frozen in place, I feel almost like Romeo, as I stand watching my very own Juliet.

I've reached new lows, and I really don't fucking care. I hold my breath, wondering if I'm going to get an impromptu peep show. Secretly, hoping I do. And secretly, hoping she knows I'm down here watching her.

Even though, I've seen her completely nude. Even though, I've had my fair share of seeing *all* of her, it's like I can't get enough. Like I'm a modern day Romeo, accepting the tragedy before it begins.

I turn the drone to the right, trying my best to pay attention to it while it flies overhead. At the moment she removes her dress, I lose control of my drone and it crashes into the glass of her balcony door.

She walks closer, holding her dress against her, and peers out. I press the controls on my watch, lifting the drone from her balcony, flying it back to me, and she snaps the blinds closed. I guess she wasn't aware I was watching her.

I'm sure my grandfather is laughing his ass off from the pits of hell at my growing obsession. It's not easy, but I block her out of my mind, and focus on the freedom of the flying drone. Until Clementine marches across the grass in black yoga pants and an oversized T-shirt. Her breasts bounce under the soft material, and my mind is right back to where it has been all night.

“Were you spying on me?”

“Spying? No.” I land the drone on the helipad, and click it off with the controls on my watch.

“There’s no high tech camera on that gadget?” She stops a few feet from me and parks her hands on her hips, her posture screaming with accusations. “No x-ray vision where you can see through clothes or something?”

I laugh. “There’s no such thing.” I place both hands in my pockets, thinking her x-ray vision is a good idea. “I wasn’t watching you. Swear.”

“Your plane thing just happened to crash into my window?” She narrows her eyes.

“My drones appear to be attracted to you.” I adjust my stance to hide my straining erection. It seems my drone isn’t the only thing attracted to her.

“Speaking of attraction, here.” She slides off her engagement ring and holds it out to me. “You broke my contract.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I never joke about contracts.” She lifts her chin, squaring her shoulders.

I shrug. “That wasn’t a real contract.” My lawyers could kill that one piece of paper easily in a courtroom, we both know it.

Her eyes look like they could shoot laser beams as she closes the distance. “That contract is real. You signed it.” She pokes her finger into my chest. Ow. “And you broke it.” Her voice has a desperate tone to it.

I laugh. “No. We’re getting married.”

“No, we’re not.”

“Clementine, I’m not doing this right now.” I’m sure we could go back and forth like this for hours. There’s another way I’d like to spend countless hours with her, and it’s not arguing.

“Take the ring.” She holds the rock out again.

I lean closer. “No.”

“Yes. Take it.”

“No. We *will* be getting married.”

“I’ll sue you.”

I try not to laugh at her determination. It’s cute.

I lean into her space, inches from her lips. “You going to tell the judge how you were so wet for me?”

She swallows, her eyes wide. “That’s not fair.”

I never agreed to play fair, so I keep going, “You going to tell him how you rode against my cock?”

“I..umm,” she breathes out.

“Are you going to tell the courtroom how I had you moaning my name? How you were practically begging for it?”

Her eyes are on fire. “You’re an asshole.”

“An asshole you’re going to marry.” And then I do something I don’t plan. I grab her around the waist and press my lips against hers. Hard.

I can’t stop kissing her, and she doesn’t push me away. Instead, she pulls me closer, dancing her tongue along mine. I can’t get enough of her, and I press my growing hard-on against her. The moment she feels it, she backs away, breaking the kiss.

“The wedding is off,” she breathes out.

“Let’s get one thing straight.” I swipe my thumb against my bottom lip. “This wedding is very much on.”

Without another word, she walks away.

Before she can get very far, I call out to her, “I’ve set up a meeting with you and a wedding planner on Monday.” I can’t hide the amusement in my voice.

“I’m not going.” She stops walking and turns around, crossing her arms, and I wish I could kiss the stubborn out of her.

“Yes, you are.”

“Will you be there?”

I smirk. “I won’t pretend I know anything about planning a wedding. And I know my presence at that meeting would only hinder your decisions,

delaying the whole process.” I step back. “So, I think it’s best you handle the wedding preparations yourself.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

She crosses her arms against her chest. “No, we’re in this together, buddy.”

“Buddy?”

“Yes, you and me. Husband and wife. Bride and Groom. This is a joint effort.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Can’t I just promise you your dream wedding and call it a day.”

“No. And if you don’t accompany me, I’ll make this the wedding of your nightmares.”

“Fine, I’ll text you the details. Monday at three.”

“I’ll be there,” she says, walking back across the grass. “Be ready to pick flowers and all that fun stuff.” Now she’s the one unable to hide her amusement.

I shamelessly watch each step she takes back toward the house. There’s no way I’m letting her go with some silly breach of contract. My phone rings just as she steps inside.

“What’s up?” I answer it.

“Sir,” Stefan says, “there’s a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“It’s your brother.”

“And?”

“He’s missing.”

Chapter 21

Clementine

I think I've made a grievous error trying to convince myself that I can work this forced marriage to my advantage. I should've known Gabriel was going to make this arrangement difficult, he's been making my life harder since the moment he walked into it.

"Ronin, danger from who?" I text again, when I'm back in my bedroom.

Seconds tick by. Then minutes. Still no response. Just like the previous five messages I've sent. Does he know about Bishop?

I'm a fool to think this would be easy. Being a fiancée to a Prince means social obligations, like the art gallery gala where I met the cowboy who mentioned Bishop Blackstone. My nerves have been shattered ever since. Living in the limelight, letting every photographer take photos of me, is not a good idea. I loved my simple life. Away from Bishop Blackstone. And now I feel like I have a beacon shining on me wherever I go.

When I received the cryptic text from Ronin, stating I was in danger, my perfectly crafted world crashed at my feet.

I toss my phone on the night table and trek across to the window. Gabriel

is nowhere to be seen when I peek out at the shadowy backyard illuminated by lights from the house.

Earlier, when that drone crashed into my window, I nearly had a heart attack. That was nothing compared to when he kissed me again. The power Gabriel holds in his lips and tongue makes me more nervous than Ronin's warning. And that is very careless, but my body doesn't heed the warning.

I move away from the window and retrieve my phone before slipping into bed. I call Erin to check on Tennyson, and if I'm being honest to get my mind off of Gabriel's magical kiss.

She answers on the first ring.

"I want all the dirty details," she says as if she's psychic.

"Hey," I respond, "how's everything going?"

"Tenny and Troy played all night. Thanks for bringing that kite with him. They both loved it."

I hold a hand to my heart. "Aw, good. I'm glad they had fun. Did he give you trouble going to bed?"

"Nope, he was an angel. Come on girl, I want all the dirty details."

I laugh. "There aren't any details to give you, dirty or not." I can't tell her how I rode Gabriel in the back of his limo. How I was so close to coming when I did. My body heats at the thought.

"Yes, there is. I can tell. Spill it."

"We kissed, ok?" I give her a nugget of info.

She squeals into the phone so loud I have to hold it away from my ear. "How was it? I bet he's a great kisser. Oh my god, tell me more. I want to live vicariously through you."

My phone beeps with the sound that a new text message is coming through, and I pull the phone away from my ear to see Ronin's name. "Erin, I'll call you back."

We hang up and I read the message, "Meet me at Givens Park. Alone. Monday 2pm."



THE FOLLOWING MONDAY, I TRY MY HARDEST TO GET TENNYSON OFF TO daycare, but it's like he has a special radar that something is going on today and doesn't want to listen at all to anything I say. During breakfast he wouldn't eat his pancakes, even though he has pancakes *every* morning.

"Tenny, please come here so I can tie your shoe," I say, sitting on the floor of his room while he plays with a Captain America action figure. I decide to make my life easier and swing low for a bribe, sometimes a girl's gotta use what she has, "And if you're really good at school, I have a surprise for you."

I've said the magic words and he bounds over, placing his sneakered foot in front of me. "I'll be the best," he says. I don't even feel guilty over using this tactic when I grasp his laces.

Once his shoes are all tied, I stand and kiss him on the forehead. "I'm sure you will be."

Tennyson smiles and in a blur of jeans and *Batman* t-shirt rushes through the door of his bedroom. Deep breath.

I grab his backpack and follow him downstairs where I'm met by Gabriel standing in the foyer.

"What are your plans today?" he asks, letting his eyes stray from mine to meander down one of the new outfits he purchased for me. I have to admit, the midnight silk blouse and dark jeans feel different than my other clothes—soft and luxurious. Decadent.

I try to smile, hoping Gabriel doesn't suspect anything out of the ordinary. "Work."

I know better than to mention my meeting with Ronin around Gabriel since it's no big mystery the brothers don't get along. Ronin's instructions about coming alone were clear. If Gabriel found out I had a meeting with Ronin, I'm sure he would insist on coming, or worse, demand I didn't go.

“Just remember the meeting with the wedding planner at three.”

Shit. I forgot. I nod, playing along. “Right, ok.”

Tennyson tilts his head up to stare at Gabriel. “Are you going to work too?”

“I have a few calls to make from here,” Gabriel answers.

“Why are you dressed up?” Tenny points to Gabriel’s stark white dress shirt and trim fitting black slacks.

“Why not?” he answers with a shrug.

“I want a suit,” Tenny says, standing up tall, imitating Gabriel’s posture.

A grin tugs at the corner of Gabriel’s lips. “That can be arranged.”

“Ok, time to go,” I interject, not liking the unwelcome smile on my face from their exchange. “We’re going to be late.”

Gabriel says goodbye to Tennyson, and then nods at me as I pass by him and out the door into the warm sunshine.

Once we’re away from the estate, I take a deep breath and let it out, slowly. I’m going to need a lot of deep breathing to get through today.

After dropping Tennyson off, Mayer drives me the short distance to work, and when I enter, the smell of baking cake envelopes me, relaxing me with the comfort of normalcy.

I shuffle into the kitchen, spotting Erin and Dena out of the corner of my eye, whisking and whipping stainless steel bowls of frosting.

Dena looks up. “I heard you’re getting married,” she screeches at the top of her lungs, never missing a beat as she continues to whisk. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Erin gives me a cringe face, and I move closer until I stop at the prep table. “I’m sorry. It’s been a whirlwind.”

“I have so many ideas for the perfect cake.” She reaches in and gives me a tight hug.

“Can you believe it?” Erin asks. “Gabriel Prince.”

Dena’s green eyes get bigger. “I know. I nearly had a heart attack when I

read it in *Gossip Weekly*.”

The fact it’s in a magazine shouldn’t surprise me, but it’s all very surreal. I need to get used to having my life splashed across glossy magazines for all to see.

Dena hugs me again and then darts away to check on her cake in the oven. We spend the next few hours preparing several orders and chattering about my new “life.”

When Dena goes to her office, Erin crosses the kitchen. “So, are you ready to fill me in on those details?” She wiggles her shoulders and puckers her lips toward me.

“Well, there’s really nothing to tell.”

Erin parks a hand on her hip, tossing a hand towel over her shoulder. “Tell me about the kiss.”

I lean closer. “It was just a normal kiss.”

“Oh, please. I know there’s more.”

I shoo her away with a laugh, looking over the remaining orders for the day. “I have to leave a little early to meet with the wedding planner today. Can I borrow your car for an hour?”

She nods, her eyes narrowing a bit on me. “Sure thing, but don’t you have a fancy driver to chauffeur you around now?”

“I do,” I say, hesitant to share exactly what I’m about to do, “but this is a surprise errand I don’t want Gabriel to know about.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“Nope, this is a special surprise.”

Erin’s attention is locked on me, and I hope I don’t sound too suspicious.

“It’s still parked out back?” I ask her, holding my breath.

“Yes. Everything ok?”

“Yes. You’re the greatest,” I say with a big smile.

Erin watches me for a few minutes longer trying to see if I’m lying, but then she must decide everything’s ok like I said and starts preparing a

sampler platter for a later appointment.

I throw myself into baking, trying my hardest to not think about meeting Ronin in just a few short hours. Givens Park is not too far from here, so I'm hoping I can make this work without anyone finding out.

At one-thirty, I say goodbye to Erin, grabbing her keys from her outstretched hand. "I'll be back before you know I'm gone."

I hustle out the back door and into Erin's white Honda.

On the way to the park, every light in town catches me, like a glowing red signal I should turn back. Finally, I hit the open road and after a few minutes make a right into the lot. I park under the shade of an oak tree and scan the grassy area, looking for Ronin before sending a text. "Are you here?"

"Yeah," is his quick response.

I look up and there he is in jeans and a t-shirt, not the trench coat and hat I was half expecting.

He eyes me through the windshield, and rounds the hood to hop in the passenger seat of the car. "Thanks for meeting me."

"What's going on?" I ask him. "Why the cloak and dagger stuff? And what do you mean about danger?"

"That's a lot of questions." His eyes roam over me.

"Are you going to answer them?"

"Yes, you're in danger. There's a man named Bishop Blackstone, and you're on his radar." He shakes his head. "He isn't a good guy, Clem."

I suck in a breath, not telling Ronin I know Bishop all too well. "Oh."

"I'm worried about you. And Gabriel is too thick headed to care."

I chew on my bottom lip. "I don't think Gabriel will do anything to hurt me," I say, gingerly.

Ronin turns to face me. "Neither do I. That's not what I'm saying." He blows out an annoyed breath. "Inadvertently, Gabriel may cause you and Tennyson harm."

"Why? What does Bishop want?" I have a pretty good idea what Bishop

Blackstone wants with me, but I want to hear why he thinks he's sniffing around. Find out how much he knows.

His eyes stay trained on mine. "He wants to stop the wedding at all cost."

"But, why?"

"Let's say the wedding doesn't happen, ok?"

I nod.

"Then, Gabriel will lose everything. The company will be left vulnerable. All the deals Gabriel has in the works will fall through. It'll be a mess, and Bishop will be there to pick up all the pieces."

"Gabriel will have literally nothing thanks to dear ol' Grandpa?"

"He'll have his inheritance and a few other trust funds, but he'll no longer be in control of Prince Holdings, and all their subsidiaries. His legacy will be ruined."

"Can't Gabriel and I just run off to the courthouse? Do a quick wedding?"

Ronin's smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Gabriel has a certain standard to uphold. I assumed you realized this by now."

"Right. I get it." This whole thing is making me nervous. Who knows what Bishop is capable of.

"I can help you get out." Ronin's eyes are set with determination. "I can help you leave."

"Leave? No way." I shake my head. "I can't be on the run. Absolutely not." I'll stay here and take my chances with Bishop. I peek at my watch. "I have to go. I need to get back to work." I don't tell Ronin about my plans with the wedding planner. The less people who know my whereabouts, the better.

Chapter 22

Gabriel

“What do you mean he’s missing?” I say into the phone to Dean.

“I mean we followed him to Zanzibar, where he just vanished after leaving Bishop’s place.”

I drop my head into my hand as I sit parked outside the office building that houses Lana Devario, the wedding planner. “Zanzibar? How could you lose him on an island?”

“He caught a small boat to Africa, and then was gone.”

“But he made it to Blackstone’s place?”

“Yes.”

Today of all days has to be the day we can’t find Ronin. I should have sent someone with him to pay off Blackstone, but I figured he could handle it. I grind my teeth attempting to regain my control.

“Did you check the nightclubs and underground?”

“We’re sweeping the city, leaving no stone unturned.”

“Keep me updated,” I say before hanging up and exiting the car.

It’s two fifty-five and Clementine’s nowhere to be found. I know this

because I scanned the street for her while I was on the phone. I unclench my teeth and remind myself she still has time, and she was the one who insisted I be here. I relax my shoulders, assuming the sophisticated manner I was brought up to exude in public, and head inside where the receptionist immediately escorts me to Lana's office.

"Mr. Prince, hello," her husky voice greets me when I step inside the rectangular room filled with enough lace and fresh flowers to make me light headed.

It's what you imagine a wedding planner's office would look and smell like—swatches of fabric and pictures of women in wedding gowns, all surrounded by the overwhelming scent of roses. I swallow my urge to gag. Clementine is going to pay for this.

"Lana, hi. Please, call me Gabriel."

She rises and crosses the space to shake my hand. "Where's the fiancée?"

"She should be here soon." *She better be.*

I glance at my phone. I'd sent Clementine one text message asking her where she was before I walked into this building. The text still sits there, unanswered. I hate the fact I don't know where she is, and I contemplate putting a tracker on her phone. Mayer would let me know if she wasn't at work. Most likely she got held up.

I wish she'd just quit her job already. She doesn't need the money. I understand she doesn't want to give up that part of herself, but she could always open her own cake shop, or hell, bake all day in my state of the art kitchen. I shouldn't like the idea of her always at home cooking as much as I do.

"We can get started as soon as she arrives," Lana says. "Please, sit. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you."

I take a seat in one of the two leather chairs in front of her desk, and we sit in silence until Lana fidgets and starts rambling.

“I’ve spoken with the Juniper about security for the event,” Lana states, lapsing into a detailed summary of what they provide.

“I’ll have my own security as well.” You can never have too much security. Never.

The door flies open and Clementine rushes in with flushed cheeks. “I’m so sorry I’m late.” She takes the seat next to me, but doesn’t look me in the eyes. “Cake emergency.”

Lana smiles. “It happens. I was just going over the security details with Mr. Prince.”

“Security, right.” Clementine places her bag on the floor. “I think we need lots of security because…” her words fall away and her eyes, for the first time since she plowed into the room, meet mine. There’s a flush to her face, and I’m not sure if it all has to do with her running late, or something else.

“The security will be handled by my team,” I reiterate, letting both ladies know I have everything covered.

Lana takes a seat behind her desk and taps on her keyboard. “Just making some notes. Ok, moving on.” She glances up at Clementine. “The wedding cake?”

I touch Clementine’s hand when she doesn’t respond right away, and she jumps a bit. “Clementine will make a great cake.” I remove my hand, hoping Lana didn’t notice the discomfort on my adoring fiancée’s face. She really needs to learn how to be a better actress.

“Well, I’m not a professional yet.” Clementine’s cheeks turn a brighter shade of red and she squirms a bit in her seat. “But, I can do the cake.”

Lana continues with her checklist of items while Clementine smooths down her wild tresses, and I’m positive something’s not quite right with her.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I say, standing from my chair. The nagging in my gut refuses to go away, and I always trust my gut. “I’ll just be a moment.”

I ignore Clementine’s questioning gaze and slip out of the room, shutting

the door behind me. I grab my phone and move further down the hallway for some privacy. My finger smashes into the dial button connecting to Mayer on the first ring.

“Where was Clementine this afternoon?” I say into the phone as soon as he answers.

“She was at work.”

“You drove her from work to here?” I ask him, still uneasy with the way she was behaving.

“Yes, I drove her to work this morning. She stayed there until we rushed across town to make it here.”

“And she didn’t leave at all?”

“No, she was there all day,” he confirms.

Maybe it really was nothing more than a cake emergency. A voice in the back of my head is having a hard time believing that, but Mayer is one of my best, and I trust him. I hang up the phone and head back inside where Lana and Clementine now talk about flowers.

“What kind of flowers would you like?” Clementine asks me. “I was thinking the crisantemi.”

Lana holds her hand up. “Actually, that flower is more for funerals.”

“Perfect.” Clementine smiles, and based on that answer, it looks like she’s back to normal. Maybe all my worrying was for nothing.

I resume my seat. “Lana, we’ll take roses and lilies.”

Clementine looks over at me. “I thought you said you didn’t care.”

I eye Lana before directing my full attention on Clementine. “Well, I guess I do. The lily was my mother’s favorite flower. And the crisantemi is what we had at my parents’ funeral. I don’t want to be reminded of that day on my wedding day. Call me old fashioned.”

“Oh,” is all Clementine says in response to that. “I actually adore roses, so that works for me.”

I shoot her a smile letting her know I appreciate her easy acceptance of

my reasons. “What’s next?” I ask in a more upbeat tone. “Maybe we can release rats at the end of the ceremony instead of doves?”

Clementine remains still, attempting to hide her smile, while Lana gawks at the both of us. I’m sure she’s never come across a couple like us before, but that’s the thing, we’re not a couple. One wicked hot kiss in the back of a limo doesn’t make us boyfriend and girlfriend. I don’t like how much my heart kicks with what I’m afraid is disappointment.

Lana launches into a spiel about which foods are best to serve for which time of the year, and I’ll be honest, I zone out. Instead of listening to talk of vegan options, I focus on Clementine’s profile and the way her bottom lip is slightly fuller than the top. The way her brows pull in and down as she concentrates on the selection of foods Lana presents to us. I’m not interested in any of it, because, really, the only thing I want to eat is inside the jeans Clementine is wearing.

“Is that all?” I ask, ready to escape, when they finish up the menu options. How did I let her convince me to sit through this ridiculous meeting?

Lana smiles, like she has a big secret to tell us. “Well, I was thinking... if you want to really wow people, we could bring in a few statues from London and Greece for decor at the reception.”

Clementine’s eyes widen and she turns to face me. “Do you want statues?”

“Do you?”

“Honestly? No. Sometimes less is more.”

I hate that I like that answer as much as I do. Clementine never ceases to surprise me. “Then, no statues.”

We continue going over every detail and when we get to the guest list, Clementine pales at the number of politicians attending the wedding. I pat her on the hand, attempting to reassure her it’s no big deal.

“Why would they even want to come?” she asks me. “Shouldn’t they be governing?”

I laugh. “It’s polite to invite. Whether they show up or not is another story.”

We finish up the meeting, leaving no stone, or lace frill, unturned about the details of the wedding. Truly, I’m surprised my grandfather didn’t plan the whole thing before he died. I’m sure he’s laughing his ass off from down below.

Lana walks us out and advises Clementine to call her if she changes her mind about the statues.

“She really wants those statues,” Clementine whispers as I open the door for her.

I chuckle. “Why don’t you ride home with me,” I suggest as we walk out to the parking lot together.

She looks up at me. “What about Mayer?”

I grin. “He’s a big boy. He can find his way home.”

Clementine fiddles with the purse strap slung over her shoulder, but doesn’t accept my offer. “I have to pick up Tenny.”

I cock a brow. “Do you not want to ride with me?”

She laughs, but it’s not a real one. “I’m not sure how to answer that.”

Stefan pulls up to where we stand, and I send a text to Mayer letting him know Clementine is with me.

“Get in,” I say, opening the car door.

“So bossy,” she says, finally entering into the back of the sedan.

I slide in, thankful that Tennyson’s car seat separates us. “Take us to Little Stars Academy, Stefan.”

The chilled air in the car does nothing to cool the heat rushing through my veins from the sudden memory of Clementine riding my hand. I loosen my tie, and try to remind myself there’s a child’s seat in here and my thoughts are very inappropriate. She doesn’t seem to have the same problem I do. She’s stiff, sitting close to the door, gazing out the window. It’s almost like she’s frozen in place. Like a statue, actually. Maybe, I could have a

statue of her commissioned for the ceremony. Lana would love that.

“Are you ok?” I ask her, once Stefan has pulled out of the parking lot.

“I’m fine,” she answers all too quickly.

“You sure? You were a little off in the meeting.”

She sags against the seat. “It’s just everything. It’s all catching up to me. It’s a little overwhelming.”

I sit with one arm propped against the window sill of the car door, tugging at my eyebrow as I study her. “You sure that’s all it is?”

She nods. “I’m sure.” She looks over at me. “The shop closes early tomorrow, at two pm, so I thought that would be perfect for you to come taste cakes.”

I lick my lips. “I’d love to taste your cake.”

A red stain paints her cheeks and she turns back to the window.

When we arrive at the modest brick building to pick up Tennyson, I follow her inside.

“You don’t have to come with me,” Clementine says, her steps as clipped as her tone.

“I know,” I answer, glancing at the rocking turtles jutting from the ground and plastic cars scattered behind the fence to the right of the building. It’s all very happy, and I can almost hear the kid’s laughter, even though the playground is empty.

Clementine pushes a button beside the metal door and we’re buzzed into a gleaming white reception area filled with bright colors on the wall.

While Clementine lets the blonde behind a glass window know she’s picking up Tennyson, I stare at the artwork of stick figures with swollen heads and disproportionate bodies and smile. She’s right. They do look like the paintings my grandfather cherished so much.

Escorted by a brunette with a kind smile, Tennyson bounds into the waiting area.

Clementine takes his small hand in hers and we head back to the car. It’s

all so domesticated. And I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I don't hate it.

"Let's do apples," Tennyson says on the drive to the estate.

"Apples?" I ask.

Clementine smiles, staring over at me. "He wants to go to his favorite restaurant."

"What's that?"

"Applebee's."

"Apple what?"

She laughs, and the sound flutters throughout the car like music, making me smile.

"You'll love it," she tells me.

"Sounds great." I rarely ever eat out, mainly due to the fact I have a personal chef, but I tell the change of plans to Stefan, and he turns the car around, heading toward the strip mall.

This should be fun. And I don't mean that in a smart-ass way. Since Clementine has moved in, we haven't had very many meals together. Most nights, I opt to eat in my office, working on contracts and making sure Bishop stays far away from my wedding. Plus, I don't want to impede on Clementine's time with her son. I almost feel like an outsider looking in, but I'm glad we're remedying it.

My grandfather was never about family dinners. I think he ate in his office too, working late and dining on the souls of his competition. I've inherited his work ethic, I guess. Too bad none of it rubbed off on Ronin.

Stefan pulls into the parking lot of the local Applebee's, and I follow Clementine and Tennyson to the entrance and open the door with an oversized apple on the glass. Inside, the place is packed, with a giant bar in the middle of the restaurant filled with people. The noise is deafening and I blink at all the happy families enjoying each other.

"How many tonight?" the blue-haired hostess asks at the podium near the front.

“Three,” Clementine says, glancing back at me.

“This way,” she says, grabbing menus.

We follow her to a booth near the back of the restaurant and slide in. The hostess puts down a menu in front of me, and one for Clementine, and then gives Tennyson a piece of paper and some crayons.

Tennyson is on cloud nine, and grabs the crayons and starts scribbling on the paper.

I open the menu. “Normally, the places I eat don’t have pictures of the food. It’s helpful.”

Clementine laughs a little from across the tiny booth. “That’s a shame. Tennyson loves it here.”

“Well, what’s good?” I ask her, letting her choose my next meal.

“I always get a burger,” she says. “We should do an order of mozzarella sticks. They’re Tenny’s favorite.”

I’m completely out of my element, but it’s something I can come to appreciate.

I glance around, observing the other families enjoying their meals, and I can’t remember the last time I ever spent real time like this with my own family.

The server, a bouncy young lady with long brown hair tied back in a ponytail, approaches our table with a smile all too big. “Evening, can I start you all with something to drink?”

Clementine orders for herself and Tennyson, and then the server looks at me. “Bottled water and an order of mozzarella sticks.”

“Promise you’ll love them,” Clementine says as the server walks away. “They taste so much better than caviar.”

I laugh. “I’ve had fried cheese before.”

She raises a brow. “Seriously?”

“You think all I eat is caviar and champagne for every meal?”

She removes the green tape from the napkin around her silverware,

unraveling the cutlery. She places the napkin on her lap. “I guess I don’t really know much about you.” Her eyes meet mine, and for once in my life I don’t want to turn away.

Tennyson interrupts our moment, showing his picture to his mother. “See?”

“It’s very nice.” She turns the paper over. “Can you circle the food you want?”

He smiles, using the red crayon to draw a big circle around a corn dog.

“Now that I’ve never had,” I say as the server arrives with our drinks.

“Oh, we’re going to change that right now.”

I feel like a lot of things are going to change, whether I want them to or not.

Chapter 23

Clementine

Gabriel is so out of his element. It's almost comical the way he reads over the menu, trying to find something to eat. Most nights, when I get home to the estate, I'm so busy with Tennyson, I never really notice what Gabriel does for his meals. He's usually locked away in his office doing whatever men like him do.

A man passes by us, giving us a stare, and I can't shake the feeling of what Ronin said to me today. Or the feeling I've had since that darn cowboy mentioned Bishop Blackstone's name at the art gallery event.

I feel like everyone's watching me.

Like I'm hiding in plain sight.

Am I putting us in danger by eating out in public? I glance around and giggle to myself. One place no one will ever think to look for Gabriel Prince and his soon-to-be wife is at the local Applebee's. I can almost relax here. Almost.

And I do have to admit, watching Gabriel in this place is quite funny.

The server takes our order, and I throw on an extra kid's meal of the corn

dog. Just so Gabriel can try it.

“Everyone needs to try a weiner fried in dough at least once,” I tell him.

His dark eyes fill with humor, and I remind myself not to be swayed by his gorgeous face. So I don’t look at him, I busy myself with helping Tennyson draw pictures on his little menu. I try to enjoy the normalcy of the evening, and push down the stress of this afternoon. With the wedding, and Ronin, and now Bishop, I’m not sure how much more of this I can take.

“Are you ok?” Gabriel asks.

I gaze up at him, noticing how acclimated he’s become to his new surroundings. He’s like a chameleon, able to blend in with any situation.

“I’m fine,” I assure him. “Just tired from a long day.”

“Wedding preparations are tedious, no doubt about that.”

“What’s tedious?” Tenny asks as the server sets our order of mozzarella sticks on the table.

“Something you don’t really want to do,” Gabriel answers.

“Then why do you do it?”

“Well, sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to because they’re necessary.”

“Careful, they’re hot,” I warn Tennyson, taking my fork and placing one on the appetizer plate in front of him. I scoop a little marinara sauce onto his plate as well and then cut up his stick. “Blow on it.”

Gabriel watches with fascination. “Where do you learn that?”

“Learn what?”

“To be a Mom.”

I smile. “It just comes naturally, I guess. Lots of trial and error, for sure.” I can think of countless times Tennyson stuck food in his mouth that was too hot.

“You’re good at it. I can barely remember my own mother.”

I pull apart a mozzarella stick as I watch his face grow somber. “I’m sorry,” I say, knowing Gabriel lost his mother and father when he was very

young.

“It’s fine.” He selects a fat mozzarella stick from the plate and dips it into the red sauce. “She’s the one who introduced me to kites.” He takes a bite and sets the remainder onto the little white plate.

“I have a kite,” Tennyson adds.

“You sure do,” I say. “He may love them as much as you.”

I grin at Gabriel and his return smile is breathtaking. Sometimes I forget how good-looking he is.

Thankfully, he turns his attention to Tennyson. “We’ll have to fly a kite soon.”

All the words Ronin said to me come rushing back, and I pay more attention to the mozzarella stick in my hand than the gorgeous man sitting across the booth from me.

We’re in danger. I need to stop living in a fantasy, and remember we’re in the real world. Gabriel makes it so easy to forget about the world around us.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I WATCH THE SECOND HAND ON THE CLOCK FLOAT around the clock on the wall, waiting for Gabriel to show up. It’s like watching and waiting for water to boil. I have a few sampler cakes fresh from the oven, ready for him to taste test.

The shop is closed, and it’s eerily quiet in the back kitchen. My phone rings, and I pick it up from the countertop. My hand shakes as I flip it over in my hand. There’s no number, and I debate letting it go to voicemail, but instead I swipe to answer, in case it’s Gabriel calling from somewhere.

“Hello.”

“I’m coming...” a male voice says and then the call drops.

My heart immediately thumps faster.

I glance around, making sure I’m definitely alone here before I send a

text to Erin.

“Hey. How’s Tenny?”

A few minutes tick by before she answers.

“Good. He and Troy are having a superhero battle.”

I smile. This paranoia is really getting to me.

“Thanks for picking him up,” I send back.

“Of course. I’ll bring him home around seven. In case you’re busy licking frosting off of Gabriel.”

“Oh my god, stop! He’s tasting cake. That’s all!”

“Mhm.” She sends a series of x-rated emojis that make me laugh, and I tell her I’ll call her later, just before my phone rings again. This time Gabriel’s name flashes across the screen.

I let out a deep breath of relief. “Thank God,” I say into the phone.

“Clementine, is everything ok?”

“Everything’s fine,” I say a little too upbeat.

“Well, I’m outside. Want to let me in?”

“Sure thing.” I hang up the phone, toss it on the counter, and rush to the front door of the shop.

Gabriel stands on the other side of the glass, shocking me by not having on a suit. Instead of his usual attire, he’s dressed in dark jeans and a white button down with the cuffs rolled up on his forearms, showcasing his watch. The arm porn is just as lethal as the suit porn.

“Come on in,” I say, and lock the door quickly behind him.

“Smells good.”

So does he. “Hope you think it tastes as good.” I lead Gabriel to the back of the shop and into the kitchen. “I have a few samples.”

“I love samples.” He takes a seat on a stool at the stainless steel table where I’ve arranged a few different flavors.

“This is the first one,” I point to the mini red velvet cake loaded with cream cheese frosting. “It’s one of my favorites.”

He picks up the fork next to the plate. “I’m not going to lie, I love cake,” he says with a smile before he digs in and takes a bite.

Just like that, I’m jealous of a fork. I want to be the tines sliding into his mouth, touching his tongue, and being sucked by his lips. No one has ever made me wish I was cutlery before.

He’d be a knife. One side smooth and cunning, not at all scary, because you know it will never hurt you. The other side sharp and evil, just waiting for the slightest slip of your hand to draw blood.

Gabriel is nothing compared to Bishop, though. If Gabriel is a knife, than Bishop is a whole army of swords. Ready to slay.

Gabriel lets out a slight moan as he takes another bite of the red velvet cake, and now, more than anything, I wish I was cake.

I look away, knowing his lips and smile will be my downfall. “This is lemon with a hint of elderflower.” I point to the yellow cake in front of him, and he raises a brow.

“You’re spoiling me, Clem.”

My breath hitches. It’s the first time Gabriel has ever called me Clem and not Clementine, and I like it. “It’s just cake,” I whisper.

He takes a bite, slow and sensual. “It’s never *just* cake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sit down,” he pats the stool next to him. I do as he says, and he picks up his fork, swiping another piece of the cake. “It’s like sex.” He brings the fork up, offering it to me, waiting for me to open my mouth.

I take the bite of the lemon cake, not breaking eye contact, letting the full flavors illuminate my tastebuds.

“It’s an explosion of flavors, racing straight through you.” His voice is husky and low. “Opening up all your senses.”

“Cake does all that?” I ask, focused on his lips.

“Yeah. And if it’s really good, really fucking good, done the right way, it makes you moan, telling your body to do it again. And again.”

“Yeah,” I breathe out. Chills race up my spine, and my heart beats rapidly in my chest.

He draws closer. “This tastes as good as you.” Before I can say or do anything, he kisses me.

I wrap my arms around his neck and stand, moving into the spot between his legs. A groan rumbles out of him, and he grips my hips, pulling me flush against him, as his tongue explores my mouth.

“I just can’t seem to stop kissing you,” I murmur when he breaks away to run his lips along my jaw.

“I know the feeling.” And then his lips find mine once again. And it’s the kind of kiss you dream about. The game-changer type of kiss. The panty-melter type of kiss.

And I’m pretty sure Gabriel just disintegrated mine.

Thoughts about Ronin, Bishop, and the wedding are forgotten at the sound of the throaty sounds Gabriel makes as he deepens the kiss. It turns me on, and I can’t stop myself. I’m no longer in control of my own body. It’s powered by pure lust and want. In this moment, I’m driven by my own selfish need. I haven’t done anything for myself in a long time. I don’t get the chance to be selfish. I don’t get to think about me.

But, right here, right now, all I can focus on is doing something for Clementine. Letting go. Feeling free.

And I don’t care.

Gabriel’s hands move lower, down my neck, tracing over my collarbone and ending there before he breaks the kiss. “I love the way cake tastes on your lips.” His hand brushes across my breasts. “You’re dangerous.”

His mention of danger causes reality to crash back all around me and dispel this little cake cocoon we’re wrapped in. I want to tell him about Ronin’s warning and the phone call that took place before he arrived.

His lips are still so close to mine. “I think we can go with the lemon and elderflower cake.” I step away. “We should get going home.”

I can't tell Gabriel. I can't tell anyone.

Chapter 24

Gabriel

Kissing Clementine is the icing on the cake. It really is. The cake is good, but the icing is so much sweeter. I don't know what it is, but every time I'm around her, I find myself staring at her lips. Plump. Pink. Perfectly decadent. It's becoming a serious problem.

I've never been this affected by anyone in my entire life. Now I see why my grandfather possibly picked her for me. He knew I'd become obsessed with the mere presence of her, and he thought that would be fun to watch from his spot next to Satan.

The man had issues. And so do I, apparently. It's wrapped in a plum colored halter dress.

If she can turn it off so easily, so can I. For the most part.

With a semi, I push away from the countertop and stand. "I've already sent Mayer home. I'll have Stefan drive us home together."

As if I didn't have my tongue in her mouth mere minutes ago, she slides her phone out of her purse and gives it a once over. "Ok. Tenny has a playdate with Troy, so Erin is bringing him back later. And I have to figure

out the bridesmaid dresses tonight.”

I pick up the dirty plates. “Where should I put these?”

“Trash,” she says.

“You throw your plates away?” I ask. “I’ve got more money than I know what to do with and even I don’t throw my plates away.”

She laughs. “They’re plastic. It’s the poor man’s china.”

“Ah.” I toss them in the garbage can while she flutters around the industrial kitchen, packing away the unused cake and icing.

“I just have to clean up here for a few minutes.”

“Let me help you.”

She hands me a damp dish towel. “Careful, a woman can get used to a man who cleans.”

I wink. “I can do a lot more than that too.” Why am I still flirting with this woman? What is she doing to me?

“But can you cook?” she challenges, turning to place a covered bowl in the stainless steel fridge.

Then I say something that even I can’t believe my own ears. “Let me cook for you.”

She whips around to face me, her amber eyes shining bright. “You cook too?”

“Yes. I cook too.” I almost sound like a caveman complete with a brutish tone, and Clementine laughs again.

“Now this I have to see to believe.”

We finish putting everything away and when we leave the shop, she double checks the locks and then we drive back to the estate. On the ride, I send a text to my personal chef to make sure the things I need are stocked.

When Clementine and I enter the house, I head toward the kitchen. “Did you want me to cook you dinner tonight?”

I could easily call the home chef in, even though I texted him and gave him the night off, and have him whip us something up, but I don’t want to do

that. I want to impress Clementine for some insane reason.

“Yes, I’m starving.” She moves closer, the sweet smell of her drifting closer as well. “So, what are you making me?”

“I make a mean steak. We could use the grill out back.” I jab a thumb over my shoulder, motioning to the outdoor kitchen complete with a state of the art master grill.

“Sounds perfect.”

She follows me through the house and out onto the expansive patio.

Clementine takes a seat on a stool next to the counter where I’ll be cooking. “Front row seats.”

I ignite the grill, letting it preheat, and then put an apron around my neck.

“This just gets even better,” she says, with a smile. “You have your very own apron.”

I glance down at my ‘An Apron Is Just A Cape On Backwards’ apron, smoothing my hand down the front. “I had this bought as soon as you and Tennyson moved in.” I raise a brow and point my spatula at her. “Don’t let this fool you. I’m a master chef.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to eat then,” she teases me. “It’s too bad Tenny is missing it.”

“We have a whole year.” Those words hit me like a ton of bricks. My mind can’t even process the thought of having to spend nights cooking for Clementine and her son, but it kind of excites me a little.

She doesn’t say anything, just stares at me.

I open the small fridge in my cooking space and pull out the platter with two filets and get to work seasoning the marbled cuts of beef with sea salt and cracked black pepper. Chin in hand, Clementine watches my every move.

“Now, I just need to let my meat rest.” Her eyes shoot up to mine and I grin, bracing my palms on the counter. “You’ve got a dirty mind, Clem.”

“Well...no...I,” she fumbles around, before finding her words, “well, who wouldn’t think that?”

This is all so domesticated. I've never had a woman around. And I've never cooked for one. It's something I've never experienced before, and I'll be honest, it's not horrible. I'm enjoying this—a lot.

“Would you like some wine?”

She nods and I uncork a bottle of red and fill a glass for her. She sips it as I season stalks of asparagus and place them on the upper level of the grill.

The beef sizzles when I set it on the grate, and the heady aroma makes me wonder why I haven't done this more often.

“It really is beautiful here,” Clementine says, looking at the streaks of pinks in the sky from the setting sun over the mountains. “Makes me wonder if your grandfather appreciated the beauty or if he was focused on building a house to rival it.”

“My grandfather had this house built for my grandmother.”

She turns her attention back to me with wide honeyed eyes. “I can't picture Joseph Prince in love.”

I laugh. “The Prince men don't fall in love often, but when they do, apparently, they fall hard.”

She twirls her hair between her fingers. “Have you ever been in love?”

I shake my head. “No. Have you?”

She stares downward. “No.”

“Not even with Tennyson's father?”

She doesn't answer for half a heartbeat. “I have something to tell you...” her words fall away and I glance up to give her my full attention.

“Ok, shoot.” I wait for whatever it is Clementine needs to say to me, but she doesn't say a word. “Change your mind?” I ask as I flip over the steaks on the grill, making sure not to press the spatula down on the meat so it doesn't lose its juices.

“Maybe later. Tell me about your grandmother.”

I want her to open up to me, but grant her wish as I tell her about my grandmother. “Her name was Rose Marie, and she was a nurse. She loved to

bake, just like you. I barely remember her, she died when I was very young.”

She takes a drink of wine, and I continue, “She loved planting roses. She had those rose bushes put in.” I point to the rose bushes lining the garden back gate. “She and my mother would take care of them together.”

Clementine cups her chin in her hand, leaning her elbow on the countertop. “I love roses too. It’s something about their bloom, so big and bright. It lights up a room.”

I stare at her, wondering if she realizes it’s her that lights up any room. “Yeah, I guess.” Our conversation falls into a comfortable lull as I finish cooking. “Hope you’re hungry.”

“Starved.” She peers over her shoulder, back to the roses. “Would it be ok if I tended to the roses sometimes?”

“Seriously?”

She smiles. “Yes, I’d love to.”

“I’ll make sure the groundskeeper knows you’ll be out there.” I turn off the heat and plate the meal. “Ready to eat?”

She nods. “Looks delicious.”

I can’t stop staring at her lips. And I don’t know how I’ll be able to handle a whole meal with this woman sitting across from me. Every time I’ve seen her eat it’s like watching porn. She makes me hard with just a soft moan from her lips.

We move over to the patio table. “Bon appetit,” I tell her.

“Can I ask you something?” she says, taking a seat.

“Sure.”

“You’ll keep me and Tennyson safe, won’t you?”

I stare into her worried eyes. “Of course, I will.”

The tension in her shoulders eases and she relaxes a bit. “Thank you.” She takes a bite. “Mmm, this is delicious.”

I could say the same thing about her lips. And I want to find out if the rest of her tastes just as sweet.

Chapter 25

Clementine

“I’m so happy to be away from work,” Erin says, rifling through a rack of expensive bridesmaids dresses. “Oh, I like this.” She holds up a long pink dress.

I park a hand on my hip. “Really? I’d never peg you for a pink dress kinda girl.”

I’ve lost her. She doesn’t answer me, and her eyes lock on something by the entrance of the store.

I follow her gaze and spot Jordan walking in, holding a clear bag with a peach dress inside.

“Oh no, why’s he here?” she whispers, still holding onto the pink dress like she can’t believe her very own eyes.

“I’m sure it’s some wedding detail.”

Jordan gives a half-smile when he sees us, and makes his way through the store to us. “Hey, ladies,” he says.

Erin must pick up on some body cue, and immediately asks him, “What’s wrong?”

“The wedding is off.” He rubs his hand across the five-o’clock shadow that’s more of a past midnight beard. “It’s a mess.”

I grab the dress from Erin’s hand and put it back on the rack. “I’m so sorry.”

Erin rubs Jordan’s shoulder with a comforting caress. “I’m really sorry, too. If you ever need to talk, or anything.”

“Thanks, I’m just returning my sister’s bridesmaid dress.”

I step away, letting Erin console her friend, and wander to the front of the store while they discuss Jordan’s wedding, or lack thereof.

Outside of the glass store front, people amble by, and I watch for a minute, wondering if they’re doing things they want to do or *have* to do. Like me. Across the street, a man in a ball cap stands, shoulder propped against the brick corner of a coffee shop, staring right at me. The fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I can’t make out his face, so I inch a little closer to the window.

Is he watching me?

He turns away, and slips into the shadows of the alley.

“What are you doing?” Erin asks and I nearly jump out of my skin. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah.” I wipe a few strands of hair off my forehead. “You just scared me.”

Erin looks me up and down before turning to gaze out the window. “You sure?”

I nod, trying to convince myself that he was just a stranger standing there for any other reason but me. “I’m sure.” I turn my attention to a long, silky lavender dress hanging on the rack. “How about this?”

“Oh, I love that,” she says, removing it.

As Erin tries on the gown in the dressing room, my phone beeps. I pull it out and nearly drop it when I read the text from an unknown number— “I see you.”

“MOMMY, CAN YOU READ ME A STORY,” TENNYSON SAYS AFTER HIS BATH later in the evening. After I left the dress shop, I headed straight to Tenny’s daycare to grab him early. I’ve felt scatterbrained since the text came through. And I want nothing more than to just lay with Tennyson and forget about all of this madness.

“Of course.”

I do a quick brush of his hair, and make sure he brushes his teeth before we head off to his bedroom. It’s strange being here. I constantly find myself looking over my shoulder wondering where Gabriel is. Almost as if his eyes are on me all the time. Most nights I spy on him out in the courtyard, flying his drone in silence. All alone, controlling the scraps of metal and plastic, flying them higher and higher into the summer night sky.

It’s almost soothing watching him, alone in my room, making sure he can’t see me spying.

But, now after the meeting with Ronin and everything else going on, I feel like a whole new set of eyes are on me—Bishop’s. And I don’t know what to do about it.

Part of me just wants to tell Gabriel everything. Let him in on the burden that has plagued me for years. He said he’d protect me. It would be so easy to let him take care of everything.

But, I don’t know if I can.

“One story,” I say, sitting on the bed with him after I tuck him under his *Batman* covers.

“Two, please?” His big brown eyes stare up at me, and how can you say no to this face?

“Ok, two.”

I grab his favorite books and start on the first page, feeling the stress of the day empty as I lay my head next to his. I’m out before I even make it to

the second book, all the excitement and mayhem of the afternoon finally catching up to me.

“Clementine? You awake?” Gabriel’s voice calls from my dreams. “Clementine.”

I feel his hand touch my cheek and I no longer know if I’m dreaming or fully awake. I jerk upright in the bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. “Gabriel, what time is it?”

“It’s still early, not even nine.”

I glance over at a sleeping Tennyson. “I must have fallen asleep reading him his story.”

“I have something to show you,” Gabriel says. “It just arrived today.”

I stand, doing a little stretch, before I follow him out of the room and down the staircase.

Gabriel walks with long, easy strides into the living room. “Now, I didn’t know where you’d want this.”

My eyes widen at the sight of the painting resting against the couch. It’s the painting I stared at all night long at the benefit Gabriel and I attended. The same one where I met one of Bishop’s men with the cowboy hat.

“Is that for me?” I ask, stepping closer to it.

“Yeah, I bought it.” His usually hard demeanor softens. “I knew you liked it and I wanted you to have it.”

I gaze back at the painting, finding my favorite soft pink strokes on the canvas, letting it calm my nerves. The same way it soothed me as Bishop’s man tried to throw me for a loop.

“You really bought this for me?” I step even closer wanting to make sure it’s really here and not a dream.

He shrugs, like it’s no big deal, but to me it’s the biggest. “Yes.”

I want to hug him, and normally, I probably would, but I need to get some of this weight off my shoulders. “Can we talk?” I ask, moving to sit on the couch. I don’t really know who to trust anymore.

“Sure.” He crosses his arms, crossing the room to join me.

“Are there people trying to stop our wedding?” I already know the answer, but I want to know what Gabriel has planned to keep Bishop away and anyone else who may have an issue with it.

“Did someone tell you that?” His eyes don’t waver from mine, and the intense stare he’s throwing my way makes me uneasy about whether to trust him. He’s suspicious and I fear I may have taken this all too far.

I shake my head.

“Then why do you ask?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Sit down,” he says. “I need to tell you something I should have told you before. There’s a man, Bishop Blackstone, and let’s just say he’s very involved.”

“Involved how?”

“He doesn’t want us to get married. He wants to see me vulnerable.”

“Is he dangerous?” Once again, I already know the answer. I’ve known the answer since the first moment I stared into the dark eyes of Bishop Blackstone. I’ve known since the first time he hurt my family. But I want to know Gabriel isn’t afraid of him.

“No. Yes, but he’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Gabriel actually believes the words he says, and it makes me want to believe it too. He’s already told me more than I could have ever expected.

“Are you sure?”

“You have nothing to worry about. I told you I would keep you safe and I meant it,” Gabriel assures me.

“I just know mafia...” My voice falters. I messed up and we both know it. “I mean...”

“Who told you Bishop was mafia?”

I shake my head, trying my best to get myself out of the corner I’ve trapped myself in. “I..uhh...” I don’t know how to answer his question. How

do I tell him that I've known Bishop for years, maybe even better than Gabriel knows him?

"Ok, look, I'm not going to lie to you. Yes, Bishop Blackstone is head of an organized crime family in the South Seas. They're into some pretty bad things, but I have a feeling you already know this."

"Are you in the mafia?" I cut him off, remembering all the men always close by, hoping he'll forget my mess up.

He levels me with two words, "Define mafia?"

That's not what I expected him to say. "You know, bad guys, murderers. Fuhgeddaboutit."

His brow raises. "Fuhgeddaboutit?"

"Yeah, like wiseguys and such."

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Clementine, I'm not the type of mafia you think I am."

"But you are...mafia?" There's no pounding heart in my chest anymore—it stops.

"It's complicated. Let me explain."

I bound from the couch. "I can't believe this." I can't breathe. "My son is here. You said we were safe." I seriously can't breathe. Call a doctor.

Gabriel stands from the couch in one fluid motion, like a man with grace, or like a mob boss would do. "Clementine, if you'd let me explain."

"I don't want to hear it." I'm going to be sick, my stomach clenches tightly. "Have you killed people?"

"No," he says so loudly I swear it rumbles the house a bit. "I've never killed anyone. Clementine." He lightly touches my arm. "Let me explain."

I'm afraid of what he might say. What have I gotten myself into? What has Joseph Prince gotten me into? "You've never killed anyone?" I reiterate, needing to hear it again to calm my overactive nerves.

"No, Clementine. I've never killed anyone. When you think mafia, you think *Godfather* and *Scarface*. I'm not even Italian. I'm not a made man, or

anything like that.”

“Ronin said we needed to be careful with Bishop Blackstone,” I accidentally blurt out. Gah, Gabriel has me so turned around, not knowing which way is up or down, and I mess up again.

Like a late afternoon dark sky, I see the storm brewing in Gabriel’s eyes. It’s like I mentioned the devil’s name. And maybe to him I have.

“When did you see Ronin?” Gabriel asks. His words are cool and controlled, but the chaos behind his eyes is anything but.

“He called me,” I answer. I’m sure Gabriel will have all my incoming phone calls tracked and traced by tomorrow, but hopefully that buys me a little time to decide what I should do. “I met him at the park. He said I was in danger.”

Gabriel stares at me, like he doesn’t know if he should believe me or not. “I’m not mafia like you think I am.

“What does that mean?”

“I do business with a lot of not so on the up-and-up people, but that’s all it is.”

“That doesn’t make sense to me, Gabriel. Speak English, please.”

“Some of my business practices aren’t technically legal. And maybe sometimes I may pressure people into business deals that work out in my favor.”

I chew on my bottom lip, trying to wrap my brain around what he’s saying to me. “Are we in danger if this wedding takes place?”

“No.” Gabriel steps closer. “I’d never let anyone hurt you.”

I cross my arms. “Why should I believe you?”

He steps even closer, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “Because I protect what’s mine.”

And then, his lips crash down on mine with such force, such demand, that I open my mouth for him. Not once thinking about resisting him.

He walks me back to the couch on the other side of the room, tangling his

tongue with mine.

We fall onto the couch. His hands roam all over me, and I pull him closer, moaning against his lips.

My emotions are on a rollercoaster. Up, down, up, down again, mimicking what I want him to do with his body inside mine. I can't control what Gabriel Prince does to me. What he does to my heartbeat. It's amped up, galloping roughly like a thousand tiny horses inside my chest.

I'm so turned on as he runs his hand down the side of my body to grip my ass, rocking his groin against me.

I can feel the ridge of him through his pants. So big. So hard. And I want it.

Call me crazy. But I do.

It's crazy, right? Why would I want him as much as I do?

"Gabriel, please." I pull at the strands of his dark hair.

He nips my earlobe. "Did you just beg me, Clementine?"

His words at the table when I asked him to sign my contract, rush back.

"If you'd like to think that, sure," I whisper.

"I think I'm the one begging." He grabs my hand, pressing it against the hardness behind his zipper. "Feel that? That's how bad I need you."

His lips meet mine in a fervent kiss that's all too consuming. I push my hips up, meeting his body and it eases the need between my legs just a bit.

His hand rubs against me, and then he pushes down my shorts. "I need in this little pussy again. I've been thinking about it since the moment I first touched it." His fingers meet the material of my panties, and he pushes them aside. "Let me fucking in there." His finger slides through my wetness.

I've never been spoken to like this before, and it turns me on so much. My breathing escalates as I try to answer him, but all I end up doing is moaning louder.

His finger goes in deeper. "I'm going to get you to come on my fingers this time."

“Gabriel, please.”

He stops, his breathing coming out in short spurts, and then he removes his hand from my pants. He flips me over, where I’m lying face down with him behind me. He replaces his hand down my pants, his other arm wrapped around my body, his hand resting on my neck.

He kisses the side of my face, moving down to my neck. “You’re going to be my good little fucking wife, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I say, pushing my ass against his hardness.

He pushes back, his dick pressing against me with such force. “You’re going to beg your husband to fuck you, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I push back again as his fingers play with my clit. I’m so turned on right now, and so close to coming all over his hand. “Gabriel, I’m so close.”

His tongue drags along my neck, sucking every so often as he groans against my skin. “Your little pussy is so fucking tight. So fucking wet.”

“Don’t stop,” I beg, knowing full well that my orgasm is close.

He keeps working me with his fingers, while his other hand wraps tighter around my neck. “You want my cock inside this tight little cunt, don’t you?”

My eyes widen at his word choice, but it turns me on even more. It turns me on how in control he is. How turned on he is. How I’m making him groan and talk like this. “Yes.”

“You want me fucking you. Don’t you?”

My body builds and builds, coming closer and closer to a crashing crescendo of want and need. “Yes, please.” My words become incoherent as Gabriel’s thumb knuckle pushes at my clit, while his fingers fuck me. It feels too good.

His breathing is heavy against my ear as his other hand leaves my neck to run over my breasts. “I’m going to own these too.” He rubs over my nipples through my t-shirt. “Come all over my fingers.”

My body can barely hold on. I squeeze my eyes shut as my hand reaches around to grab onto Gabriel’s hair. “Too good,” I moan out.

“Fuck, your pussy is so fucking wet.”

Just hearing how turned on Gabriel is does me in. My body crashes, tumbling into my orgasm that courses throughout my body. I keep riding his hand, letting the orgasm continue on and on.

As soon as I come down from my orgasm, I turn over to face him.

He licks his fingers, causing me to blush. “Now, when did Ronin call you?”

Chapter 26

Gabriel

Knowing Ronin is chatting away to Clementine almost ruins the high I feel from touching her and making her come. Almost.

I don't like Clementine thinking I'm mafia.

Mafia is such a technical term.

I don't run an organized crime outfit. But, I may help those who do. I may be in business creating the technological advances for said industries to flourish, and I'm fucking good at it.

But, I would never be in any danger from it.

The only danger as of now is Blackstone wanting to take away a soon-to-be contract I have with a Fortune-500 company. Blackstone has been a pain in my ass for years, trying to undercut me on deals. Outbidding me in markets. Just all around trying to sabotage everything I've worked so hard to build. Attempting to be like me and doing a piss poor job of it.

It's turned hostile over the years. Blackstone always wanting to out do me and never being able to. Sometimes, his dirty play is a bit *too* dirty for my liking, but I always still come out on top. He's an evil man. And when

Clementine wants to compare me to the mafia and monsters, well she's never met Blackstone.

She's never been on the receiving end of his threats. I'll admit, I've played just as dirty, sometimes feeling almost guilty for some of the things I've done, but this man just keeps coming back for more, and I always win.

And now he wants to come to *my* wedding. Well, there's no way in Hell that's happening. No way.

I'd never put Tennyson in danger. I would never subject Clementine to him.

"When did Ronin call you?" I ask her again.

"A few days ago," she says, her cheeks still tinged pink from her orgasm.

"Where is he?" My men still haven't been able to locate him since he left Blackstone's place on the island of Zanzibar three days ago.

"He didn't say." She's lying. I can tell. I might have to give her another orgasm to get her to tell me the truth. A man can wish.

"What did he say to you?"

"Just that we're in danger and I shouldn't marry you." Now she's telling the truth.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I wouldn't leave."

I can't tell if she's lying or not, but I pray she's telling the truth. Maybe she's at war with the whole thing. "You *should* trust me."

Her eyes meet mine in a battle of who breaks first. "I do," she finally says.

I stand, giving a head nod to the painting I bought for her. "Where would you like it?"

"Over my bed?"

"I'll have Amy arrange for someone to hang it over your bed in the morning. We have an early meeting with Lana at the Juniper."

She gets off the couch and straightens her clothes. "What time?"

“Ten am.”

She nods. “It was very nice of you to buy the painting for me.” Her words are sincere. “I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I’m going to bed.” She crosses the room, and before she steps out, she peers over her shoulder. “Thank you.”

I don’t know if she’s thanking me for the painting or the orgasm, but I say, “You’re welcome,” all the same.

When she’s gone, I walk to my office and dial Dean. “Put a trace on Clementine’s phone. She’s been receiving calls from Ronin.”

“On it,” Dean says. “Also, this is something you might find interesting.”

“What’s that?”

“Blackstone is in the States.”

I grit my teeth together. “I’m sure he thinks he’ll be coming to my wedding.”

“I’ve already talked to his men for you. Told them he wasn’t invited, and made sure they know not to be there.” Dean takes a deep breath. “I’ll be there tomorrow. And I’d like to go over the plans for the security of the wedding.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Hey Gabe, don’t worry. We’ll find your brother.”

“I know we will.” And then I hang up.

I dial Kurt next. “Everything ready for tomorrow?” I ask.

“Yes. The car will be there at nine am to take Tennyson to daycare before you and Clementine head to the Juniper.”

“Thank you.”

“Anything else you need, sir?”

“Yes, cancel all of Ronin’s credit cards.”

I’ll flush the fucker out.



THE NEXT DAY CLEMENTINE AND I PULL UP TO THE JUNIPER. THIS HOTEL IS all panache marble and tame stonework, marrying the two together in an elegance of class, creating an idyllic hotel recognized as one of the top-five in the world.

I step out of the back of the sedan, following Clementine to the columned entrance of the Juniper.

“This place is really something else.” Her eyes run over the gold trim of the front door, and it’s impossible to appreciate anything but her. She’s wearing this strapless, smocked maxi dress that has done nothing but make me want to pull it down and suck her breasts into my mouth since she came downstairs this morning.

“Yeah, it’s stunning.” I tear my eyes from her as the valet opens the doors for us and we step inside. The interiors are classically decorated, with polished floors, gold detailing and deep wood panelling along the walls. “I actually play golf with the owner.”

Clementine smiles at me. “Well, you’ll need to tell him he has a very nice place.”

A glass chandelier, dripping with crystals hangs in the center of the lobby, screaming look at me as we pass under it.

“Do we really need all of this?” Clementine asks, raising her hands a bit to showcase the arabesque garden tapestry hanging on the wall and the carved-mahogany throne chair.

“All of what?” I secretly make a mental note to buy a throne chair for the study.

“Gold crown moulding.” Her eyes prance around the room, taking in the gold-flecked scarlet rugs and pristine Venetian furnishings. “Can’t we just do simple?”

I know she’s having second thoughts since last night’s talk of Bishop Blackstone, but I need her to know she can trust me. “It’ll be ok.”

Clementine stops walking and faces me, putting her hand on top of my

arm, branding through my suit jacket. “I’m getting really nervous.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s everything. It’s just all getting to me.”

“It’ll be fine. I have the best man for the job.”

“What job?”

“Security. My buddy, Dean Maddox, is a wizard when it comes to security for events.” I lean closer, my voice echoing a bit against the cathedral ceilings in the lobby. “You’ll be safe with me.

She visibly relaxes. “Ok.”

Because I can’t resist, I place my hand on the small of her back, and we cross the lobby to a wide hallway that leads to the ballroom. We step inside the cavernous room and Lana waves when she sees us. She greets us both with a hello and handshake. “Ready to visualize your big day?”

Clementine smiles. “Can’t wait.” I can still see the lines of tension in her beautiful face, but she puts on an admirable facade.

We step further into the space and it’s impressive.

“Oh, wow,” Clementine says, looking up at the ceiling, lined with gold plating in intricate designs. “This place is gorgeous.”

Lana strides across the room with tons of energy as if she’s trying to sell us on the place. She turns back to face us and spreads her arms. “Now imagine this area filled with white-clothed tables and fresh flowers in tall vases decorating the center.” Clementine looks around and nods, like she’s actually seeing it. “The lighting is soft, creating a romantic glow throughout the ballroom.”

I stand back as Lana shows Clementine all the upgraded features of the room, leading her around to different areas.

I do a quick check of my phone, to see if Dean has heard anything. He made it stateside this morning, and together with his team has been setting up perimeters around the estate, trying to find Ronin.

It pisses me off he would just vanish like he has. He was supposed to pay

Blackstone, and come right back.

A stray thought crosses my mind, wondering if Blackstone did something to him instead. I put a call in to Kurt. “Contact your men on the inside of Blackstone’s base. Find out what you can on Ronin’s whereabouts.”

“I was just about to call you. He’s not there. He left Blackstone’s and vanished.”

“That’s unacceptable. Find him.”

With my wedding only weeks away, I don’t need a loose cannon running around.

Chapter 27

Clementine

I've never been in a place as lavish as this ballroom before. Opulence. Sophistication. Wealth. This is a type of ballroom where the extremely wealthy marry, and I still can't wrap my head around the fact I'll be married here soon.

The place is fit for a king, or I guess I should say *Prince* with its carved-vaulted ceilings and floor-to ceiling windows.

It's magical, and it makes me a bit sad. It's like a fairytale dream wedding, and I feel like maybe it's all a bit too showy. "So we'll be married here as well?" I ask Lana as she shows me around the room.

I glance back at Gabriel standing by the entrance, on his phone.

"No dear, this is for the reception. The ceremony will take place outside in the botanical garden."

"Oh, can we see that?"

Lana smiles. "Follow me."

I peek over my shoulder, and Gabriel slides his phone into his pocket. "We're going to see the ceremony spot," I say to him as we walk toward the

back door, leading outside.

He nods, following us. “Sure thing.”

Lana leads us outside to a secluded garden off the main lobby. “You would walk down the aisle here,” she says, pointing to a small walkway leading to a breathtaking view of the mountains. “And then we’d put the ceremony up here.”

“This is really stunning,” I say, but I’m still so worried about Bishop showing up at the wedding that I stand firm with the wish to have a small indoor wedding with locks and bars on the window.

They always say a good marriage is when a husband worries about things the wife doesn’t, and vice versa. If that’s the case, we’re on our way to a perfect marriage, because so far, I’m worried over every little thing, and Gabriel doesn’t seem to have an issue with anything.

I wish Bishop would just show himself already and let me see him. Stop hiding in the shadows while I shop. Stop sending creepy text messages to me. Be a man.

“We could set a few angelic statues on each side of the altar,” Lana says, pointing to where they would go.

“Ok, sure,” I agree, no longer wanting to pretend any of this is normal. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m just going to run inside to the restroom.”

Lana smiles. “I’ll just finish up the details with your fiancee.”

I nod, giving Gabriel’s arm a little squeeze as I walk by. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“Are you ok?” he asks, and I smile.

“Yes.” I rush toward the side entrance and inside where I stop an employee to ask where the bathroom is located. She directs me toward a short hallway. Once there, I push open the door and head right to the sink. I turn the faucet on, letting the sound of water rushing soothe my overworked nerves. I need to get out of this constant state of fear I’ve been living in since Ronin told me I was in danger.

The door opens, and bent over the sink, with a handful of water ready to splash over my face, the soft sounds of footsteps causes me to pause.

I suck in a deep breath just as soon as something flashes out of the corner of my eye, causing me to duck my head down.

“What the...” my words are silenced when a hand covers my mouth.

I clamp my teeth down on skin, tasting flesh as the hand covering my mouth lets go. “You bitch,” a man says.

“Help,” I scream, hoping someone hears me.

I kick my foot out, connecting with the man’s shin.

He doesn’t go down, but stumbles back some, and then rushes from the bathroom in a blur of dark clothes.

I hurry out the door, still screaming for help, just as Gabriel is running inside. “He attacked me.” I point in the direction the man fled, but can no longer see him.

Gabriel palms my face. “Did he hurt you?”

“He’s getting away,” I say, feeling the hot sting of tears forming.

“Don’t worry.” Gabriel wraps his arms around me, checking to make sure I don’t have any injuries as a security guard arrives. “What happened?”

I retell the story of how the man was in the bathroom with me, and how he covered my mouth. The guard for the Juniper takes my statement, and then I tell the story again once the cops show up.

A man with gray eyes and cropped dark hair pulls Gabriel away, speaking close to his ear. Gabriel and the man glance over at me as they talk, and then they speak with the police officer in charge.

“I’m so sorry about everything,” Lana says, sitting next to me on the lounge couch. “I’ve just talked to the manager, and they’re going to double up the security here.”

I shake my head, knowing this wasn’t just a random attack.

When Gabriel finishes with the police, he walks over, flanked by the dark haired man.

“Clementine, this is Dean. He’s going to assign a man to stay with you at all times.”

“What do you mean?”

“Security,” Dean answers. “We want to make sure something like this doesn’t happen again. You’re marrying a very important man, Clementine. We want to ensure your safety because people could use you to get to Gabriel.”

“It won’t. I have an idea who did this,” Gabriel says more to Dean than to me.

I blow out a deep breath, knowing he’s thinking about Bishop just like I am, and stand. “Can we go?”

Gabriel nods, wrapping a protective arm around my shoulders and leading me out of the Juniper where Stefan waits, holding the door open to the back of Gabriel’s sedan.

“I need to get away,” I say once the Juniper is behind us. “A beach somewhere in a tiny town sounds perfect.”

Gabriel places his warm hand over mine, brushing his thumb across my skin.

Never in my life have I ever just run away from a problem, mainly because I didn’t have the means to, but sometimes self preservation overrides everything else. No matter how many times Gabriel assures me we’re safe, I fear this wedding will ruin all my plans. Ten million dollars is not worth the price I’ll pay if Bishop Blackstone finds out what I’m hiding.

Chapter 28

Gabriel

Clementine wanted a beach, so a beach she'll get.

She may try to put on a brave face for others, but it doesn't work with me. I could see the fear. The pain. This attack was not the first time someone has threatened her. I can tell. Don't ask me how, maybe just an intuition, but I know something more is going on here.

Well played, Bishop. Going after my soon-to-be wife to get to me. Well fucking played.

But, I'll always remain one step ahead of him. Just like with my company, every time he's tried to outbid me on a deal, I've always come out on top.

This won't be any different.

"Are we going on that?" Tennyson asks, pointing to the helicopter waiting to take off from the helipad located on the roof of the estate.

The roar of the blades is loud behind me, and I have to bend over so Tennyson can hear me. "Yes, the helicopter is going to take us to the airport where we have a jet waiting to take us to St. Thomas."

As soon as we arrived home, I arranged everything for a short getaway and instructed Clementine to pack a bag. For once, she didn't argue. To make sure Clementine has time to fully decompress, Faye, the nanny, is accompanying us.

Clementine holds Tenny's hand, looking so fucking sexy in a simple blue summer dress that blows around her long legs. "Isn't this exciting?" she asks Tennyson as we wait for the ok to board the chopper.

"I get to fly like Batman," he says.

I slip the bag off Clementine's shoulder and place it over my own. "Ready?" I ask them.

Tennyson bounces on the balls of his feet, trying his best to wait to jump on the helicopter.

As soon as we get the ok, we head to the chopper, and I help Tennyson up first, then Clementine, and Faye follows next.

Once we're all settled, the pilot gives us a thumb up and takes off. Clementine's eyes widen as she holds onto Tennyson. I grab a headset for everyone and put on my own so we can talk to each other.

"This is insane," Clementine says, staring out the window.

"Have you ever been in a helicopter before?"

She shakes her head no as she shows Tennyson the mountains off in the background. "No, never."

A sense of pride rushes through me that I'm able to give her this first. It's almost like I want to impress them both. "Take the scenic route," I tell the pilot, and he turns the chopper around so we can fly over the bright lights of the city.

The next fifteen minutes of the flight are filled with me showing Clementine different landmarks throughout the city.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," she says.

I stare at her and realize I've never seen anything so beautiful either. The way she looks right now nearly takes my breath away.

She smiles at Tennyson, pointing to something down below, and I can't stop staring at her lips. Remembering the way they taste. The way they looked when she came all over me. I'm to the point of getting hard right now, and I try to focus on the here and now and forget about Clementine's face.

I like it though. The carefree look she's giving right now. Like the attack from earlier today has been stricken from the record, and she no longer has any fears nestled within her. Another rush of pride tackles me, knowing I'm the reason to take that fear from her. What the hell is going on with me?

She's messing with my head. This whole marriage is messing with me, making me think about having all of this for real.

I need to tamper that thought down, and remember that is not in the game plan for Gabriel Prince.

"We're approaching the airport, sir," the pilot says. He lands us as close as possible to the hangar that holds my jet.

I can already see it on the tarmac, and we make quick work transferring us all from the helicopter to the jet.

Once we're on my jet, I relax. I won't ever admit that I'm nervous about these attacks, but I fear I won't be able to get to her in time if something like this happens again. Dean and his men never found anyone at the Juniper. It's like the man who attacked her vanished into thin air. The fact someone laid hands on Clementine turns me into some raging beast ready to fight to protect her.

When we return to the city, Clementine will have someone protecting her at all times. I wish it could be me. I wish I could follow her around twenty-four-seven, and I'm not going to lie, I'd kind of like to. I should just go after Bishop Blackstone myself, let him know who he's dealing with, and finish the fucker off for good.

Clementine and Tennyson are out once the plane takes off from the Denver Airport, and I get a little work done while they sleep, making sure everything for my empire is running smoothly. Then I read the email from

Kurt letting me know the house in St. Thomas is fully stocked and the manifest has been changed so no one knows the plane even took off.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Perfect,” I reply back.

I don’t want Clementine to feel like she needs to look over her shoulder while we’re here on my very own tropical paradise.

After we arrive on the island of St. Thomas, we hop into a car to take us to my personal retreat. I can’t say I visit it here as much as I would like, but it does come in handy when I just want to escape the pressures of my everyday life.

It’s late by the time we roll in, and I give Clementine a quick tour of the house before we all head off to bed.

Tennyson and Clementine take the guest room, and I check on them before heading to my own room.

“Gabriel?” Clementine’s sweet voice whispers into the darkness of the night, when I open the door.

“Yes, it’s me. I was just checking on you.”

“Can you sit in here until I fall asleep?”

I open the bedroom door further, stepping across the tile to the queen-sized bed Tennyson and Clementine are occupying. I stand over her, staring down at her snuggled beneath the comforter with tiny palm trees on it. “You’re safe here. No one knows where we are.”

“Thank you for doing this, Gabriel.”

“Of course. You don’t have to thank me.” I try to smile at her, but she should know marriage or not, I’d do this for her. I didn’t do this because I expected anything in return.

I cross the room to sit in an oversized tufted chair by the large bay window, overlooking the ocean. Stars twinkle across the black sky, and the moon casts a soft glow over the crashing waves outside. It’s tranquil with the palm trees swaying in the salty breeze, making me relax even more.

Clementine snuggles closer to Tennyson. Her breathing evens out after a

few more minutes, and I stand, moving over to her side of the bed.

I brush my hand over her forehead, pushing a few soft strands of hair from her face. “Sleep tight.”

I leave the door open just a crack, and flip on the hallway light just in case Tennyson wakes up in the middle of the night and doesn’t know where he is.

Is it strange I’m thinking about a kid? This is so out of the norm, but it feels more normal than anything I’ve ever felt before.

Chapter 29

Clementine

The next morning, I open my eyes and Tennyson isn't by my side. I jolt upright in the canopy bed, my eyes racing around the room. I barely remember much last night as we got in so late. I can faintly hear the ocean as it laps quietly against the shore.

"Tennyson?" I call out.

My stomach is in my throat as I jump out of bed, and pad across the cool tile out into the hallway. Voices drift from the kitchen and I follow the sound. I'm shocked by what I see when I reach the arched opening—Gabriel, in shorts and t-shirt, cooking something in a skillet, with Tennyson sitting on the granite countertop next to him.

"What's going on?" I ask, rubbing the sleep from my eyes to be sure I'm seeing this scene correctly.

"Good morning," Gabriel says, turning a bit to smile my way. His eyes skim over my white tank and gray sleep shorts. "We're making breakfast."

"We're making breakfast," Tennyson echoes Gabriel's words with a giant smile.

I walk further into the G-shaped kitchen complete with a granite countertop bar encasing the top-of-the-line appliances. “Is that so?” I wrap my arms around Tenny, picking him up to give him a big hug and kiss. “What are you making?” I set him back down.

“Eggs and toast,” Tenny says, swinging his feet back and forth against the cocoa-colored cabinets.

“Sounds delicious.” I give Tennyson another little squeeze.

My eyes do a sweep of the villa and I was so tired last night when we arrived, I didn’t fully take it all in and missed so much. From the kitchen, I can see into the spacious living room filled with a wrap-around beige sofa and a chair made from loud-indigo fabrics. The throw pillows appear like they’re made from burlap sacks, and the dining room table has what looks like... “Is that a real tree?” I ask, unable to stop staring at it.

“Sure is. It was salvaged from the beach and I had it made into the base for that table.”

“That’s really cool.” It’s more than cool. I never expected Gabriel to be so creative.

Beyond the living room is a wall of glass with a view of an infinity pool with crisp blue water appearing like it’s feeding right into an aquamarine ocean that goes on and on, with no end in sight.

It’s like out of the pages of a home design magazine. Something I would flip through while in line at the grocery store and know I’d never be able to have anything so luxurious.

“I didn’t have the heart to wake you,” Gabriel says, bringing me back to the here and now.

“Careful, or people might realize you actually have a heart,” I tease.

Gabriel raises a brow, pointing his spatula at me. “Careful, or you won’t be fed.”

I want more than anything to feast on him, but I strangle that dangerous thought and smile, giving Tennyson one more kiss on the head before I step

away from the kitchen, heading into the living room. I cross to the patio door and slide it open to step out onto the sunshine-filled patio. There's a vintage bar complete with a hanging wine rack overhead. The patio furniture is sleek and sophisticated with blueberry-colored pillows which is a perfect contrast to the ocean. It's so beautiful here, I almost cry.

I don't know why I'm overcome with emotion right now, but I am. Waves tease the shore, giving a little but taking it back just as quickly, and I step onto the warm sand, feeling free. I close my eyes, and tilt my face upward, letting the sun kiss my skin.

A girl like me could get used to something like this. But I can't. This is temporary. And my heart sinks a little at the thought.

I head back into the house, going through the motions of helping Gabriel and Tennyson finish breakfast. Like a sweet little fake family.

After we eat, I wash dishes and put them away, listening to Gabriel and Tennyson discuss whether this is the sea Spongebob Squarepants lives in.

"He wears a tie too," Tenny says.

Gabriel laughs and my belly swirls like the water down the drain of the sink.

"Want to fly a kite on the beach today?" Gabriel asks Tennyson.

Tenny doesn't need any prompting on how to answer. His chocolate brown eyes light up and he grins from ear to ear. "Yes," he says, jumping out of his chair at the table.

We spend the next twenty minutes getting everything ready for the beach, and I change into a black bikini with a coverup over it. After lathering Tenny and myself in sunscreen, we head down to the private strip of shore owned by my husband-to-be.

"We'll get the kite to fly high," Gabriel says as he unravels the string of the red and blue kite.

"Higher than that," Tenny says, pointing up toward a puffy white cloud.

"Ok, hold the string and I'll get the kite into the air." With one muscular

arm, Gabriel holds the kite high in the sky as Tennyson runs further down the beach with the string in his hand.

The blustery wind pulls the kite into the air as soon as Gabriel releases his hold on it. It flies into the air and Tennyson keeps a good hold on it. Gabriel and I rush toward him, helping him keep his hands on the spool.

“The wind is disrupting the bridle of the kite,” Gabriel says.

“The what?” I stare up at the kite teetering through the wind.

“The bridle. It’s the string that keeps the angle of the kite up.”

I never really knew there were so many things to think about with kites. “Oh.”

“See the cross spar,” Gabriel says, pointing up at the kite in the sky. “It needs...”

I cut him off with a smile, “Pretend I know nothing about kites.”

He laughs, taking the spool from Tennyson. “Let me get it back in the air and flying right.”

The kite plummets toward the ground, but right before it hits, Gabriel twists his arm and yanks the kite back into the air, steadying it. He holds the spool, tethering the string between his fingers like a pro.

“You really know your kites,” I say to him, holding Tennyson’s hand as the kite soars.

“I love watching things fly. Watching something I’m controlling fly into the sky is one of the greatest feelings.”

“The greatest feeling?” I ask with a little sarcasm.

Gabriel raises a brow. “Well, second best.” He transfers the string spool over to Tennyson, and helps him fly the kite again.

I step back, watching them working together to keep the kite in the air. It’s all so domesticated. It’s all so family-like. All we’re missing is the dog.

The breeze plays with Gabriel’s dark hair and he looks like something right out of the pages of a magazine. It’s insane to think this man has kissed me. The moment my mind goes there, I can’t stop thinking about it.

The way his lips felt against mine. Overpowering. Needy.

It makes a trillion tiny tingles erupt, cascading up and down my spine.

Gabriel let's Tennyson take over the kite, and Tennyson rushes off down by the water, leaving Gabriel and I alone.

"He loves being here," I say to Gabriel.

"I love having the two of you here."

I blush, unable to say anything back.

Gabriel smiles at me and the chills are back, despite the balmy temperature.

"You're really good with him," I say.

"He reminds me of me when I was a kid."

"That's a scary thought," I joke.

"I'm not that bad, am I?" He turns to face me, and all those feelings I've been trying to push down bubble back up to the surface.

"You're not bad at all." The limo ride, the living room, every time Gabriel has had his hands on me floods into my memory, and I have to look away before he sees the want in my eyes. I glance back at the sugar-white house and change the subject, "The pool looks like it's an extension of the ocean."

"Want to take a dip?" His voice drips with sexual innuendo, and all the naughty thoughts I've been having about Gabriel re-appear. As if he can read my mind, his eyebrows shoot up. "Maybe later tonight?"

Is this what life with Gabriel will be like? Fighting the chemistry for a year? I'm tired of fighting. What happens in paradise, stays in paradise.

I nod. "I like that idea."

We sit on the beach, watching Tennyson fly his kite, and when he gets bored with that he splashes around in the shallow waters of the ocean, building sand castles.

"What happened with your sister?" Gabriel asks me as the afternoon winds to an end.

I dig my toes in the sand, wishing I could burrow my whole body beneath it. I hate talking about this. I never know what to say or what to tell people. “It was a long time ago,” I start, not really sure where to begin. “As you know, she worked for your grandfather. She loved working there, but Ronin became obsessed with her.” I break out into a sob. “I’m sorry, just thinking about her.”

“I’m sorry.” He rubs my back, comforting me.

I pull myself together, not wanting Tenny to see me break down in tears. “It was a long time ago. Your grandfather fired her because he thought there was something going on between the two of them.” I laugh a little at the irony. “And Joseph Prince’s grandson could never be in love with someone so...*common*.”

His head snaps to me. “I didn’t know.”

“I guess Joseph didn’t like their *friendship*.” It still makes me furious when I think about how upset Savannah was the day she came home from the Prince estate after being fired. How I couldn’t get her to calm down. How she was determined to see Ronin. “She took her car that night, and,” now the tears come, “the police officer knocked on my door later that night. She was in a horrible car crash and didn’t survive.”

“Clementine, I’m so sorry. Death sucks. I lost both my parents in a car accident as well, and it just fucking sucks.”

I swipe at my tears. “It really does.” I marvel at Tennyson by the shore. “I should make him lunch.” I pop up and head down to the ocean.

Gabriel doesn’t follow me, and I breathe a sigh of relief he isn’t questioning me more on my past.

We collect our things and head back to the house for a late afternoon lunch.

Gabriel doesn’t mention my sister’s name again, and I’m thankful for that.

After lunch, we play a board game, and then finish off the evening with a

light dinner and a movie in which Tennyson passes out halfway through.

I lay Tennyson in his bed, pulling up the covers, and return to the living room.

“Faye is here. How about a night out instead of the pool?” Gabriel asks, staring out the window at the rain drizzling along the paned glass.

It would feel good to get away for a bit. To let loose and not think about anything. I agree with a smile and head off to get ready.

A tiny black dress later, I meet Gabriel by the front door. We say goodbye to Faye and the small security detail staying at the house to watch Tennyson, and a black SUV whisks us to a small dance club downtown.

I have to hold onto Gabriel’s hand when we enter because the place is packed like a can of sardines. I never even knew there were this many people on this tiny island, but I believe they’re all here tonight.

We move together to the bar first, and Gabriel orders us both a drink. I take a sip of the sweet vodka and cranberry cocktail, eyeing the gyrating bodies on the dance floor.

“Want to dance?” Gabriel asks, holding his hand out.

I down my drink and then take his hand. He slices through the dancers like the knife he is and finds a spot for us. My hips sway to the beat, and I reach my hand out, connecting with Gabriel’s hard chest.

He’s staring at me like he never has before, and I inch closer, wrapping an arm around his neck, moving my hips against his body. It feels safe in this crowded place, like I’m a needle in a haystack.

It’s like I don’t even need to think about anything, just be.

Just be here with Gabriel.

His hand rests on my hip, gripping.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” he whispers into my ear, sending tiny chills of excitement racing down my heated skin.

The beat of the bass is so loud against my ears I can barely think, but I don’t want to think tonight.

“So are you,” I say, brushing my body against his. We move together in an erotic spiral toward my downfall. It’s hot. It’s sensual. It’s everything it shouldn’t be.

Suddenly, Gabriel grabs my hand, dragging me off the dance floor and down a dim-lit hallway. He pushes open the ladies room door, and pulls out a wad of cash.

“Out,” he demands of the restroom attendant.

With wide eyes, she takes the cash and leaves. He closes the door behind her and locks it. He looks so good out of his normal high priced suits. His jeans fit him like they were made for him, and let’s be honest, they probably were. The black V-neck shirt he has on hugs his body, daring me not to notice the strength behind the soft material. I noticed.

He stares at me with a look in his eyes I’ve yet to see. He’s the predator and I’m the prey. He looks like he wants to pounce and I’m unsure if I should try to flee or let him maul me.

“Ruin me,” I say.

He unbuttons his jeans, slowly easing the zipper down, and slides them down his lean hips just enough to have his hard cock pop out. I can’t take my eyes off it.

“Get over here,” he demands. With no hesitation, I move to him, glancing between his dick and his eyes. In one swift movement, he removes his shirt and drops it on the travertine tiles in front of his feet. He points to it. “Get on your knees. I’m going to fuck your mouth and you’re going to take it all.”

The way he’s talking turns me on as much as the etched abs and the v showcasing his cock. I do exactly as he says, dropping onto the fabric. Before my mouth touches him, he grabs my hair, twisting it around his fist. I know in this moment I’m not in control of what happens. I lick the perfect tip and then slide his cock in my mouth. He groans.

“Ah, fuck,” he says.

Sucking, I move my mouth down the velvet skin of his shaft. His tight

hold on my hair prevents me from being greedy and moving fast. He pumps his dick in my mouth, like I've imagined he'd do to my pussy.

"That's right, take me down your throat. You like having your mouth wrapped around my cock, don't you?" He pulls my hair to make me look at him. I moan in agreement, swirling my tongue against the head of his dick. "Fuck yes. Pull the top of your dress down so I can watch your tits bounce while I fuck your mouth."

I take my hands off of his thighs and pull down my strapless dress, revealing my breasts. He groans in approval and it turns me on even more.

He starts fucking my mouth faster and I need to relax so I don't gag when he constantly hits the back of my throat. He's completely in control. The speed, how deep he's going—even of me. He hasn't let go of my hair, and I'm relishing the power he has over me. My pussy is dripping wet, and the idea of him fucking it the way he's fucking my mouth is a need right now.

"I want to feel your teeth, Clementine. I need them to scrape against me," he pants out.

I give him what he wants. He moans, and his thighs quiver beneath my hands.

His hips rock faster. "Play with my balls."

I peek up at him and his eyes crash into mine as I cup his balls. He lets out a long hiss, and I taste the saltiness of the beginning of his release. I want it all. He rewards me a few short minutes later.

"Fuck," he groans.

His hot release fills my mouth and I swallow every drop. He pulls himself from my mouth.

From my knees, I look up at him, licking my lips. "So good," I say.

He still has a hold on my hair as he grins down at me. "This is only the beginning."

My pussy clenches with hope that it might get the relief I so desperately need. He releases my hair and I stand, my aching breasts still exposed. I grab

the top of my dress to pull it up, but he stops me. “Don’t.”

“Gabriel, we can’t stay in here forever. It’s a public restroom,” I say.

“Well, then, we should hurry.” He grins, stroking himself. “Strip.”

“What?”

“Does that confuse you? Slide off your dress and remove your panties,” he says with no humor. “Now.”

I’ve never been this turned on in my life. The rough, deep sound of his voice, is the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.

I slide my dress down, and it floats to the floor. My fingers slip into my panties and I push them down my legs, stepping out of them. He stops me from removing my heels.

“Keep them on.” His eyes rake up and down my body, making me feel more exposed than I’ve ever felt. “Slowly, run your hands down your chest. Grab those perfect tits and massage them, then pinch those hard nipples.”

This isn’t something I’ve ever done before, touching myself in front of someone else. I can feel the wetness dripping down my legs. I need relief from this painful ache between my legs. It increases when I touch my breasts. I squeeze my thighs together, trying to alleviate some of the agony, but it doesn’t help at all when I pinch my nipples.

“You like it don’t you, Clementine, touching yourself for me? You wish it was me don’t you? You want me to fuck you. Make you feel things you’ve never felt before,” he says in a husky voice.

I lock eyes with him and speak the only truth between us, “Yes.”

He steps toward me, slow and calculated, watching me with an inferno in his eyes. It chars wherever it touches. “Tell me what you want,” he says.

There’s a huge difference from thinking the things I want and actually saying them out loud. I’m not sure I have the confidence to find my words. I swallow a few times, but nothing comes out.

Gabriel stops in front of me, his hard cock in his hand. “Tell me or I’ll fucking walk away right now.”

The fear of him walking away right now loosens my tongue. “I want you to fuck me.”

He lifts my chin with his fingers. “Say it again.”

“Fuck me,” I whisper, completely consumed by him.

He spins me around and pins me against the gray marble counter. Our eyes meet in the mirror that stretches from the ceiling to the top of the marble. His jeans hit the floor.

“Fuck, I really got this cunt wet,” he hisses, running his fingers through my shameless arousal. “I’ve wanted my dick inside you since you first moved in with me.”

My head drops back to his shoulder. It feels good, but I need so much more.

“Please,” I beg.

“Fuck, yes. Beg me, Clementine. Tell me from that dirty mouth what you want.”

I lift my head off his shoulder and find my confidence. “I want you to slam your cock into me and fuck me hard.”

His dick replaces his fingers, rubbing against my pussy. “It’s about time I fuck what belongs to me.”

He enters me with one quick stroke. “Oh God,” I shout.

He pulls back and then pounds into me. It’s fast and punishing.

“Your tight cunt feels so good wrapped around me.” He moans into my ear. “Look in the mirror, watch what I’m doing to you.”

I do and he watches me. It’s by far the most erotic thing I’ve ever experienced. The view of him fucking me in the mirror is something I will fantasize about for a lifetime.

I brace my hands against the countertop and push back against him. The feel of him deep inside me is overwhelming. His dirty words add to it all. It’s more than I can handle. I feel my body starting to burn.

“Gabriel, don’t stop.” His punishing pace doesn’t let up at all. He fucks

me like he owns me, which I guess in a way he does.

“I feel your pussy tightening on me, don’t fucking hold back. I want to feel you come on me. I want to watch exactly what it looks like when I make you see stars.”

I try to fight it, I want it to last forever, but I can’t. I’m falling and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. He reaches down and rubs my clit. That’s all it takes. I explode around him.

“Fuck,” he mutters, and then his release follows mine.

A shudder racks his body, and as I try to catch my breath, I hang my head so I don’t see the lovestruck look in my eyes.

Chapter 30

Gabriel

I'm a goner. Now that I've felt her, there's no turning back. I don't know what came over me on the dance floor, but I knew I had to have her. The moment I saw her tonight, decked out in the tiny black dress, I knew tonight would be the night I'd have her. Is it insane? Did I fuck everything up?

We were getting along so well since the whole debacle of this forced marriage transpired, and now I may have fucked it all up. A year is a long time to be with one person, and now I may have made Clementine hate me.

I glance over at her as she dresses. "I guess I should get you home."

Her eyes meet mine in the reflection of the mirror, and she runs a finger over her lips, cleaning the slight smudge of her lipstick. "Oh, ok sure."

I zip my jeans, trying not to make tonight more awkward. "Listen..." I pause. I'm not really sure what to say to her.

How do I tell the woman I'm about to marry and then divorce that I'd like to keep doing this more and more? That I want to see her naked on a regular basis? I can't.

"I'm sorry," I finally end up saying, trying my best to clear the air.

She waves her hand, brushing me off. "It's fine. We don't need to ever mention it again."

"Sure thing." Keep my hands to myself, got it.

I don't know why that's so hard to hear, but it is. Maybe a part of me felt we were beginning to feel something, but I guess that's just not the case.

We head back into the club, only to make our way to the exit to head home.

The car ride back is a quiet one, and more than anything I want to hold onto her. Tell her everything will be ok. But I don't. Instead, we head into the house once the car has dropped us off, and go our separate ways.

"I'm just going to shower before heading to bed," she says, turning into the hallway bathroom.

I grab my cell phone from my pocket, placing a call to Dean to make sure everything is running smoothly back in Colorado. He tells me they're making progress with Ronin, and I hang up with high hopes Ronin will be found and we can get to the bottom of this mess.

I don't know if I should trust my brother, and knowing he went missing right after his meeting with Bishop doesn't sit well with me. What happened during that meeting?

The next morning, the smell of something cooking awakens me from a deep sleep with dreams of an auburn-haired beauty dancing just for me. The sound of chatter and laughter leads all the way to the kitchen. When I get to the entrance, I stop. Clementine and Tennyson dance around the kitchen together, singing and laughing as they prepare pancakes.

Faye enters at the same time as me, giving Tennyson a high-five when he stops dancing.

"What's on the agenda today?" I ask them.

"Beach," Tennyson says.

"We went to the beach yesterday, Tenny," Clementine says. "Don't you want to see the island?"

“No, beach.” He folds his arms across his tiny chest and pouts.

“I can stay with him today if the two of you would like to explore,” Faye offers, pouring orange juice.

Clementine glances over at me. “I guess that would be ok?”

I move into the kitchen, wanting more than anything to wrap my arms around Clementine and give her a good morning kiss. Totally inappropriate with all the people in the kitchen, but it’s still something I can’t stop thinking about.

“We won’t be gone long,” I tell Faye as Clementine hands me a plate with two golden pancakes. “Who made these?” I ask Tennyson.

He giggles. “Me. I made them.”

The four of us sit down together to eat breakfast, and I can’t believe we’re sitting here, eating and laughing, as if I didn’t just fuck Clementine hours before. It’s like what happened at the club last night is long forgotten, and she’s focused on the future.

I won’t lie, it makes me fucking sad she could forget something so epic so easily. Personally, I won’t be forgetting the way she felt anytime soon.

In fact, it’s going to be something I hold onto long after this marriage has ended, and I’m a bitter old man.

“I figured we could go check out Henley Cay,” I say, staring at Clementine.

She smiles. “That sounds perfect.”

After breakfast is cleaned and put away, Clementine and I help get Tennyson ready for a fun day at the beach.

“Please call if you need anything,” Clementine says to Faye.

“Don’t worry. I know how to get ahold of you both if anything happens.” She smiles. “Now go have fun.”

“I almost feel guilty for leaving Tenny today,” Clementine says once we’re in the SUV.

“Don’t. He’ll have a blast with Faye.”

“Yeah. He really likes her.” Clementine scoots closer as our driver heads through the streets to the marina. The streets are narrow, packed with tall buildings and people. Most likely tourists shopping for special deals on all things tropical. But, being the weekend, there’s a certain vibe on the island today. Like everyone’s on holiday looking to have a good time.

Greenery stretches beyond the uneven streets, and just a bit further than that is the ocean. So big. So fucking blue.

The driver parks along the marina and there are white boats for as far as the eye can see. But, there is *one* boat that stands out amongst the rest.

“Don’t tell me that one is yours,” Clementine says, pointing out the window at the behemoth sailboat towering over all the others. It floats like Goliath, intimidating all the tiny boats in its path.

I smile with pride. “Yep, sure is.”

“Of course, it is. When’s the last time you were on it?”

She’s got me there. I haven’t been to this island in many years. Since before my grandfather got sick.

“I hate to admit, it’s been a long time.”

“I’m sure you’ve brought many women here in the past.” Her accusation stings a little, mainly because she’s so wrong. And she has no idea how wrong she is.

“I’ve never brought anyone here.”

“Really?”

I lean into her personal space a bit. “Yes, stop trying to paint me as a monster.”

She smiles. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m not a very good artist.”

I lean back, opening the door. “Ready?”

Clementine exits the car, glancing up with a smile toward the sun. “I am.”

We walk across the weathered-wooden dock and I help her onto the boat, watching her ass in the tiny white shorts she’s wearing. “You named your boat ‘The Prince is Right’?”

I laugh. “Sure did. Just like *The Price is Right*, but mine is ...I’m right.”

She smiles, laughing as she does. “Oh, I get it, Mr. Ego.” She steps further onboard. “It’s actually kind of clever.”

I waggle my eyebrows at her.

“But, completely wrong,” she teases.

The captain steps closer, and I shake his hand, and then Clementine and I head down below to change into our bathing suits.

“You don’t play around,” she marvels as I lead her to a room to change.

“Nope,” I say with a grin.

The cabin is a haven with comfortable furniture, russet-tined fabrics, and elegant cherrywood joinery. The lower deck features a sauna and separate Turkish bath.

Once she’s settled, I slip on a pair of black board shorts and head back out onto the sole of the boat. The deck crew gets to work on setting sail for the small cay off the coast of St. Thomas. It’s closer to St. John, a neighboring Virgin Island, and in about thirty minutes sail time we should be close enough.

The cay is so remote there’s no way my hundred-foot custom Ketch sailing yacht can dock there. So, I plan a little excursion, keeping my boat anchored a little ways away while we kayak the rest of the distance.

The clear blue water, sunny sky, and soft-summery breeze relaxes me. It’s enough to make me wish we never had to go home.

Clementine steps out of the cabin, looking sexier than hell in a jet-black bikini with a teal sarong wrapped around her trim waist. Black sunglasses hide her eyes from me.

“Wow, I feel like I’m Rose on the *Titanic*.” She leans against the taffrail of the sailboat.

“Yeah, only difference is this boat is not going to sink,” I say with confidence, stepping closer as the captain sails us through the aquamarine waters to the cay.

I can barely see the tip of greenery of the miniscule island, and smile.

“That’s Henley Cay,” I say, pointing to the small spot of land covered with trees encased by a sandy beach. “We’re going to kayak there. Have you ever kayaked?”

“Only once, when I was a little girl. But, I’m sure I can handle it.”

“I’m sure you can, too.” Without thought, I wrap my arm around her waist and lean in to kiss her.

She doesn’t pull away. I press my lips against her soft ones, and enjoy the moment with her. I keep waiting for her to push me away, but she never does.

I deepen the kiss, running my fingers through her breeze-blown hair, wanting more than anything to taste every bit of her. This is one thing I think I might love about Clementine—her hair. Silky, soft strands of dark auburn temptation.

I break the kiss the moment the word love enters my brain. No, not love. I like her hair more than I’ve ever liked another woman’s hair. I chuckle, stepping back. That’s it. I just like her hair a lot.

“What’s wrong?” Clementine asks. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I rub at my bottom lip. “I...uhh. Nothing.”

She turns to look back at the cay. “It’s so beautiful here. I wish I could live here forever.”

I want to tell her that being married to me means she can live here every day of every year. I want to tell her that I want to live here with her, but I don’t. Instead, I glance at the captain as he lowers the anchor.

“We’re here, Mr. Prince,” the captain says.

“Ready?” I hold my hand out, waiting for Clementine to place her tiny hand in mine.

The moment she does, we disembark and head off to where the kayaks are lined in a row and wait for the deck crew to lower our kayak into the water.

They help Clementine into the front of the kayak, and then I climb down

and grab the oar. We push away from the boat, and together we paddle toward the tiny island.

“It’s just so beautiful.”

I move the bag of supplies we brought on the kayak, and continue paddling to get us closer to Henley Cay. “I love it here.”

Clementine peeks over her shoulder at me. “What are we going to do once we get over there?”

I smile. “You’ll see.” I have big plans for my soon-to-be bride.

We drift into the sandy beach of the cay, and I help her from the kayak. The island is empty, not too many tourists to compete for space with today. That makes me happy because I hate sharing.

“This is amazing,” Clementine says, pushing her toes into the sand.

“Follow me.”

We walk to a little inlet on the opposite side of the island where a sandy beach awaits us. The estuary water is bluer than the light blue sky, and more inviting than anything I’ve ever seen. Except, Clementine.

I set the bag down, unzipping the top. “Want to go snorkeling?”

Clementine steps closer, peering into the bag. “Yes, the water looks so good.”

We spend the next few minutes getting everything ready for snorkeling, and I glance to the water. “There could be sharks in the water,” I warn Clementine.

Her brow furrows. “Like shark sharks?”

“They’re more afraid of you.”

She parks a hand on her hip. “That is one thing I do *not* believe.”

I laugh. “Ok, maybe they’re not afraid, per se, but they won’t bother you if you don’t bother them.”

We wade out until Clementine stands knee deep in the water, the snorkel mask sitting on top of her head. “Are you sure?” she asks.

“If you haven’t learned by now,” I step closer to her, wrapping an arm

around her waist, “you can always trust me.”

Chapter 31

Clementine

The sharks swimming and lurking in the depths below are not near as dangerous as the man standing before me. If anything will bite, it's him.

Trust.

How can you trust someone if you've never done anything trustworthy for you to trust them with? I haven't been completely honest. And the most recent lie I've told is I don't have feelings for Gabriel. With every smile, every wink, I fall harder and harder. And I don't know what to do about it.

Do I run? Do I trust him?

What if he takes my heart and feeds it to the sharks?

I can't lie to myself that sex with Gabriel wasn't one of the most life-changing things in all my years here on this earth. My emotions are like a kaleidoscope of varying feelings filtering in through the sunlight. I know one thing for certain—I want to keep having sex with him again and again.

I mean, this vacation has been great at getting me to stop thinking about Bishop Blackstone and all his threats. Being alone with Gabriel, having him touch me, makes all the fear and anger I feel toward Bishop disappear in an

instant.

And so, I leap with both feet. “I trust you,” I tell Gabriel, lowering the snorkel mask over my eyes.

I’m ready to swim with the sharks. I follow Gabriel out deeper into the ocean. And then we both keep to the surface, floating as we watch all the marine life beneath us.

It’s like something right out of *Finding Nemo*. If Tennyson were older, I would love to bring him.

Bright colored fish swim next to even brighter coral and rocks deep underneath.

A stingray shoots below me, and yeah, I’m not so sure about that. I pop my head out of the water, removing the mask.

“Fun, right?” Gabriel says from behind me.

“I saw a stingray and got a little scared.”

He grins, and licks the water from his lips. “I told you I’d always protect you. Nothing’s going to hurt you out here.”

I believe him and I smile. “Ok.”

“Here, follow me and we can see some sharks.”

Again, that little voice in the back of my head speaks up, but I tamper it down, trusting Gabriel completely. I reposition my mask and follow behind him.

We don’t venture too far out, but there’s a drop off, where the ocean floor gives way to a darker depth below. And there they are—sharks—swimming further away from us, in the blue water.

Adrenaline rushes through my veins. I feel very safe from the distance away we are, but Gabriel smiles at me and swims closer to the danger.

I don’t know what kind of sharks these are, but it doesn’t matter to me. A shark’s a shark in my eyes.

Gabriel flaps his fins to bring him closer to the predators. This man is crazy. He looks like *Aquaman*, and it’s almost inspiring, making me wonder

if I should follow him into the deep blue.

I don't.

Instead, I'm frozen here underwater, floating on the surface watching him. I can't take my eyes off the beauty unfolding before me. The fact he's risking his life by swimming with these vampires of the ocean frightens me.

After a few more minutes, Gabriel returns back to the shallow waters near the cay where I am.

"That was crazy," I tell him. "I can't believe how close you were."

"Those are nurse sharks. They're probably one of the friendliest breeds of sharks around."

I narrow my eyes. "I have never heard of a *nice* shark before."

"They're harmless." Gabriel raises a brow. "Want to give it a try?"

"Swim over there?"

"Come on, we'll only swim for a few minutes."

I decide to put my trust in Gabriel and nod. "Ok." I put my mask back over my face and follow Gabriel into the deep end.

And what happens next is magic. The nurse sharks swim below us while we float near the top of the ocean. My eyes widen when a nearly ten-foot shark swims by.

Gabriel pops his head up, removing his mask, so I remove mine. "Did you see that one?" he asks.

"Yes, it's amazing."

"Let's head back to shore."

I put my mask back on and follow Gabriel back to the sandy beach. As soon as we're on the beach, I flip off my mask and smile. "I can't believe I just swam with sharks."

Gabriel grabs two white towels from the bag and hands one to me. "Better than sex, huh?" He rubs his rock-hard chest with the towel and I lick my lips.

"Yeah," I say, no longer remembering the question.

He steps closer. "Better than sex with me?"

I shake my head. "No," I whisper.

"Good answer," he says, spreading his towel on the beach. "Come here."

I move toward him, my body already overcome with need. The look in his hooded eyes scares me more than the sharks.

I drop to my knees between his thighs.

Gabriel reaches his hand out, running his fingers through my hair. "You humble me."

His lips caress mine as he kisses me, and I cling to him, trying my best to never let go. Because I will have to let go at some point.

I break the kiss, dropping my forehead to his. "You spoil me."

I turn and settle between his legs, leaning back against his chest, staring out as the waves of the ocean lightly crash onto the shore.

"Why do you think my grandfather chose you?" Gabriel asks, running his fingers through my hair.

I think I know the answer to his question, but I don't know how to tell him the truth. What if he hates me? I know his grandfather picked me for the mere fact of my connection with Bishop Blackstone. It has to be. "I don't know," I tell him, feeling horrible for keeping the truth from him.

My heart wars with my head, wondering if I should just tell him everything.

"I always worked so hard for my grandfather. I didn't realize all this time that he hated me."

"No, I don't think he hated you. I just think he had a plan we can't see right now." My mind races, trying to figure out Joseph Prince's masterplan. I mean, there has to be something going on.

Has to be something sinister at play here. Unless the man was just a creepy old bastard with nothing better to do.

"No, he must have hated me. I mean, who does this?"

My heart aches for Gabriel, not really sure what to say to him. "I'm sure

he had a good reason, even if we can't see it.”

“See, that's just it.” Gabriel turns me around to face him. “What reason could he possibly have to force this? You have a son.”

And then, it all comes together. The whole reason Joseph Prince chose me. The man who I had always hated was trying to make amends.

In his own twisted way, he was trying to pay penance for his sins.

Chapter 32

Gabriel

This is what a fantasy looks like. I couldn't have conjured this up, if I tried. The way the sun glistens off her golden skin, wet hair, and a dusting of freckles across her cheeks. I can't turn away from her.

"Everything ok?" I ask a lost in thought Clementine.

She places both hands on my face, cupping my cheeks. "You're a really good man." And then she kisses me.

And now, I'm lost in all things holy. I lay her down, worshipping her with everything I have.

This is what it looks like when two people decide to give their hearts to one another. I touch her skin—breasts, stomach, hips, thighs—as she moans my name.

"I need to be inside you," I tell her, admitting all my truths.

"I need you, too," she says back, and my lips find hers once again.

I spread her legs and settle between them. "I need to lick your pussy first."

She leans her head back, mouth open as she presses her nails into my

shoulders. And then I move down her body, leaving kisses all along the way. I kiss down her legs, behind her knees, and slide down the scrap of material that's her bikini bottoms. And when she's completely bare for me, I swipe my tongue through her wetness. Starved, I grip her ass with both hands and dive in, making sure to spend extra attention on her clit as I suck it between my lips. I nibble gently, eliciting moans from her that make my cock ache.

"I love the way you're so wet for me," I tell her and then lower my head once again to taste her sweetness.

Her fingers grip my hair, pulling me closer to her body as she thrusts her hips against my face. It's too good to stop.

I keep eating her, plunging a finger deep inside her. She moans even louder now, and I'm so fucking turned on. It's like a tribal ceremony, and her pussy is the altar.

She keeps riding my face, yanking on my hair and screaming out my name and my heart drums in my chest. She's close. I can feel it.

I lap at her wetness, enjoying her pussy like my life depends on it. I keep going, long after her body begins to shake. I speed up, my tongue operating completely of its own volition.

"Gabriel," she cries out.

My hard dick needs to be buried deep in her pussy in the worst way. I don't know how much longer I can hold back.

Her orgasm subsides, and I move up her body, playing with her tits before I kiss her full lips, letting her taste herself on me.

"You're such a good girl coming all over my face for me."

"That was so amazing. I've never..." her words end, but she doesn't need to finish her sentence for me. I know what she means. It's like we're connected, and I can read her every thought.

I can make her feel even better. Even better than last night.

I remove my board shorts, and she watches my hand as I wrap it around my steel cock, pumping it in my fist. She licks her lips, always so hungry for

it.

So I give it to her. As she lays flat on her back, I move so she can lick the drop of precum on the tip of my dick.

She swipes her tongue around the top, and I nearly lose my load. “Fuck, baby.”

I place my hand on her head, letting my fingers run through her silky strands, debating for longer than I’d like to admit, whether I want her to suck on my cock. I decide I need to be inside her way more.

I lay back down with her, moving to my back, and letting her straddle me. I remove her bikini top, letting her round tits free so I can squeeze and fondle her breasts, running her nipple between my thumb and index finger. She’s got the greatest set of tits I’ve ever seen. I have to taste them too.

I sit up a bit and suck her pebbled nipple into my mouth.

She grinds her hips against me. “Gabriel, ahh, so good.”

“Wait until my cock is buried deep inside you.” I want to get dirty with her, let her know who’s in charge. I want her to ride me so badly.

She moves her body, positioning her pussy right over my dick, and she eases down onto it.

“You’re so fucking tight.” It’s almost painful how hard I am right now.

She doesn’t move until I’m fully seated inside her. Then she rocks, and I groan.

“That’s right, baby. Ride my cock.”

I thrust, gripping her hips, moving her against me, controlling her body. “You like my big dick, don’t you?”

She closes her eyes, leaning her head back. “Yes.”

I keep rocking up into her, letting her feel every inch of me. “You like that I can make you come, don’t you?”

“Yes. Please make me.”

She moves her body on mine, riding my dick like she was born to do it. Fuck, she feels so good.

When I can barely hang on anymore, I move her from on top of me, and put her on her hands and knees. “I know what you need, Clementine. You need my thick cock buried inside you from behind.”

And that’s what I do. My hands move from her ass, over her back, and up to her shoulders, and I slam my cock back inside her, groaning as I do.

She lets out a cry of ecstasy.

“You like the way my cock fills you?”

She moans out her answer, and I lift her up, connecting her lips with my hungry mouth. I can’t get enough.

“You feel too good to be true.” This has to be a dream.

The sun beats down on us, watching our dirty deeds as I claim this woman here on this tropical oasis. I can’t fuck her hard enough. I can’t hold on any longer.

“Fuck, Clementine. What are you doing to me, baby?” I groan, wanting more and more of her. I will never have my fill of this gorgeous woman.

I’m so close to coming, I can barely keep it together. I grit my teeth, my hand finding her clit. I trace the bundle of nerves with my fingers, going even harder with each swipe of my hand.

She moans. “Gabriel, I’m so close.”

I bite her shoulder, trying my best to preserve any shred of restraint I have left. I will never tire of Clementine. And I can’t stop myself from wanting this woman over and over again. I keep pushing my thick cock inside her. “Come on me. Come all over my dick,” I tell her.

She reaches around, fondling my balls with her hand.

“Clementine, you’re ruining me.” I can’t hold on.

We both come in a blaze of white-hot heat. It’s like this tiny island goes up in flames with us as we both reach that heightened state of euphoria.

We land on our backs, our breathing ragged as we stare at the sky.

“Fuck, Clementine,” I say between breaths. “I...fuck.”

She doesn’t say anything, but reaches out to hook her pinky with mine. “I

could stay here forever,” she finally says, and by fuck, I’ve never wanted to give her anything more than I do right now.

In this moment, with Clementine laying on the beach, her hair fanned out, her golden eyes satiated, I want to give her everything she’s ever wanted.

I know I’m falling for her, because I can’t stop myself from hoping one of those things is me.

Chapter 33

Clementine

I want to crawl into the rock cave over my shoulder and never resurface. Gabriel looks like a porn star in all his naked glory, also fucks like one too, but I can't stare at him right now without getting wet and wanting him all over again. And while having sex with him makes all my problems disappear, it's only temporary.

Because as soon as we both come down from our high, all the bad things are still there.

Bishop Blackstone being the biggest.

As I sit here and debate on the best way to tell him everything I've been dealing with the last few years, he kisses me.

And it isn't a normal kiss. No, this kiss has meaning. It's filled with promises he can't possibly keep.

Am I falling for this man?

No, I can't. That is not an option.

Gabriel breaks the kiss. "Is everything ok?" He stares at me like he can fix all the broken pieces. And I wish he could.

He might be able to if I opened up to him.

“I was just thinking about everything.”

“Clementine, I’m sorry for it all. I’m sorry my grandfather dragged you into my life.”

I sit on my knees, my hands clasping Gabriel’s face. “No, I’m sorry he dragged *you* into it.” Gabriel is the unsuspecting innocent party here. His only contribution is the wealth he holds. And the empire he holds so dear. That’s his collateral.

I know what I need to do now. “We should head back to Colorado,” I tell him.

He stands and grabs his shorts, sliding them on. “Yeah, we’ve been gone for a while.”

And all I can think is we haven’t been gone long enough. I don’t want to leave this hidden paradise with him. I don’t want to leave him.

I know he’ll be my husband soon, but that’s *if* we ever make it down the aisle.

Either way, forever is not in the cards for us. Forever will never be in the cards for us, because I don’t have forever to give to him.

I find my suit and get dressed while Gabriel gets the kayak ready. The sky turns dark with a storm brewing off the coast.

“We need to hurry,” Gabriel says as we push the kayak off the shore.

I paddle as hard and as fast as I can, but I don’t think we’ll make it back to the sailboat before it rains.

Somehow, by the luck of fate we make it back to the boat just as the first drop of rain touches my forehead.

We move down into the cabin as the rain falls heavier, and I head into the bathroom to shower and change. As I’m shampooing my hair, the bathroom door opens, and Gabriel steps in.

He opens the glass shower door, and removes his clothes. “You seemed so...something. After we had sex, you seemed sad,” he tells me as he moves

under the spray with me. “And I just can’t help to think I’m to blame for making you sad. And I can’t live with myself if I have.” His solemn face inches closer to mine and I reach my arms around his neck.

I kiss his lips and then stare up into his eyes. “You’re one of the only things in my life that doesn’t make me sad.”

He leans his forehead against mine, his words melting my heart, “I just want to make you happy.” And then he kisses me with more passion than my body can fathom.

It lights every cell, every nerve, everything on fire.

I’m a bad liar trying my best to pretend this man doesn’t affect me the way he does. Who am I kidding?

I could never not want him. And it’s not just his looks. He’s kind. And the way he is with Tennyson melts my heart.

I can’t stand to be inside my own head anymore, so I let Gabriel help me escape. I welcome his touch. I enjoy his lips on my heated skin. I beg this man to take me again in the shower, letting him wash away all of my sins.

And I don’t lie to him when I ask him to make love to me.

I don’t lie when I tell him he’s the best I’ve ever had.

And I will never lie to him when I beg him for more.

Gabriel gives me everything I’ve ever wanted here in this shower, making me feel like we could somehow beat the odds and be together forever.

Even though, it’s probably the biggest lie I’ve ever told myself, I believe it for right now. I believe the lie when he kisses me and tells me he’s never wanted anyone as badly as me.

I believe him when he tells me he can’t wait to make me his wife.

And I want to believe him when he promises me forever with him by my side.

It’s a fantasy I will forever hold close to my heart.



THE MOMENT WE ENTER THE COTTAGE ON THE BEACH, TENNYSON RUNS UP TO me and wraps his arms around me. “Want to see the picture I drew?”

“Of course I do,” I answer back with a big smile.

He hands me a picture with three circles and lines from the circle. “That’s us,” he says.

I can make out the three people with what appears to be a kite. “Is it us flying the kite on the beach?”

He smiles wide, like I just answered the million-dollar question. “Yes.”

I show Gabriel, and he smiles. “I’m going to hang this up in my office at home. Is that ok?” he asks Tennyson.

Tennyson smiles. “Yes. In a frame.”

I smile at Faye, thanking her for watching him and then we get busy packing to return to Colorado.

“I can’t believe we really have to leave,” I tell Gabriel as we pile into the SUV to take us to the airport.

“We can always come back anytime you want.”

A rush of warmth floods my system, making me feel like with Gabriel anything can be possible. And maybe one day *all* of us can come here.

I busy myself with helping Tennyson get calm before the flight, and texting Erin to tell her we’re coming back to town.

I glance down at my phone as soon as the plane takes off and see an unread text message from Ronin, saying, “Bishop knows.”

I’m going to have to tell Gabriel everything soon.

Chapter 34

Gabriel

Being back in Colorado makes me a bit on edge. In St. Thomas, I didn't have to worry every five minutes for Clementine's safety. Here, I do.

I dial Dean's number.

"We still haven't found him," Dean says, answering on the first ring.

"Thank you." I carry a sleeping Tennyson onto the helicopter to take us back to the estate. Where the fuck is this mother fucker? I have so many questions for my brother. "Let's change tactics. Find Bishop instead."

"On it," Dean says, hanging up the phone.

"What's wrong?" Clementine asks into the headset as soon as the helicopter lifts off the ground.

I take her hand, kissing her soft skin. "Nothing we can't handle."

The minute we get home, Dean greets us in the foyer. "We have some solid leads."

I had dinner ordered, and Clementine, Dean and I sit down to eat while Faye takes Tennyson to bed.

"I want everything with this wedding to go off smoothly," I tell Dean

over a rack of lamb. “I don’t want any surprises.”

Dean nods his head.

“Do you think Bishop will show up?” Clementine asks.

I place my hand over hers, giving it a little squeeze. “I don’t want you to worry about anything. Dean will make sure nothing happens.” I glance over at Dean. “Right?”

Dean nods again. “We couldn’t have more security possibly fit in the building. I want you both to know we’ll be tracking Bishop’s movements the day of the wedding.” Dean takes a drink of wine. “Is the wedding all set?”

“I think there’s only one thing left to do,” Clementine says, bringing a bite of mashed potatoes up to her lips. “I just need a dress.”

“I’ll go with you to pick one out,” I tell her, not wanting her to be alone until that ring is on her finger and we are legally married.

“Well, isn’t it bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her dress before the wedding?” Clementine asks.

“I think in this case it doesn’t really matter. It’s not like this is a real marriage anyway,” Dean blurts out.

I silently beg him to shut his fucking mouth, because if anything isn’t real about this marriage, I don’t know how I’ll be able to survive the next year.

“Right,” Clementine says with a nervous laugh.

I place my hand over hers again. “I’d like to still come with you to make sure everything’s ok. I don’t have to see the dress.” I give her a small smile, hoping to ease the tension Dean created in the room.

Dean raises a brow in my direction, but he doesn’t say a word.

After dinner, Clementine heads off to her room to sleep, and Dean and I convene in the study with some Prichard’s double-barreled bourbon and a pack of Cuban cigars.

“Don’t tell me you’re starting to develop feelings for her,” Dean says the minute I take my first sip of alcohol.

“I am. Is that so wrong? Maybe my grandfather saw something I didn’t.”

Dean uses the cigar cutter to cut off the cap of his Cohiba, before lighting the foot end. “It’s not wrong, but are you sure about this?”

I shake my head, lighting my own cigar in the process, stepping out onto the small patio off the end of the study. “I don’t know what’s going on anymore. I never wanted to get married, or be a stepfather. But, now with Clementine...” I pause. “I know I want her. I know I can’t stop thinking about her. I don’t know what it means.”

Dean follows me through the double french doors. “I think it means you’re in love.”

My heart skips a beat, or else it completely stops. I’m not sure. No, I’m not in love. Never been in love. Never plan on being in love. “I don’t think that’s it. I’m just a little consumed by her.”

“Love,” Dean says, taking a drag of his cigar.

“No.” That can’t be the answer. It just can’t be.

Sure, being around Clementine is pretty much the only thing I want to do right now, but it has to be a phase.

I’ve just never met anyone else like her. It’s the infatuation of having a shiny new object around—that has to be it.

But, then I remember being in the shower with her this morning. Feeling her, kissing her, touching her like a man who loves a woman touches. Is it the craziest thing in the world for a man like me to fall in love?

It is. No more talk about this love stuff.

I finish up with Dean, saying goodnight and head off to my room to get a good night’s sleep. When I open the door, Clementine’s fast asleep in my bed. I walk to the edge of the mattress and watch her.

Her eyes flutter a little as she sleeps, something I’ve never noticed before. I smooth away her hair from her eyes, and sigh. This woman will be the death of me.

“Gabriel,” she breathes out, her eyes opening just a smidgen, “is that you?”

“Yes.” I remove my tie, and then unbutton my shirt as she slowly wakes. “I’m here.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“You don’t need to explain.” I flip off the bedside table lamp, letting the only light in the room come from the moonlight streaming in through the windows. “You don’t ever have to explain anything to me.” I lift the covers, sliding in next to her.

She snuggles up next to me, her head nestled in the crook of my arm. It feels right. “I’m nervous.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” I would never let anyone touch her. “I’m here to take care of you.”

She lifts her head, resting on her elbow, her eyes gazing into mine. “I know. I think that’s why your grandfather wanted you to marry me. To take care of us.”

I reach my hand up, touching her soft skin. “What are you talking about?”

“You have to promise me you’ll keep us safe.”

I sit up, more worried than I’ve ever been. “Clem, what are you talking about?”

She kisses my lips, softly, taking my breath away with her. “Did I ever tell you about my sister?”

“Not really.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “I miss her so much. And it makes me so sad she’s missing out on Tenny’s life.”

I wrap my arms around her, curling her against my chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“She thought she was in love. She thought she knew what she was doing, but she was so wrong.” Clementine is in full on tears now.

I stroke her hair. “I’m so sorry.” I feel like an idiot, because I’ve never been good at this kind of thing. I’ve never had the right words to say. All I can think about is the pain I felt when I lost my parents. “When my parents died, I was a mess. I didn’t want to eat or play. I was so young, and I still

remember how angry I felt. I was angry at the world.”

“Death is the whole world's fault,” she says. “A series of unfortunate events that lead to someone’s death. It isn’t fair. This life isn’t fair.”

“For many years, I blamed everyone. But, you can’t blame anyone, because it was an accident,” I tell her, grazing my fingers down her arm, remembering my parent’s car crash, and the small details we had about the whole ordeal. “It sucks.” She wipes the tears away. “There are people to blame for what happened to Savannah, though. I want to make them pay.”

I push back, finding Clementine’s honey-colored eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Before my sister started work here at Joseph’s, she went to work for Alastair Blackstone.”

“Bishop’s father?”

She nods. “Yes, and they’re the reason she’s gone.”

“What exactly happened?”

“I can’t tell you. But you have to promise me, you won’t let anyone hurt us.”

“I promise you, Clementine.” And I mean it.

They’ll have hell to pay. She’s mine to protect now, and I’ll make sure I always do.

Chapter 35

Clementine

It's been two days since we came home from St. Thomas, and it's been two nights I've slept in bed with Gabriel. I don't know what it is, but he makes me feel safe.

I haven't done much of anything the past two days, except, plan a wedding. An extravagant one at that. It's not that I want the extravagance, I just want to get the whole thing over and done.

"Yes, five-hundred," I tell Lana, in her office, after Gabriel steps out to take a phone call. "I'd like five-hundred paper airplanes released at the end of the ceremony." I know how much Gabriel loves kites, planes, and drones. So, I think he'll get a kick out of this romantic gesture. It's something I want to do for him for keeping Tennyson and I safe.

"I love that idea," Lana says back. "Have you picked out your dress yet?"

I haven't even thought of a dress. "No. There's just been so much going on."

"Don't stress. That's what I'm here for."

I smile and stand. "Thank you."

“Of course. Call me if you need anything else.”

We say our goodbyes and I step out of her office.

Leaned against the wall, Gabriel glances up from his phone. “Ready to get a dress?”

I nod. “I am.”

I shouldn’t be thinking about this as a real wedding, but there’s a small part of me that is kind of hoping for the happily ever after with Gabriel by my side.

He touches the small of my back, leading me out of the building and to the black sedan waiting by the curb.

Gabriel tells Stefan where to go as soon as we slide into the back seat. LaBrec’s—*the* place for a dress. Normally, it’s by appointment only, but from what I’m learning, Gabriel Prince doesn’t need appointments.

“Who knew when we were young, and I flew my drone into your hair, we’d end up marrying,” Gabriel says as Stefan pulls away.

“Not me,” I say. Funny how fate works.

“Sorry there isn’t enough time to get a dress custom made for you,” Gabriel says.

I wave a hand, dismissing his words. “It’s fine. Better to get this over with sooner than later.” I don’t want to waste a year planning this wedding just to prolong the inevitable.

A strange look crosses Gabriel’s features, that I can’t quite read, before he pulls out his phone.

“I just need to take care of a few things,” he says.

I check my phone just for something to do. There’s a text from Ronin, and I stiffen. Without opening it, I put my phone away, not wanting to deal with him.

We pull up to Labrec’s and Stefan parks the car.

Have you ever had something burning a hole in your pocket? This phone right now is for real, straight up burning a hole in my purse, taking up all my

headspace. I need to read the message.

A statuesque woman in a green caftan approaches us the second we step inside the shop where mannequins pose around the space wearing bridal gowns in varying shades of white. It's all very creepy couture. One immediately catches my eye. A sleeveless, form fitting lace dress that flares mid thigh into an elegant fairytale of tulle.

The woman introduces herself as Loretta and instructs us to follow her into a private area in the back.

"I'm going to dip into the restroom," I say as soon as we're settled into a little area of the store meant only for us.

"I'll just be grabbing some different styles in your size," Loretta says.

"Thank you. I'll just be a minute." Gabriel takes a seat in a leather chair and I leave, backtracking toward the restroom sign we passed on our way here.

Once I'm safely inside the bathroom with the door locked, I read the message. "I've found a way out for you," is all it says.

My hands fly over my phone, texting him back. "I don't need a way out."

A way out where? I can't leave. I can't uproot Tennyson.

What I need is for this wedding to happen as soon as possible.

Ronin texts back, "You need to get out of there."

I type back a simple, "No."

I stare at myself in the mirror. For the most part, I look the same but everything has changed inside. I feel like a different person. Last month, my life was normal, boring even. Now, it's a whirlwind of madness. It's a turbulent mess, and I definitely won't be the same person by the time this is over next year.

Only a few more days and I'll be a married woman.

I'll be a Prince.

Ronin's words scare me, and I debate if I should tell Gabriel what he's said.

I gloss my lips, and head back into the store. As I walk through the shop, I decide I won't be telling Gabriel. I'm not completely ready to trust a Prince.

How can I?

Even though Gabriel is a good man, he still has that Prince blood running through his veins.

When I return, Loretta has a rack of dresses ready for me. The one I like is not on it.

"I'm back," I say.

"Perfect," Loretta says with a smile. "This is your changing room over here." She points to a white door with "Fantasy Suite" written on it. "This is where all your fantasies come true." Gabriel smirks. "And you can just keep trying on as many as you like." She opens the door and hangs a few dresses inside. "And just let me know if you need any help."

"Thank you. I will."

"Go try them on," Gabriel urges.

I sequester myself in the large dressing room, and slip out of my sundress. The first gown, I nickname 'Ruffles.'

It's a white poofy mess and my head looks tiny sticking out of the top of this thing. I can barely move, and it reminds me of a giant marshmallow.

I crack the door open. "I'm not coming out in this one," I call out of the room.

"Can't be that bad. Let me see," Gabriel says back.

I take a deep breath. Here comes the bride, all dressed in lies. I step out of the room, and Gabriel takes one look at me and laughs.

"Yeah, that's not the one. You look like a cloud."

"Isn't it bad luck for the groom to see his bride in her wedding dress before the wedding?" Loretta asks, reappearing with a chastising tsk in her tone that we are breaking tradition.

My eyes meet Gabriel, and for one split second I forget this wedding is already doomed with the divorce date set in stone. Bad luck couldn't ruin our

marriage even if it tried.

“It’s fine. We’re not superstitious.” Besides, these aren’t the one I want anyway, so if I *were* superstitious, and we *weren’t* doomed, I’m good.

Loretta chews the side of her lip and then lets out a little sigh. “Ok. I’ll be near, if you need me.”

“Thank you,” Gabriel says. “We’ll let you know.”

She leaves and Gabriel’s eyes meet mine. “Let me see the next one,” he says.

I turn back, re-entering the luxurious dressing room. Before I can shut the door, Gabriel’s foot keeps it from closing.

“Let me help you,” he whispers, sending chills racing up and down my spine. “My cock has been rock hard since we stepped into this shop.”

“Loretta turning you on that much?” I joke.

Gabriel smiles, locking the door, and spinning me around to unzip my dress. “I crave you, Clementine. I fucking crave you.”

His words turn me on, and I try not to think about the fact the Prince men will be the ruin of me. He stares at me in the reflection of the mirror, removing the ruffled dress.

His hand wraps around my neck, his eyes darker than I’ve ever seen them. “If you knew where Ronin was, you’d tell me, right?”

I swallow, never breaking eye contact. “Yes,” I whisper.

He kisses the back of my neck, his hard on pressing into the backside of me. “You’d tell me if he contacted you, right?”

“He’s in town. He’s been messaging me,” I confess, no longer able to keep secrets from this man.

His head rises, his eyes once again meeting mine. “What has he told you?”

“He says I need to leave.”

Gabriel basically growls at my words. “And what did you say?” He pushes his hardness against my ass. “Do you want to leave?”

I shake my head. "I said no."

"Good." Gabriel unzips his dress slacks. "I love your sweet ass." He turns me toward a wing-backed chair in the room. "Bend over."

I clasp the arms, spreading my legs so he can enter me from behind.

"Ah," he groans out, pushing inside. "Your pussy is always so ready for me. Always so hot for me."

I can't believe we're doing this here. What if Loretta comes back? All thoughts about how wrong this is leave my mind the moment Gabriel sinks his teeth into my shoulder, something I'm learning is his signature move. I love it.

I reach behind me, trying my best to touch him in any way I can as he fills me up with his dick.

"I love fucking you." He leans in close to my ear. "Are you a good girl for me?"

I nod, our eyes meeting in the reflection of the mirror. "Yes, I'll do anything you want me to do."

"You'll let me fuck you anytime I want?"

"Yes."

"You'll let me fuck you anywhere?" His dick slams into me, making me almost lose it all for him.

"Yes, Gabriel. Anywhere."

His speed picks up, his body moving at a rapid pace as he pushes his cock deeper inside me.

It's insanity that Gabriel is here in this dressing room fucking me. He brings this out in me. He brings me to the edge of sanity. Causing me to go wild with need.

"Gabriel, I'm going to come."

I no longer care we're in a dress shop. I no longer care people might hear us. I no longer care about anything in the world but reaching my climax with this man inside me. I've never felt anything like this feeling blooming in my

chest before. It's indescribable, something I can't even put into words. It's more than me. It's so much more than him.

"Come on me, Clementine. Make me come, baby." He pumps into me until we're both a bunch of breathy moans and loud grunts. Until we're both riding out our orgasms holding onto one another.

It's beautiful and dirty all at the same time.

Gabriel wraps his arm around my waist, to hold me up. Little does he know, I've already fallen. I've already fallen more than one person can fall. I've fallen a whole infinity of depths. I've fallen so madly in love with him.

I want to curse myself for letting it happen.

But, it did happen. It has happened. It's something I won't ever be able to control for the rest of my life. Because it's a breathing, living feeling. Something that moves and exists all on its own. It's something I can no longer control.

A love that has turned me into something I barely recognize anymore. Something that has made me happy.

And I can only pray it stays that way.

Chapter 36

Gabriel

I'll never get tired of fucking her pussy. I can say that with absolute certainty. I kiss her once more before I slip out of the dressing room.

While I wait to see the next dress, I take a seat and shoot off a text to Dean. "Ronin's close."

Dean answers back. "We've found him."

Before I can even call him, Clementine steps out of the room in something that's comparable to heaven.

It's strapless, and tight, showing off every curve she has. It's sexier than anything I've ever seen anyone wear. Sexier than the dress she had on for the art gallery event where I had her riding my hand in the back of my limo.

"That's it," I whisper, forgetting all about Ronin and Blackstone. Forgetting about everything.

She smooths her hands down the lace bodice of the dress. "It's ok."

Our eyes meet, and there's no lies hidden in them. I want her as my bride. Seeing her in this dress confirms it.

I stand from my chair, moving behind Clementine as she stares at herself

in the mirror. “You look beautiful,” I say, swiping back her hair from her shoulder to place a kiss on the back of her neck.

“Gabriel, I...” she tries to say.

I don’t know what it is about her that consumes me. I kiss the same spot as before, digging my teeth in this time against her soft skin. Is it bad I want her all over again? Because I do.

Loretta interrupts us with a cough. Clementine glances at her through the mirror, never turning around. “I need to think before I decide.”

Loretta nods. “It’s a big decision.” She steps closer to Clementine, and they chatter away about alterations as I pull up my phone, sending a text to Dean, “Where?”

I want to know where Ronin is, and now.

“Is everything ok?” Clementine asks me as I slide my phone back into my pocket.

I smile. “Everything’s fine. I love the dress.” I turn to Loretta. “Do you have shoes for her?”

They move away, discussing shoes and jewelry and I clench my jaw, trying to hide my anger.

If Ronin thinks he can use Clementine against me, he has another thing coming.

I pull out my phone once more, typing out a text to Dean, “Set up a meeting with Ronin.”

I pay for the dress, and Clementine makes an appointment to have it altered. And once we get home, I sequester myself in my office to call in a few favors owed to me.



LIKE A HAWK, I WAIT AND WATCH, READY TO CATCH MY PREY. A MAN BY THE name of Johnny Mango, an associate of Dean’s, contacted us to arrange a

meeting between my brother and me.

Tonight at the race track.

I weave through the small crowd, trying to blend in with my jeans and black t-shirt. I pull my Larks ball cap lower as my eyes roam through the gamblers standing near the track, searching for Ronin. I don't see him anywhere. Dean drifts through the crowd, lurking, never far away.

The constant sound of the ringing of the gates opening and horses galloping drum through my ears. It's hectic, and I scan the crowd once more.

"Hello, Gabriel," Ronin's voice says from behind me.

I turn to face him, and it's like he's aged a few years since I've last seen him, even though it's only been a few weeks. "Ronin." I nod.

The smell of mud and horses is fresh in the air as we take a seat in the grandstands.

"Thank you for meeting with me," Ronin says, shifting in his seat to face me.

"Why didn't you just call me?" I ask.

"Blackstone's planning something."

"No shit. What have you heard?"

Ronin shakes his head. "Nothing concrete. But I know Clementine isn't safe. You need to let me help get her out of here."

"To where?" My anger fires like a missile, aimed at him. "You have some master plan that you think you can keep her safe?"

"Well, it's better than you parading her around."

"Ronin," I speak slowly, like I'm speaking to a five-year-old, trying to raise my voice over the cacophony of chatter and cheering surrounding us, "I have to marry her or I'll lose everything. Where do you think that money goes?" I lean in. "To you?"

"She isn't safe here." His eyes are trained on the track, watching the horses gallop faster.

"It doesn't go to you," I continue, even though he's obviously not

listening. “You and I will both have nothing.”

“You’ve already cut off most of my credit cards.”

“And I can turn them back on with a snap of my fingers.” I snap my fingers together. “I just need you to let me protect my fiancée the best way I see fit.”

“Did you know she wants to leave. She told me so herself.”

I purse my lips together. “Lies.”

“You sure about that, little brother?”

My blood boils, raising my body temperature. I raise a brow at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s only pretending with you. She wants to leave. Let me help her.”

“Pretending?” My mind thinks about all the moments I’ve had with Clementine since the second she’s moved in. There’s no way she’s pretending. Is she?

Chapter 37

Clementine

The last few days before a wedding are always a blur. A complete and utter haze of details, colors, and madness that culminates in one important day.

The butterflies flapping their tiny wings in my belly, cause a metamorphosis from fear to happiness.

These past few days, I haven't had a moment to myself to even worry about a thing. Lana and I have been inseparable, planning everything to a 'T' to make sure the wedding goes off perfectly.

At my dress fitting, where I switched out the dress to the one he hasn't seen, I had the realization that in just a few short days Gabriel Prince, *the* Gabriel Prince, will be my husband.

I feel guilty for not telling him the truth.

And now we're to the night before my wedding, and there's only one thing left to do.

I grab my phone, placing a call to Erin. "Can we come over?" I ask her. "I have Tennyson all packed."

Because of the business of the day tomorrow, Tennyson is staying the

night with Erin and Troy, and she'll bring him early to the wedding.

"Sure, I may even have some wine. I bet you're a nervous wreck."

I laugh. "Guilty. Ok, be there soon."

Tennyson and I head to my car in the garage, and we set off to Erin's. It's nice driving myself. A part of me just needs to be alone, to have a break from always having someone around.

A black sedan follows a bit too closely when I turn onto the main road. It follows me every turn I make. Gut instinct tells me it's no coincidence. I step on the gas, trying to lose him once I get into town. He stays pretty close to me, and I scramble to get my phone out to call Erin. There's no way I can lead whoever this is to her house.

I glance quickly for her contact, and bring her up. "Erin, I have someone following me," I say once she answers.

"Slow down, Clem. I can barely understand you."

"Someone's following me." It has to be Bishop.

"Drive to the police station down the street from my house. Pull in there, and wait until he drives away."

"Ok. Good idea," I say.

"Stay on the phone with me," she says, reassuring me that everything will be ok.

My heart pounds and the sound fills my eardrums. I can barely hear anything she's saying to me, but I grip the steering wheel tightly, my knuckles turning white, and keep going.

I hope she's right. I spot the police station up the road, and I breathe a short sigh of relief. The car is still on my tail, but hangs back a bit.

I pull into the station parking lot, and drive toward the front door of the building. If I have to, I can make a run for it inside. I glance at Tenny through the rearview. He's sleeping, with his favorite stuffed giraffe and yellow blankie in his hands.

The station is full of activity, with a few cops standing outside, chatting

away to one another. They look over at me, but I don't make a move. I just sit. And wait.

The black car doesn't follow me into the lot. Instead, they pull into the mini-mart across the street. And now, it's just a game of who leaves first. It won't be me.

Hope whoever it is knows I'll wait all night if I have to.

And so the game begins, and I try my hardest to see who's driving the car parked across the street.

"Did they leave?" Erin asks, and I almost forgot she was on the phone.

"No, they're waiting it out on the other side of the road."

"Are you at the police station?"

Yeah. Oh, wait, they're driving away." The car speeds off, tail lights disappearing into the night. "They're gone."

A cop knocks on my window, and I tell Erin to hold on before lowering it. "Is everything ok, Miss?"

"I had someone following me," I say to the man. "He just drove away."

"We'll do a drive up and down this road. Where are you headed?"

"Just up the street to my friend, Erin's." I hold up the phone, like that explains anything.

"I'll follow you there, make sure you get there safe."

"I appreciate it, officer."

He smiles, glancing into the back seat at Tennyson, and then strides to his squad car.

"Erin, the cop is going to follow me to your place."

"I'll be waiting outside. It's probably some crazy reporter trying to catch a scoop."

I nod, even though she can't see me. "Ah, maybe you're right."

Fear is a funny thing. It makes you believe things that may not be true. A random reporter following me in a black sedan with tinted windows darker than the night is entirely possible. Or some paparazzi person trying to get a

picture of Gabriel Prince's future wife. I cling to the idea, because I'm too afraid to face the alternative. This is the life, and it wouldn't be unheard of.

"I'll stay on the phone with you until you get here."

I take a deep breath. "Change of plans. Why don't you and Troy come to Gabriel's and spend the night?"

"You got it. Give me thirty minutes to get our things and I'll meet you there."

We hang up, and then, I let the officer know I'll be returning home. The cop car follows closely behind on the ride back, and when I arrive safely, I thank him and take a sleeping Tenny inside to his room.

Gabriel is nowhere to be found, so I let Amy know I'm having guests and she makes sure a room is ready.

When Erin arrives with Troy, Tenny is awake and Faye takes the excited boys to the playroom. After Erin is settled in her room, we convene in the kitchen for a much needed drink.

"This is the life," Erin says, sliding into a stool at the island.

I remove two wine glasses from the cabinet. "I'm glad you came."

"Are you ok?"

I nod while she makes quick work of opening a bottle of Chardonnay and pouring it into our glasses. I take a long pull, letting it settle my frazzled nerves. I'm still shaking.

"I'm sure it was nothing." Erin's face is completely serious, and I want to believe it.

"I'm sure too."

I'm also sure I need to tell Gabriel. I need to tell him everything. I trust him, may even love him, and he needs to know.

"I got the picture you sent of the dress," Erin says. "It's breathtaking."

I smile, but still can't shake off the fear. "Thanks."

Erin takes a sip of her wine. "I know the wedding isn't *real*, but I still think it's going to be beautiful. I'm really happy for you."

“It’s only for a year,” I give her what feels like a pre-recorded answer.

“Clem, I see the way Gabriel stares at you.” She runs a finger around the rim of her glass. “And the way you stare back.”

My cheeks heat. “I don’t stare at him any particular way.”

Erin smiles. “Yes, you do. And it’s ok. He’s gorgeous. If I were marrying him, I’d be staring that way too.”

“It isn’t like that.” I move to the fridge and open the door. “I have some fruit. Want some?”

“Fruit? Got any cake in there?”

I laugh. “Actually, yes. The wedding cake.”

Erin hops up and crosses to me. “Let me see.” She takes a peek at the four tiers I baked and decorated earlier today that will be assembled tomorrow. “It’s gorgeous.”

“We could eat a little piece of the top,” I suggest with a grin. “Three tiers is plenty.”

“No, that would be wrong,” she says with a laugh. “Wouldn’t it? What about the tradition of freezing the top of the wedding cake and eating it a year later on your anniversary?”

“You mean on the divorce?” I eye her seriously. “It’s not a real wedding.” I pull out the small top and place it on the countertop. “It’s little. No one will ever miss it.”

After I find a knife, forks, and two saucers, I slice through the white fondant roses with edible pearl centers and plate the pieces of cake.

“Oh man, this is heaven,” Erin says, after taking a bite.

“Gabriel really liked it,” I say. My belly gets that familiar ache in it remembering the tasting and his words comparing it to sex.

“He seems to care about you.”

I swallow my bite of cake. “Why do you think that?”

She shrugs. “Sometimes you just know things.” She takes another bite. “You can’t see it because it’s happening to you.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

She laughs. “It is. Just like when you’re dating a loser and everyone else can see it, except you.”

“Yeah. But I don’t think that’s the case with Gabriel. Have you seen Jordan since that day?” I ask her, changing the subject.

“I forgot to tell you,” she says, with a grin. “We’re going to catch up next weekend.”

I smile. “That’s great. I’m really happy for you.” I can see Erin getting everything she’s ever dreamed of. At least I hope she does. I hope we both do.



WHEN EVERYONE IS SETTLED IN BED, I SEARCH THE HOUSE AGAIN FOR Gabriel. I find him in the study, sitting behind the desk, a glass of liquor in his hand. When his dark eyes meet mine, it’s almost like years have come and gone between us. He’s not like the same man I woke up next to this morning.

“Are you ok?” I ask, crossing the hardwoods, until I’m behind his cherry-oak desk. “You don’t look so good.”

He swirls the glass of amber liquor, causing the ice to clink, and then takes a sip. “We can’t find Bishop.”

My heart aches at the scratchiness of his voice. “Are you drunk?”

His eyes meet mine. “Are you pretending?”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“Maybe it’s just stress.” He laughs a short laugh that sends chills deep into my bones. “Maybe it’s just everything.”

“I was followed to Erin’s house tonight. She brought Troy here instead and they’re spending the night.”

“How come I didn’t hear about you being followed?” He takes another

sip, slamming the glass down a bit too hard.

“Well, I didn’t have Mayer drive me.”

“Who drove you?” I see the muscle tick in his jaw. “Who?”

“I drove myself.”

He laughs again, but there’s no humor there. “How am I supposed to keep you safe when you run off and do things by yourself?”

I don’t really know how to answer that. In good times and in bad, right? “I’m sorry.”

“Clementine, don’t you realize Bishop Blackstone is trying to hurt you? And I can’t find him to stop him.” He runs a hand through his hair, causing the strands to stand on end. “I can’t protect you if you don’t obey.”

“You’re right.” It was stupid of me to try to go to Erin’s by myself. I just figured the quick trip would be ok. “I’m sorry.”

“Clementine,” his eyes bore into mine, like he can see straight through me, “I don’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to you.”

I lean forward, placing my hand over his. “Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

“Clementine,” he breathes out, leaning back in his chair.

I move and straddle his lap. “Nothing’s going to happen,” I say again, running my hands up his chest.

His hands grip my hips as his lips find mine in a fervent hungry kiss.

I rock against him and his dick grows hard beneath me. “Gabriel, you’ll keep me safe,” I tell him once he breaks the kiss.

His eyes own me as his hand runs through my hair. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispers. “So fucking pretty.”

My whole body comes alive. “You’ll protect me.”

Gabriel presses his forehead against mine. “With my whole life,” he breathes out.

“There’s something I need to tell you.” Tears flood my eyes, hoping Gabriel doesn’t hate me the moment he learns the truth.

“Tell me.” His chest moves up and down with each ragged breath, and I focus on each button of his stark-white shirt.

A tear falls down my cheek and he swipes it away. “I haven’t been completely honest with you about a lot of things.”

“About what?”

“I think I know why Bishop doesn’t want us to get married.”

Gabriel’s hand shakes when he reaches it up to swipe another tear from my face. “Why?” he asks, barely audible.

“Because, he’s Tennyson’s father.”

Chapter 38

Gabriel

The world's on fire and no one can save me.

It's been three hours, forty-five minutes, and three seconds since Clementine dropped a bomb on me.

Tomorrow, I'll be married. Tomorrow, Clementine Bright will be my wife.

The only woman I've ever loved will be mine.

Only, this isn't a sweet victory. It's a tragic ending to an all too-consuming love story.

The moment Clementine told me Bishop Blackstone was Tennyson's father, I was enraged. I sent her crying from my office, my own heart completely shattered.

I couldn't even look at her the same.

I couldn't look at myself either.

The powerful realization of how much I love her slammed into me the moment she called me an asshole and left.

I've been debating now for three hours, fifty-two minutes, and eighteen

seconds on whether or not I should chase after her. I've been trying to think of the right words to say to her when I do. Because, of course, I will chase after her.

I love her.

"We're all set for tomorrow," Dean says, entering my study, taking a survey of the room. "Whoa, what happened here?" His eyes land on the remains of my shattered glass of Woodford's Reserve bourbon on the floor.

"Bishop is Tennyson's father."

"Holy fuck." Dean shuts the study door and then runs both hands through his short-cropped hair. "I'm bumping up the security."

"It's already as bumped as it can be. Did you find Bishop? Ronin said he's planning something for the big day."

"Listen, Gabe, it'll be fine. The second we see that asshole, we'll get him."

"Shoot first, no questions later, right?"

Dean smiles. "Exactly."

"Good."

"I'm going to make sure everything's all set for tomorrow."

I nod as he leaves the room.

Before I head off to bed, I debate on seeing Clementine. I walk down the hallway, knowing she's probably worried about tomorrow.

With all the shit going on, my main concern shouldn't be if she's pretending with me, but it is. I want to know when I kiss those rosy lips if her moans are real or fake.

I stand at Clementine's door, wondering if I should knock or head to my own room. I even raise my hand, balling my fingers into a fist to rap on the door. I drop my hand.

I decide it's better not knowing.



TODAY'S THE DAY I SAY 'I DO.' I ARRIVED AT THE VENUE EARLY TO GO OVER the security details with Dean. We've added a few more men to the payroll, but we still haven't been able to locate Blackstone.

We know he's here, probably slithering in the grass like the snake he is, and we're keeping our eyes open.

I've asked Ronin where Bishop is hiding, but he's no help. I haven't seen Ronin since the night at the dog track, and I'm guessing he won't be at the wedding.

I mingle and shake hands with the guests, keeping my eyes on the crowd of people entering the Juniper, trying my best to spot anything suspicious.

When I'm done playing the part, I wander over to the door leading out to the garden where the wedding ceremony will take place.

"We have men watching out for Ronin as well," Dean says, stepping up beside me, checking his phone one more time.

"Everyone's in place?" I ask him.

"Yes. Don't worry," He pats me on the shoulder. "If Ronin or Bishop show up, you'll be the first to know." He laughs. "This will be better than the last wedding I was at."

"Good thing."

"You can head to the altar now," Lana tells me. "I'm just going to check on Clementine. I haven't seen her yet."

I nod, adjusting my tie, and making my way down the aisle, ready to get this show on the road.

A woman, playing a harp, creates soft music for the wedding as people file to their seats. I smile and shake the hand of the preacher, waiting for it all to begin.

Dean stands near the entrance, watching the garden fill up like a hawk, and speaking into his ear piece. I'm impressed at his attention to detail as he guards this garden as if his life depends on it. That's a good friend.

After a few minutes, Lana speed-walks back down the aisle toward me, a

look of concern splashed all over her stressed out face. “Mr. Prince, I need to speak with you.”

I steer her away from the preacher and anyone else who may be able to hear what she has to say. “What is it?”

“Clementine,” she says.

“What’s wrong?”

“She isn’t here.”

“What? That’s impossible.” I head toward Dean, with Lana on my heels, wanting to let him know we’re missing a bride. With an uncanny intuition that something is wrong, he rushes closer, already speaking to his team through his earpiece to stay alert.

“What is it?” he asks, before I can even get a word out.

“Clementine has disappeared.” I turn to Lana. “Will you handle the guests? I need to find her.”

I stalk to the women’s lounge to where Erin’s on her phone, frantically tapping away at the screen. “Where is she?” I ask.

Erin’s eyes fill with tears. “I don’t know. She was here one minute, and then the next she was gone. She received a phone call right before...” she doesn’t finish her thought, her worried eyes settling on her son, Troy.

“Did she say she was leaving?” I pull out my own phone to see if I have any missed messages from her. Our fight. Thoughts of her and Ronin running off together invade my mind.

Erin shakes her head. “She didn’t say anything.”

Dean enters, talking into his earpiece, and I hear him say Ronin’s name. Last night’s fight floods my mind with images of my anger surfacing and how I couldn’t hear a word Clementine said to me. My whole world blurred, but obviously it was all too much for her.

She’s gone for good. And I deserve it.

I’m not a saint. I’ll admit I was wrong, but I know she didn’t leave here on her own. She had help. Ronin.

I'm not going to wait to get answers. I'll find her, and I'll make sure she knows exactly how I feel about her.

"Did you check with Mayer?"

"Yeah, he hasn't seen her since he dropped her off here. I've got local law enforcement checking the bus stations and airports now," Dean says, fingers flying across his phone. "They couldn't have gotten far."

"Contact *everyone*," I grit out.

"Already on it," he says, sliding his phone into his pocket. "I'll get the car."

I'll find her. I have a lot of people in this world who owe me a favor. Different types of people. You can't become as powerful as I am without making the types of deals I've made. Without making the types of *friends* I've made.

And I've made plenty.

I want Ronin, Clementine, and Tennyson found. And right now.

I'm so angry, the only color I see is red when I give Lana the task of telling a garden full of hundreds that the wedding will no longer be taking place.

I feel like an idiot. I shouldn't have reacted the way I did last night. I've pushed her away. Right into the arms of a waiting Ronin.

She's mine. And I want to prove to her how much I care about her. I love her.

And it's about time I told her.

I wish I could take back my reaction from last night. Take away the anger of finding out Bishop is Tennyson's father.

"Ok, bathroom break is all taken care of," Faye says, entering the room. Her smile drops when she sees me. "What's going on?"

I glance down at the one thing Clementine would never leave behind. Tennyson. He's in his new suit, holding Faye's hand.

"I'm Bruce Wayne," he says with a big smile.

And my whole world spins out of control. My heart slams in my chest as
the realization Clementine didn't leave me slams into my mind.

It wasn't the fight that drove her away. She was taken from me.

And there's only one name that comes to mind.

Bishop.

Chapter 39

Clementine

“You need to let me go,” I say with conviction, trying my best to talk some sense into the man with a black hoodie and ski mask. “You’re too scared to show me who you are?”

He shakes his head, not saying a word.

“Let me go.” I pull my legs closer to my chest as I sit in the back of the small jon boat. “You can’t just kidnap me,” I call out over the roar of the motor.

My words are futile, I know. Because he did. And I can’t escape. I could attempt to push him from the small swivel seat he’s sitting in, but if I fail, it could prove disastrous for me. I sigh, glancing out into the vast night air. Nothingness surrounds us. Except, the lights of a sailboat floating about a hundred yards away.

I never should’ve answered Ronin’s call the morning of the wedding. And I never should’ve gone outside to talk to him. The next thing I knew, I was tied up and tossed in the back of a car, heading out to God knows where. But, God clearly isn’t around, because it’s been a hellish day, filled with

bright lights and dark hideaways. I must have been drugged because I barely remember any of it, other than the grogginess as I was tossed from car to plane to boat.

Not that it matters anyway, I know where he's taking me.

To the devil himself.

"Where are we?"

The man shrugs, his brown-owl eyes meeting mine. "Atlantic Ocean," he says, with a Southern twang. It's a voice I've definitely heard somewhere before.

But where?

I glance around the boat, looking for a weapon I can use. I blow out a deep breath, my anger only subsiding for a moment, before I recognize the voice of my captor. "You're the man. The one I met at the art gallery. The cowboy."

He laughs. "You're good. Name's Duke."

He removes the ski mask from his face and looks exactly the same as I remember him.

Big bushy moustache. Bushier eyebrows. And a row of crow's feet framing each eye.

"I am good, and you should pray you're better, because I won't let anyone hurt me," I warn.

His face softens. "I promise you, it'll all be over once we get to the Bahamas and Mr. Blackstone gets what he wants."

"And just what is that?"

He moves the motor, steering us closer to the bigger sailboat. "Mr. Blackstone doesn't go into much detail with me. All I know is that he doesn't want you to marry Mr. Prince."

The mention of Gabriel's name weakens my defenses. He probably thinks I ran away. After the way things ended in his study last night, after I told him Bishop was Tennyson's father, he most likely believes I've left him. He

probably thinks I ran away with Ronin, and probably hates me right now.

Spray from the water mixes with the tear trickling down my cheeks. “And why’s that?” Anger emanates from every single pore on my body.

He shrugs, as if he’s bored with the subject. “Can’t say. Probably has to do with the money.”

Pretty sure it doesn’t. I keep my mouth shut, not wasting my breath on this man who doesn’t know his head from his own ass.

He navigates up to the much larger boat, similar to the one Gabriel had on the island of St. Thomas. But, it isn’t his. Instead of being white and welcoming, it’s menacing and dark. Like a pirate’s ship.

Duke transfers me from the jon boat onto the sailboat in the middle of the night.

Duke leads me down into the cabin of the boat, opening a door and ushering me into a small bedroom.

“Sit tight,” Duke says, “We’ll be there soon.”

He shuts the door and the lock clicks into place. Asshole. I jiggle the handle, thinking maybe I can shimmy it loose, but it’s no use. Besides where would I even go?

Hatred spears me. And I rummage around the room, looking for a weapon I can use against Duke the next time he comes in here.

There’s a small dresser and I go through each drawer, not finding anything useful. I sit down on the edge of the bed, wondering how on earth I’m going to get myself out of this mess.

After what feels like forever, the door handle twists, and the cowboy enters my room once again.

I stand, crossing my arms, and trying my hardest not to spit in the man’s face. “What are you doing here?” I ask, still trying to figure a way out.

“We’re here. And once you get off this boat, everything will be fine.”

Maybe, for him, he’s delivered his prize. Maybe, he’ll get a bonus check for getting me delivered overnight. He’s quicker than Prime delivery.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He grabs my arm. “You’re lucky my boss wants you alive or…”

I cut him off, “Or what? Or you’d kill me?” I narrow my eyes on him, full of hate. “I’d like to see you try.” I have no way of defending myself, but I won’t let this bastard think for one second I’ll go down without a fight. I have my teeth, nails, and a very expensive pair of high-heels.

I slip the heel off, holding it out to ward him off.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Come on. There’s somebody here who wants to meet you. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way.”

I slip my shoe back on. “Fuck you.”

He rolls his eyes. “Hard way it is.” He grabs me and lifts me over his shoulder, carrying me out the room caveman style. “Don’t worry Clementine, it’s not *you* he’s after.”

Chapter 40

Gabriel

“Find her.” I glare at Stefan, knowing she didn’t leave on her own accord. “This has Bishop written all over it.”

Stefan nods and leaves my office. It’s late. The wedding would’ve ended hours ago. The wedding that never was. Everyone was so helpful and consoling when they found out there’d be no wedding, but their pity is something I don’t ever want again.

All I can think about is her safety. I promised her I would protect her.

Rage rips through me as I think about the turn of events. I head into my grandfather’s office, checking one more time if he left anything behind that may give me an idea as to what’s going on here. The room full of leather and wood still reeks of him. It’s polished every day as if he’s going to walk back in here and let us all in on the joke.

Files fly to the floor as I rip through them looking for anything that may lead me to the truth.

Knowing Tennyson is Bishop’s child leads me to believe my grandfather didn’t randomly choose Clementine for my bride.

No, there's a reason he did this. I just don't know what it is.

I slam my fist against the mahogany of his desk as I come up empty. I move over to his mini-bar, the one he kept stocked with top shelf liquor, removing the hundred year old bottle of King Louis XIII from the shelf, and pour myself a shot. I take a long pull from the glass, feeling the burn that is nowhere near what's in my chest.

What the fuck is going on?

When I return the bottle, I spot a phone number on a scrap of paper lying where the bottle once was. No name, just a number.

I debate on calling the number as I try to put everything into place. It's like a giant jigsaw puzzle, where I'm missing a few of the pieces.

Dean enters my grandfather's office. "We think they flew out of the state."

"This is ridiculous. Was it Bishop?"

"Yes, we have sources that lead him to Miami."

"Get my jet ready."

"Sure thing. We think they're just off the coast of Florida," Dean says. "We're contacting the Coast Guard now."

I pocket the number, and head up to my bedroom to change out of the tuxedo I'm still wearing. In my room, I call the number. On the second ring, a voice I know all too well answers.

"Ronin?" I say into the phone after he says 'hello.' I can't believe my own ears. "Is that really you?"

"Gabriel, how did you get this number?"

Whose phone is this? I'm still a little shocked, wondering why Ronin is on the other end of the line. "Did you have anything to do with Clementine's disappearance?" I roar, wondering if he's working for Bishop.

"She's missing?"

"Yes."

"Is Tennyson with you?" he asks in a hurry.

“He’s safe.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m about to be at my hangar at the executive airport.”

“I’ll meet you there.” And then Ronin hangs up.

Dean, Stefan, and I race across town to the airport, trying our best to get to my jet before Clementine slips into international waters and becomes even harder to find.

Bishop Blackstone will pay for this. And heaven help him if he laid one finger on her... I can’t even finish that thought.

I slam my fist against the bar in the back of the Rolls Royce taking me to the airport. How could I let any of this happen?

A few minutes later, Stefan pulls into the side gate at the executive airport, passing through security and taking me to my own personal hangar where my jet is on the tarmac ready to go.

Dean and I exit the car in a rush.

“Holy shit,” Dean says, spotting Ronin standing next to my jet.

It’s dark in Colorado, the sun’s rays long lost over the mountain tops. Ronin stands in the shadow, and right next to him is my bride-to-be.

My temper boils. Liar. He does have her.

He steps toward me, calling out my name. How dare he. How dare he lie to me.

I’m half-tempted to rush over there and punch him in the throat. The other part of me is relieved to see Clementine standing safely on the tarmac.

I need answers. And I need them now.

I step closer, my mind waging its own war against Ronin’s motives.

There’s nothing he could possibly say to make any of this ok.

I step closer, my own mind playing tricks on me. Until the moment my sweet Clementine turns around and those golden eyes land right on me.

Oh, fuck.

Chapter 41

Clementine

Be strong. Don't let him see me cry.

I won't cry. I won't do anything but just be a statue. No emotion.

I don't say a word, my mind already trying to play out every scenario of escape possible. I can do this.

Breathe, Clementine, breathe.

"It's you," my captor says.

"It's me." I glare back into the dark eyes of Bishop Blackstone.

Standing on the sandy shore I've been transferred to, he looks every bit the rogue he is. From his rumpled jet-black hair to the broad shoulders and lean muscles encased in dark slacks and tight-fitting black tee, he's a classic villain. Handsome, in a bad boy, don't-get-too-close-or-your-heart-will-get-broken type of way.

"What do you want, Bishop?"

He smiles at Duke, showcasing a set of straight white teeth and a dimple.

"Like she doesn't know what I'm after."

I rub my arms up and down my shoulders, trying to fight off the chill in

the night air. “You’ll have to kill me first.”

Bishop steps closer, cracking a smile. “Why do you have to be so dramatic? No one said anything about killing anyone.”

I narrow my eyes, not answering him, anger coursing through me.

He inches even closer. “I want what I’ve always wanted. And I know you know what that is.” He leans in where his nose is mere inches away from mine. “Don’t you?”

I don’t back down from his menacing stare. “Just let me go, please.”

“You think you’re so smart, Clementine. Marry into the Prince fortune so I wouldn’t be able to touch you, is that it?” He laughs a quick short laugh. “Gabriel doesn’t scare me.”

“You don’t know about Gabriel and me?” I ask, wondering if he even knows about how I was forced into this marriage.

“Know what?”

If he doesn’t know, I’m not going to be the one to tell him every detail.

“All I know is how you’ve been lying to me for years, and now I’m here to collect my property.”

“Over my dead body,” I sneer.

“Duke, get her inside,” Bishop says, nodding over to a small hut next to the ocean.

Duke steps closer, and I all but growl at him not to touch me. I follow him into the straw dwelling, because there’s no sense in running.

When I step into the tiny shack, there’s a small chair and Duke pushes me down on it. “What now?”

Bishop enters, sucking out all the air with him, like a black hole ready to do the darkest deeds of the devil. “I’m debating how I’m going to return you to Gabriel. In pieces or not at all.”

I gulp down some air, unable to get enough into my lungs. I’m about to have a full on panic attack, and I try to calm down.

Breathe in. Breathe out. A loud explosion rocks the silence, and then

there's shouting and chaos all around me. My arms fly over my head, shielding myself from the mayhem.

"Hands up," I hear a male voice shout from outside.

Bishop only laughs, the sound more sinister than his looks. "We've been waiting for you."

"And now here I am." Gabriel steps over the threshold of the hut and I choke on a sob. I can't believe he's really here.

He glances over at me. "Are you all right?" he asks.

I nod.

"As I was telling your fiancée," Bishop says, stepping closer to Gabriel, "I just want what's mine."

And then, I think I must be dreaming. I have to be imagining this. A dream so vivid, it seems real, but isn't. There's just no way.

"Even in death, I couldn't escape you," my sister says, stepping around Gabriel.

I blink. I scrunch my eyes, because surely they must be deceiving me, but when I open them, she's still there.

"Let them go," she says, "and you can have me."

"Savannah?" I whisper.

Eyes the same color as mine look over at me. "Clem," her voice breaks, before she presses her lips together and turns back to Bishop, saying, "Let her go."

Gabriel's eyes ground me, urging me not to freak out. Tears flood my vision. It's been so long since I've seen her. I've mourned her and never ever forgotten her. And now she's here. In the living, flesh and blood. I've carried this secret about Tennyson all this time, not knowing she was still alive.

I shake my head. "No, we're not leaving without you." Tears stream down my cheeks, my whole system about ready to crash and burn, and Gabriel inches closer to me.

"And I'm not leaving here without what I came for." Bishop says,

stepping closer to Savannah. “I knew you’d return from the dead, just like a phoenix. And I knew if I took your sister it would flush you out. I always suspected you were alive.” He stares at her like she’s an enigma. “I caught wind of the possibility of it when that crazy old man, Joseph Prince, died.”

Savannah shakes her head. “Let her go.” Savannah’s voice is stronger now. Like she’s in control.

My heart bangs in my ears as my stomach clenches. I feel like I could puke, but I don’t dare move. Sweat trickles down my forehead, and I clench my fists tightly together in my lap.

Behind Gabriel’s shoulder, I see Ronin. He doesn’t take his eyes off Savannah.

So many people in this little hut, like a clown car. Maybe I’m delirious and none of this is happening. Gabriel steps to the center of the small hut, demanding attention. “Ok, I’ve had enough. I’m not leaving here without what’s *mine*,” he snarls out.

It’s like we’ve stumbled onto a turf war, and I don’t even breathe for fear of setting someone off. I heard Dean’s voice, so I’m almost positive Gabriel has a team of men surrounding the hut.

A chill skates over my skin, entering deep into my bones making me more afraid than anything in my life. More afraid than the moment I received the letter from Joseph Prince saying to marry Gabriel or suffer the consequences.

Bishop stares at Savannah like she’s his winning lottery ticket.

“Gabriel you can have *your* sister, and I’ll take *mine*,” Bishop states like he’s giving Gabriel exactly what he wants too.

“No deal. I walk out with both sisters.”

“And what do I get?” Bishop scoffs.

“You don’t get a bullet to the fucking head,” Ronin says from the door.

Bishop laughs. “I’ll decide who gets what around here.”

“She doesn’t love you. She doesn’t want to be with you,” I finally shout,

unable to take this game anymore.

“Is that so?” Bishop asks.

I turn to face him, my eyes narrowing on his. “Yes, she’ll never love you...” Before anyone can say anything else, another loud explosion comes from outside, and Dean rushes in.

I can barely make out what’s going on through all the commotion before Gabriel has me down against the weathered wood floor of the shack. Pain shoots through my knee as it connects with the floor. “Gabriel,” I call out.

Gunshots fire throughout the hut causing me to squeeze my eyes shut.

“Let’s go.” He swoops me into his arms, running out the front door of the hut to his chopper. “It’s almost over,” he yells over the screams of the blades whipping through the night air.

The chaotic night turns even worse when I scan the scene and don’t see my sister. “Savannah, where is she? We can’t leave her,” I shout at Gabriel.

“It’s ok. We’re not leaving anyone behind.”

I can’t even think straight, and then I hyperventilate.

I’m overcome with emotion, tears streaming down my face as Ronin lifts Savannah into the helicopter.

I rush her, wrapping my arms around my sister. “I missed you,” I say to her.

“Me more. I never should have involved you,” she says, crying onto my shoulder.

Ronin hops into the helicopter, moving closer to Savannah. “Go. Go. Go,” he shouts.

Gabriel holds me, smoothing my hair with his hands. “You’re safe now.” He sits me down and straps me in.

Gabriel turns to face the pilot. “Let’s get the hell out of here now.” He turns his attention back to Ronin. “Strap her in,” he says, nodding toward Savannah.

Ronin does as he’s told, and the helicopter takes off from the ground.

And I finally breathe a sigh of relief.

It's been the most trying ordeal I've ever been through and I'm so happy to be going home.

My only thought right now is my sister. She's alive and more than anything, I want to wrap my arms around her and never let go.

Chapter 42

Savannah

Talk about making an entrance. This is *not* how I wanted Clementine to find out. You're probably wondering where I've been. Or what the hell is going on. Basically, I've made a mess of my life with no clean up crew in sight. I've always been the one needing someone to take care of me. I tried my hardest to be the older sister Clementine could be proud of, but always felt like I let her down. Well, not this time.

My mistakes started when I was fresh out of high school. My parents were too poor to put me through college, so I had to work. And I landed a sweet job right after I graduated, taking care of Mrs. Ivanna Blackstone, mother to a very wealthy Alastair Blackstone.

I'd heard rumors about the Blackstones, that all that money they flaunted wasn't exactly legal. I never knew what Alastair did for a living, but when I pulled up to his 17th-century colonial mansion, I no longer cared how he had made his money, all I cared about was the fact I had a job.

It was an easy gig—care for the mother, brush her hair, bathe her, and help make her meals. It was too good to be true. I liked Ivanna. She had fire

in her frail body. We'd laugh, and she'd tell me stories about all the men who once fought for her hand in marriage. She said I reminded her of herself when she was young.

During my time working at the estate, I also grew a little too close to her grandson, Bishop Blackstone, heir to a kingdom. I was overwhelmed by his ridiculously good looks and charm.

We fell in love, or so I thought.

The days turned into weeks that then turned into months, and I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with Bishop.

But, his father had different plans. Alastair expected him to take over the family business, and Bishop had no choice. No one defies Alastair. And, as I was quickly finding out, no one defies Bishop either.

Ivanna's health deteriorated. And then, one day while I sat with her, Ivanna told me another story. She told me the *family* business. She warned me about secret dealings and made men. She used words like mafia, mob, and criminals. She told me the only way out was by death.

The day Bishop became a made man, and I realized Ivanna wasn't just telling stories about exactly what the Blackstone's did, was one of the hardest days of my life thus far.

To top it off, I had just found out I was pregnant.

I sat with Ivanna day in and day out, trying to think of a way out. But, one thing I was quickly learning was Bishop always got what he wanted. And what he wanted was me. Ever since he took his 'throne,' he'd been looking for his princess, and I knew deep down that could never be me.

When Ivanna died, I could only focus on the negative.

I couldn't raise a child with a monster, and not having the child wasn't an option. I couldn't condemn my child I had no idea what to do. I turned to the only person who could help me—Clementine.

We thought for hours on a plan to help me escape. We went over every detail for weeks on how I could get myself out of this mess.

And then one night, it hit us like a ton of bricks. Leave the city, run away and pass the baby off as Clementine's, so Bishop would never know.

It was a good, solid plan. We had everything in place and left to visit family in Alabama while I carried a healthy boy to term.

We brought him home, and everything was done. Clementine now had a son, Tennyson. And I had the most precious nephew anyone could ever ask for. He was perfect. With ten perfect toes and ten amazingly perfect fingers. I raised him for the first few months, taking a job as Joseph Prince's caretaker.

And then I met Joseph's grandson, Ronin, and my world spun out of control. It was like *deja vu* all over again, and I wouldn't make the same mistake. But I guess I was destined to, because like I said, I'm a screw up. Because destiny is a funny beast, never caring about our past mistakes and only ever focusing on the future.

For months, I fought the attraction. For months, I tried my hardest, until finally he wore me down with his charm and asked me out.

I agreed, causing a chain of events to spiral out of control.

I may have put Bishop out of my mind, but I was front and center in his. And when he found out I was dating Ronin, he lost it. He couldn't be stopped. The threats started, and then it got worse and worse until one day I broke down and told Joseph Prince everything, begging for his help.

And he swore on his life he'd help hide me from the monster. I agreed, not knowing the terms or realizing his plan was flawed.

Flawed in so many ways. Just like me.

A fake death and I would live out the rest of my days under a new name and never contact anyone I'd ever known. Easy, but the hardest thing I'd ever do.

We faked me getting fired, I played the part of upset, and Joseph took care of the rest.

For the greater good, I'd sacrifice myself to keep my loved ones safe until Joseph Prince could figure out a way to ruin Bishop Blackstone once and for

all. I was too naive to realize people like Bishop don't get 'ruined.' You might temporarily stun them, but they rise up stronger. Just like me.

Chapter 43

Gabriel

I never expected Ronin to show up at the airport with Clementine's sister, Savannah. From a distance, I thought it was Clementine. I was about to pummel my own brother to the ground when I thought he had something to do with my fiancée's disappearance. I couldn't even think straight. Until I walked closer, and saw the difference.

Clementine moves from my arms, wrapping her arms around her sister's shoulders. They stare into each other's eyes and cry.

I glance over at Dean, and like he can read my mind, he shakes his head no, answering my unasked question if Bishop got away.

Good.

And now he'll never be an issue again, and I can finally relax once and for all.

The asshole got what he deserved.

The helicopter makes its way back to the private airport in the Bahamas so we can get on my jet to take us home. I personally can't wait to get Clementine home.

A lot of new questions open up, wondering if Tennyson will now live with his true mother, Savannah.

The helicopter lands a few minutes later, and all of us board my private jet, taking us back to Colorado.

It's a long flight, and most everyone passes out.

Except, Ronin and me.

He stands from his seat next to Savannah, and crosses the aisle to sit with me in the back. "I'm sorry I never told you," he starts, and I pour him a glass of scotch.

"I would have done the same." I will always protect what's mine. "Can I ask you something?"

He nods, taking the glass of scotch from my hands. "Sure."

"You knew all this time she was alive?"

He shakes his head. "No, I overheard someone at Bishop's place. I guess after Grandfather died Bishop suspected. Had I known..." he doesn't finish his thought. He raises the glass to his lips and takes a sip. "I don't know what I would have done." He glances over at Savannah and Clementine. "It's going to be a big adjustment for everyone."



TWO DAYS LATER, I SIT IN MY STUDY, FIGURING OUT WHERE WE GO FROM here. Savannah, Clementine, and Tennyson have been inseparable, and my brain is exhausted trying to wrap around all the events that transpired.

There's a knock on my door. "Come in."

Savannah enters. "Sorry to bother you, but I wanted to give this to you." Savannah hands me a letter. "It's from your grandfather."

I take it from her hands, turning it over to read my name scrawled across the envelope in my grandfather's handwriting. "Where did you get this?"

"He gave it to me. Wanted you to have it if everything went south." She

smiles, and it's very similar to Clementine's smile. "I guess you could call what happened with Bishop going south." She laughs a little.

"I'll leave you alone to read the letter."

When she closes the door behind her, I move back to my office chair and sit. I pull at the sealed envelope, opening it to reveal the letter addressed to me inside:

Gabriel,

If you're reading this, then the truth has come out, and hopefully Bishop is no longer a problem. I hope more than anything this is the case. I chose you to protect Clementine and Tennyson because you're the only person on this planet I could entrust this task to. You've always been my star, and you've never let me down. I'm proud of you, Gabriel. I want you to know that.

You probably think I hate you for forcing you into a marriage, but it really was the only thing I could think of to keep Tennyson safe from the monsters who hunt him down. I'm sure you and Ronin both have so many questions, and you'll find all the answers you need with Savannah. I want you to be happy, so you no longer need to marry Clementine Bright to keep your fortune. Enjoy your life, and find your own princess.

I love you, Joseph Prince.

For a full minute, I think about not even showing Clementine the letter. I debate telling her the wedding is still on, and we need to get married like nothing has changed.

Because heaven knows, if anyone's my princess—it's her.

I leave the study, needing to think, and wander the halls of my castle, planning my next course of action. What if I tell Clementine we no longer need to get married and she leaves?

"What are you doing?"

I turn around and spot Tennyson standing behind me in the hallway on the way to the movie theater. "I was thinking about watching a movie." I

wasn't, but he doesn't need to know I was traipsing around the halls feeling sorry for myself.

"Want to fly a kite instead?"

I smile as an idea hits me. "Actually I have something so much better."

Twenty minutes later, Tennyson and I are in the courtyard, two drones flying side-by-side. I show him how to land the drone, and then take back off again.

"You're good with him," Ronin tells me, coming up to stand beside us.

I fly my drone out of the way of Tennyson's miniature helicopter. "He makes it easy to love him." I smile over at my brother.

Never, in a million years did I ever think I wanted children. Not until this little guy came into my life did I think it was a possibility. Hell, I never even thought I'd ever want to be married, but I do. With every beat of my heart, I want to marry Clementine Bright.

"I can't believe this is all finally over," Ronin says, stepping up to help Tennyson keep his drone in the air. "I never thought it would be."

"So, what are your plans now?" I ask Ronin.

He smiles. "I plan on being around more. And," he rubs the back of his neck, "I'd love to help out at your company more."

I nod. "I'd like that too."

"I'm sorry for everything over the years. Losing Savannah was the hardest thing I've ever been through. I guess I didn't handle it well."

I pat his shoulder, after I land my drone. "It's ok. I hope I never have to go through that." I couldn't imagine losing Clementine. I shudder at the memory of the pain that I suffered when Bishop took her.

"Want to fly drones with us?" I ask my brother.

His grin lights up his face. "Yes, I do."

The three of us spend the afternoon flying drones, and once Tennyson has had enough, we head inside.

"I want to do something for Clementine," I tell Ronin. "She's been

through a lot.”

“Maybe we can all get away. We could all use the break.”

“Actually, I have a different idea.”

Chapter 44

Clementine

Here comes the bride, all dressed in the dress she really wanted. Sugary sand cushions my feet as I walk barefoot toward my soon-to-be-husband. One doesn't need thousand dollar heels when you're on a beach in St. Thomas with a million dollar sunset painting the sky.

Tennyson holds my hand, walking me down the path to Gabriel. There isn't hundreds of guests I don't know, or care about, just the people that matter most.

I've got everything covered:

Something old—the panties Gabriel gave me on the night of our engagement party.

Something new—a Brazilian wax for when he removes said panties.

Something borrowed—the heart locket necklace of my sister's that holds a photo of Tennyson.

Something blue—the lace garter belt, of course.

Savannah and Erin, standing to the left of Gabriel, who is flanked by Ronin and Dean, beam at me as I walk closer.

It's a picture-perfect scene: a gentle breeze, music lilting in the background, and the jeweled ocean crashing in the background.

At the altar is the man I love, waiting in a tuxedo, and I thank my lucky stars that this man is mine.

I join Gabriel, ready to say my vows to the man I will forever be with.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Gabriel says with a smirk, causing a swell of longing that I doubt will ever go away.

I smile. "I'm glad too."

The preacher recites the words that will bind us together and I am giddy with happiness. When it's time to say our vows, Gabriel looks at me with enough fire in his eyes to burn down the world.

"Clementine, you're my fortune. I never thought this kind of life would be the one for me. But, it is. You and Tennyson are my life."

A tear trickles down my cheek. He thumbs it away.

"Reading my grandfather's letter made me realize two things. One, he was proud of me. Proud of the man I've become and it made me appreciate the ol' bastard. And two, I'd give up everything to make you happy."

And then he kisses me. Full of promises.

"You're not supposed to kiss me yet," I whisper against his lips.

"I do what I want," he says with a grin.

"Well, I don't know if I can top what you said. I love you, Gabriel. You've taught me so many things. You've taught me that I can swim in a world of sharks and never be afraid. And you taught me that as long as you're flying your drones I should always duck. I will love you today, and I'll love you for the rest of my life."

"I love you too."

And then we're man and wife. And this time he can kiss me. And he does, deep and consuming.

And then I have my own special surprise for my groom. Kites. A rainbow of kites release into the sky, and Gabriel wraps an arm around me.

“Just like the kite, my love knows no bounds and can fly freely because I know my string is always tethered to you on the ground,” I whisper to him as we watch them soar.

He pulls me in, kissing me until I’m breathless.

Later that evening, Ronin makes a speech, happy we’re all together, and thanking his brother for everything.

I can’t even look at Gabriel without wanting to thank him for everything too. He even still offered me the ten million dollars, told me it was the right thing to do, and I told him absolutely not. This wedding was because I love him. And then, an idea strikes. Maybe I can get him alone on the island and thank him for everything in my own special way.

Maybe on the beach, in the red string bikini I packed, I can show him exactly what he means to me.

“I’m so happy for you,” Savannah tells me as we grab another bottle of champagne from the kitchen. “You’re the greatest sister anyone could ever have. And I’m so lucky I get to have you.”

I fan my face, keeping the tears at bay. “Don’t make me cry.” I glance up, and then give my older sister a hug. “I love you,” I tell her as the floodgates open.

We head back through the house and onto the patio, where Gabriel sits with Tenny in his lap. My husband smiles at me, vowing with his eyes to make our wedding night one I’ll never forget. As if I could.

And I vow back with my gaze that I will give him a life he will never forget.

From this day forward, nothing will ever take me away from him.

Not until death do us part.

Epilogue

Gabriel

Here comes the bride, all dressed in . . . holy fuck . . . *nothing*. Inside my bathroom, there's a goddess slipping into a steaming tub filled to the brim with bubbles. Now, the bathroom alone to most adoring eyes would be captivating enough. I know, seems weird to say about a bathroom, but mine costs more than most people's entire estates *and* it has more amenities.

I built it custom for my wife, completely decked out with all the lavish and luxury touches a woman of her caliber is deserving of. I want Clementine to have the best because—quite simply—she *is* the best thing that has ever happened to me.

So when my sweet goddess strips down to her stunning naked body out of her restricting clothes she now has nothing but comfort surrounding her. From the heated marble tiles under her bare feet, a sunk-in spa with massaging jets and no shortage of hot water or bubbles.

The room smells like a garden of roses. It gets me hard just breathing her in. Just picturing what's going on beneath the layer of foam she's slipping into, one leg at a time, as she eases her way down into the water.

Fuck me.

The suite is complete with a towel warmer so she'll never be cold, although that kind of fucks up my world because I love to see her nipples standing at attention and warm towels mean none of that shit is going to happen. A small price to pay, I remind myself.

There's so much more to her than a good body, and you can't say that about most of the women in my world.

She loves triple-ruffle pink roses so I make sure every three days there's a fleet of roses being delivered to our home to ensure they're decorating and filling every room. She steals a stem from the bouquet in the bathroom and pops the head of the flower off, sprinkling the petals in the water. Her toes turn off the handle and the stream of hot water slows to a halt.

Part of me is tempted to just keep watching from the doorway. I could easily jerk off without being caught. It would be so fucking epic and satisfying to pump my hand over my cock as she washes her incredible tits and long legs. But the flowers pull me back to our wedding day. I remember the feel of her. How good she feels to be inside of. How hard she makes me come and how much I fucking love hearing her screaming my name as she comes around me.

It's too damn much. I have to unbuckle my belt or I'll die.

The memories come flooding through my mind and now I'm straining against my boxers. I let my dick spring free, just pulling down my zipper to stroke myself. Precum is already soaking the tip of my cock and I use it to pump quickly, a little too quickly as I feel the build up already—no pun intended—coming. I have to be disciplined or I'll come too fast. Clementine dips back, her back fully arched as she wets her hair in the water.

Her breasts are fully exposed. Wet. Soapy. Fucking perfect.

I want to put my dick there, mashed between her perfect mounds.

Slowly, I kick the door open. She straightens up but hasn't noticed me yet. I tuck myself back into my pants. It's painfully hard . . . but I want her to

touch me. I want her to take me in her hand.

I sit on the edge of the colossal tub.

She finally opens her eyes and looks at me.

“Oh,” she smiles. “Gabriel.”

“Like your new tub?” I grin back.

“It’s beautiful. Everything you put into this is just so . . . thoughtful. It’s too much though. You didn’t have to spend so much money.”

“I didn’t spend enough,” I say. “There isn’t a thing as too much when it comes to you. I want to give you everything—even shit I don’t have yet.”

She smiles bigger. “You’re so good to me. Such a good husband.”

I lean down and kiss her. “I want to be good *with* you.”

She leans into our kiss and allows me to deepen it, opening her mouth. I taste her sweetness. I don’t give a shit about my clothes. I let myself crawl into the tub with her, only leaving my shoes behind. Clementine laughs as we fall into the bath together, still locked in our kiss.

“You’re all wet,” she says between breaths.

“Mm,” I hum and move my mouth to her rose-scented neck. My fingers go exploring. “So are you, baby.”

Clementine moves her hands to my chest quickly unbuttoning my shirt and tugging at my grey tie as she tries to strip me of my wet clothes.

I help her pull my shirt free and then flip her around until her hands are grabbing the edge of the tub, the side that has more of a bar than just smooth ceramic.

Ok, so maybe I had a little of this in mind too when I built it. But still, for her pleasure.

I pull on her hips and jut her ass out toward me, slapping my hand against her wet skin until she purrs. Her lips are swollen with desire and I press my mouth to her center, shoving my tongue as deep inside of her as I can get.

“Oh, Gabriel.” she moans and her voice echoes off the walls. I fucking love it. “Mm.”

I lap at her, spreading her cheeks to get deeper inside of that sweet pussy. There's nothing better than the taste of her on my mouth. If I wouldn't drown I'd have her just sit on my fucking face so I could drink her dry. There's nothing hotter than her being bent over the ledge losing her mind as she rocks back against my mouth, begging for more than just my kissing of her clit and swipes of my tongue.

I slap her ass again. She moans so loud I almost lose my shit right there. I'm still locked inside my pants and my dick is a beggar who desperately wants to be freed from this prison. I can't take it anymore. I pull myself to my feet, the water rushing over me as I stand.

Clementine turns around completely out of breath and looking absolutely fuckable. I don't even have to ask. She lunges for my zipper like a hungry little minx. Her hands are expert as she pulls my dick free, gasping a little as she takes me in her hands and pumps.

"I love how big you are," she purrs, my precious little kitten. Her tongue flicks out and licks along the tip. "Mmm."

I take her head in my hands and draw her in. Clementine wraps her sweet lips around me and I groan. She's so good it only takes looking at her pretty face to push me over the edge.

"Come in my mouth," she says.

I do.

I laugh to myself.

Ah.

I do.



I WAS READY TO TAKE HER OUT WHEN I GOT HOME. THAT PLAN IS BASICALLY fucked because of that epic fucking bathtub. Not that I'm going to complain. I can get a table at any respectable restaurant in this city. But it does require

going through the whole process of dressing again.

Not that I can complain about that either. Because it also means I get to watch Clementine disrobe and rub lotion up and down her legs as she lies on our bed. I have to use every ounce of restraint and discipline to not pounce on her like some kind of wild fucking animal. Again.

I promised I'd make tonight special for her birthday.

I've already screwed up my first set of plans by being late thanks to bathtub sex. Although I suppose orgasms are great gifts, this should be a little less about me and more about her—that's what I'm getting at.

"I like the blue tie on you," she says, rubbing her knees as she pulls them against her chest. I see everything. Ev-er-y-th-iiiiing.

Is she trying to kill me?

"Are you trying to kill me?"

She looks over my way, seeming innocent to the display she's putting on. Her face flushes. "Oh," she squeaks.

"I'm not complaining," I add. "But there's no way we're leaving this place if you don't stop doing that."

She hops up from the bed and rushes to the closet.

"I'll pretend not to be hurt," I joke.

"Sorry, but cake is everything."

I smile. "I suppose it is."

She picks out a dress that matches the cobalt blue tie she hands me. The back is unzipped and Clem twirls around, lifting her hair up into a messy heap. "Zip me up."

"Mm." I kiss her spine. "It's the least I can do, birthday girl."

She giggles. "Now you need to stop."

I kiss her again, grabbing her waist as I whisper in her ear. "Do I?"

"Gabriel," she warns.

"Mm, that doesn't affect me in the way you'd like it to, Clementine." But I pull away anyhow. I zip her up and she twirls once again to thank me with a

haste kiss.

“Want me to do yours?” she says.

“Yes,” I say immediately. Not even knowing or giving a damn what ‘yours’ she is referring to. My zipper? My tie? My dick? Do it all. As many and much as you like.

Forever.



I SURPRISE HER IN THE GARAGE, HOLDING MY HANDS OVER HER EYES.

“This is just one of many gifts you’ll get tonight.”

She’s almost bouncing on her toes. So I let go, letting her see her new gift.

Across the garage, a classic vintage car wrapped in a big red bow. The plate is custom with her name. I want her to drive the best, too. I have a fleet of cars that are the epitome of luxury, speed, and status. Ultimate comfort. They decorate a one of a kind garage built specially to house them as if this is more of a museum than a place where you park your daily driver.

This car is the most special in my arsenal. And, I wanted her to have it.

“Happy birthday, my love.”

She stands speechless for a moment. “This can’t be real.”

I take her hand and kiss her palm. “I think that every time I introduce you as my wife. Every time I look over at you in bed as you sleep. I want to get to dinner at some point tonight so I’ll keep quiet on when it most surprises me.”

She laughs. And then wraps her arms around me.

“Thank you. I love you. Still too much though.”

“Not enough,” I counter. “Never enough.”

We speed our way through the city, finally ending up at a posh little place where we get a table in the kitchen—which Clementine is over the fucking moon about—and so am I by default. But honestly, it’s pretty damn loud in

the kitchen and not quite the intimate dinner I was hoping to give her. But if it makes her happy, I'll fucking do it. And right now she's beaming as she sips slowly at her wine, completely transfixed on all the happenings of the kitchen.

We're treated to a special menu. The food is superior, but honestly, it's her reaction to it all that I love the most.

"Oh God that's good." she wipes her mouth clean from lobster ravioli.

"That won't be the last time you'll say that tonight." I tease.

Clementine looks over at me. "I sure hope not."

I lean in and kiss her soundly, not giving a fuck about who is around. She doesn't seem to care either. That is . . . until the cake is brought out. Because, in her words, chocolate cake is everything.

And I suppose today—on her birthday—that is more than allowable.



"WHAT IS THAT?" I ASK, PULLING BACK FROM THE PAIR OF SOFT LIPS I'VE got mine pressed against. "Cotton candy?"

We're jammed in the backseat of her newly acquired '68 Mustang and I don't really give a fuck about the flavor of her lipgloss if I'm being honest, but her mouth is too sweet not to comment. I lick the taste of her from my lips and stare into her eyes as a smile spreads across her face.

"Toasted Marshmallow," she says. "But close."

I pull her bra strap down and suck on the skin of her shoulder. "Mm. Of course."

She giggles under me and pulls my mouth back to hers. "Marshmallow," she says, kissing my mouth hotly, her teeth nipping my bottom lip tenderly before she pushes my head back to her skin. I taste her neck. "Vanilla Cupcake."

"Little sweet shop, aren't you?"

She cups my face and brings me back to her lips but pauses. “You have no idea.”

“Mm.” I lean in and taste her lips again. “I think I do, actually. Always up for a refresher course, though.”

She runs her hands across my shirt, popping the tightness of it as it hugs my chest. “Can’t lie. It’s hard to deny you like this. And also, I don’t know if you know this but it’s kind of my birthday today.”

“What did you wish for?”

“Already have everything I ever wanted, Gabriel. I have you.”

“Baby, let me take off your dress,” I say. “I’ll eat that cupcake so fucking good.”

She smacks her palm over my mouth. “Gabriel.” But she’s all smiles.

I taste her palm. “You know I will. The best birthday present you’ll ever get. I promise.”

She licks her lips.

And as promised, I’m going to lick everywhere else.

We’re not in the best place to be doing this shit, but who the fuck cares. Definitely not me. I’m about to put Dr. Suess to shame with my rendition of ‘I’ll fuck her near, I’ll fuck her far, I’ll fuck her anywhere we’re in the backseat of a car that’s too damn small for this kind of thing. But here we are. And it’s never stopped us before.

I hike her dress up to her hips and rip her barely-there underwear in one fell swoop. They mean shit to me. I need her. Now.

“Tell me,” I say.

“Put your mouth on me,” she pleads, parting her legs.

“Your wish, birthday girl.”

She moans as I tease, crouching to gain access to her, putting just the slightest touch of my tongue on her skin at first. She’s so wet. I don’t want it to be over too quick. I want to spend as much time as I can pleasuring her tonight. Hopefully before someone calls the cops on us for this act. We’re not

exactly parked in the most private of parking spots and anyone—if they choose—could spy on us at any time of their choosing. It's not like my other cars where the glass is tinted and we could fuck like wild animals in my limo without anyone being any wiser. This is a small car with little privacy.

It only makes me harder.

Clem doesn't seem to mind.

We're below the level of the window and I try to keep us that way as I put my mouth back on her clit. I hum so she'll feel the vibration as I put my middle finger inside her tight pussy and pump slowly, using my time wisely to tease that spot up high. I curl my finger like I'm calling her. That's what she likes. Her back arches and everything changes about how lost she gets. That's how I know she's close.

I'm hard as fuck, too. But I want the rest of the night to be about her. Fuck my feelings.

She goes still for a moment as I pump her quick, speeding up my tongue to send her over the edge.

"I'm coming. Oh, Gabriel ..."

"I love you." I kiss her thighs as she falls back to earth. "Happy birthday."

"Definitely the best gift," she pants.

"I was thinking the same thing." I kiss her knees, her stomach, her chest, neck . . . until I find her lips and delve in, not even coming up for air when I'm in need. I'm consumed by this woman. And I want her forever. No matter the cost. No matter the risk. Nothing matters. I'd go to any lengths. I'd do anything for her.

Extended Bonus Material

Savannah and Ronin

Have you ever wondered what happened with Savannah and Ronin? Well, keep reading to find out...

Chapter One

Ronin

Trudging through the forest late at night should get me committed. Seriously I need to have my brain checked out. But, when I got the tip of Savannah possibly being alive, I had to act on it.

I had one job. Pay off Bishop and return home. But, what I overheard on the island of Sanzibar will forever change my life, hopefully.

However, now I'm starting to second guess myself. What if this is all one big trap? One giant scheme to lure me away from Clementine so Bishop can attack her.

All of a sudden I feel foolish, and debate on heading back home.

No, she's here.

It's worth the risk.

I keep pushing on, hoping that when I find this cabin, I find her. No one understands how horrible my life became the moment Savannah died.

When I found out she was alive and not dead, I knew what I had to do. At first I didn't want to believe it. I wanted to pretend I hadn't just heard the worst news of my life. I felt empty, heartbroken, afraid. I couldn't handle all the feelings as they washed over me.

The next few years were a blur of drunken memories. Gambling. Getting

myself into debt with one of the worst mobsters in the world. Bishop Blackstone.

None of that matters right now. I need to find her.

Which is what I'm doing. I need to see her, touch her. Know that she's actually safe and not buried six feet under. The hike will be well worth it.

After another half hour of nothing but twigs snapping beneath me, birds chirping, and the sound of my own voice in my head, I see a clearing. It's not big, but it may lead me to where I need to be. My tired feet pick up the pace and I stop just before stepping through. I check to make sure no one's there. When I feel confident I follow the long path. It ends quickly with more trees.

"Fuck this." The sun bounces off something and hits me in the eyes. I move forward and a few yards away I see a cabin.

It's just sitting there. My heartbeat hammers inside my chest.

The cabin is made out of white oak, with a large front porch. There's one lonely rocking chair sitting out on it, and it pains me to think of how many years Savannah has sat on this front porch looking out, unable to live the life she deserved.

I rush to the door, but once I get there, I'm not sure what to do. Knock and risk getting my head blown off. Open the door and risk the same. I figure knock and open the door. I do that and step inside. The sound of a gun cocking stops me dead in my tracks.

"Ronin?"

The soft voice of Savannah makes me spin around. She's standing there with a rifle pointed at me, fat tears running down her beautiful face. I rush over and push the gun down to face the floor.

"Savannah, give me the gun," I whisper, unable to even catch my breath properly. She looks the same, yet so completely different.

She lets go and I put the safety on, and lean it against the wall. Her big honeyed eyes gaze at me like she can't believe I'm actually here.

I can't believe I am either.

We stare at each other for a minute before I step closer. “It’s just me, sweetheart.”

As I say the words, she falls into my arms and I hold her tight. She’s trembling and I’m not sure if it’s from crying or from fear. Her hold on me is just as tight, like she’s afraid to let go. I’m so relieved she’s alive. A single tear rolls down my cheek.

“How’d you find me?” she asks, not letting go.

“It wasn’t easy,” I say, placing a kiss on her head. “You want to tell me what the hell you and Clementine are doing? Why did you fake your own death?”

She pulls away and runs into the bathroom.

Her cabin isn’t as bad as one might expect from a cabin in the woods. Someone paid a lot of money to hide Savannah here.

Just as I’m about to knock on the bathroom door, she steps out. “I’m sorry, I just needed a minute.”

“I guess me showing up is a lot to take in,” I say, knowing exactly how she’s feeling.

“Yeah, something like that,” she whispers. “Would you like a drink? Water?”

“Water would be great.”

We go into the kitchen, and I graze my hand over the expensive marble countertop.

She hands me a bottle and I follow her into the living room, letting her take a seat on the oversized beige sofa.

“Talk to me, Savannah,” I gently urge.

Her sad eyes once again fill with tears. “I don’t know where to even start.”

I reach over and grab her hand, holding it in mine. My thumb draws small circles as I try to get her to relax and trust me. “How about you tell me why you’re here? Why does everyone think you’re dead?”

“Clementine hasn’t told you anything?” she asks, her eyes searching mine.

“No, but even if she did, I’d still want to hear it from you.”

She’s quiet for a few minutes. I’m not sure if she’s thinking about what to say or just finding the courage to say it. Either way, when she lifts her head to gaze at me, my heart stops with the appearance of sadness and fear in her eyes. I squeeze her hand a bit harder and nod my head.

“I need to trust you, Ronin,” she says, a bit more firmly.

I lift her hand to my mouth and kiss it. “You have my word.”

“Tennyson isn’t Clementine’s son, he’s mine.”

My stomach drops and my throat tightens. Not because she’s his mother, but because I know I’m not the father. Savannah and I have never taken our relationship to that level. Even though I wanted nothing more at the time. “Why would you lie about that?”

She looks away briefly before glancing back at me. “Bishop’s the father.”

I grit my teeth together, and anger, fear, and understanding all take over. “You’re sacrificing your life for his.”

No words are said, she just shakes her head. Once again tears rush down her cheeks and I pull her to me. She holds onto me and we stay that way for a while. I’m not sure what she’s thinking, maybe relieved to tell me, maybe regretful. But, for me, it takes a while to wrap my head around it all. I understand it all so clearly now. I also can’t just sit back and let it happen. The need to protect her, to reunite her with her son, is all I can think about. I will do it, I just need to figure out how.

After what seems like hours, she lifts her head off my chest. “I’m so happy to see you.”

I search her eyes and I notice the need in them. It’s been years since I’ve been near her, yet it’s something I’ve thought of everyday since. I fell in love with her and those feelings are even stronger now. My hands cup her face and

I lean forward and press my lips to hers.

She gasps in surprise, but then she returns my kiss. And I can't let go.

I'm suspended in disbelief that I'm actually here right now with her. That I'm touching her. This can't be a dream. I won't let it be.

She moans against me and I know immediately she wants this as much as me.

I slip my arms around her and lift her. "I need you, Savannah."

One last tear escapes her eye and I brush it away. "I need you too, Ronin."

Chapter Two

Savannah

Ronin carries me across the hardwood floor to the bedroom. To have his arms around me feels like a dream in the nightmare I've been living. I didn't think it was possible to feel again, nevermind feel the fire raging inside me. Ronin is the only man capable of that and now he needs to extinguish it.

He walks down the hallway like he has a map to the master suite, and he finds it on the first try. He swings the door open, letting me slide down his body as he stands in the middle of my room.

"I've dreamt about this," he whispers.

"Me too." Because I have. I think every night my dreams were filled with him. With being able to be with him without the constant worry of Bishop coming after me.

We slowly start to undress each other. He removes my shirt and I remove his. I watch in fascination as his muscles flex and contract as he moves. It's hot and turns me on even more. Once we get our jeans off, he pulls me to him and crashes his mouth to mine. It takes my breath away. We stumble onto the bed and explore each other's bodies.

It's not fast and frantic.

It's slow and sensual.

We're reacquainting ourselves.

It's magical.

And it's something I haven't felt in so long.

He kisses down the column of my throat, over my neck, and across my collarbone, gently biting it. My body grows with a need and longing I haven't felt in years.

Is it so bad that all I can think about is having Ronin inside me? Even if it's only for tonight.

Only once. Before he heads back to the land of the living and I never see him again.

I can't.

I'm not welcomed there.

"Fuck, Savannah," he groans, pulling my thoughts back to his expert tongue as it trails across my heated skin.

I'm empowered by the effect I have on him. With a confidence I thought was gone forever, I roll on top of him. I kiss down his chest, his stomach, and to the top of his black boxer briefs.

His eyes slam into mine, and I can't turn away even for a second.

He removes the last of his clothing, and my eyes widen at the sight of him. So strong and proud, jutting right toward me.

I lower my head, licking up his long shaft, swirling my tongue around the tip. I wrap my lips around him and take him into my mouth.

He lets out a growl, fisting his hand into my hair.

I suck along him, as I think about how many times I've imagined this very scene. Tears fill my eyes, wishing I could stay with Ronin forever.

Ronin catches sight of this, and pulls me from his body. "Kiss me," he begs, and I lean over and plant my lips over his.

His hands rummage through my hair, down my body, and to my panties. He rips them off.

"Oh God." I love how he's taking control. I love how he's flipped me

over now, and hangs his head above mine. “You were mine so long ago.”

I nod, gazing into his eyes.

“And you’re still mine, Savannah.” He kisses me, leaning up slightly to say, “You’ll always be mine.”

He moves his hands down my body, grazing over my hip and settles in between my thighs. His fingers run through my wet folds and I nearly buck off the bed. His thumb grazes over my clit, and I realize it won’t take much to push me over the edge.

“Do you have any idea how fucking hot it is that I’m the reason for this dripping wet pussy?” I bite my lip as he looks down at me. “I want you to come in my mouth and then on my dick.”

I have no words, I just bite my lip harder. He smiles before he starts to slide down my body. He tosses my legs over his shoulders and drags his tongue through my pussy. I shout in pleasure and he begins to feast on me. He licks at me with a speed I didn’t know was possible. I grab onto the sheets, trying to hold still as his hot breath fans against me while he eats my pussy.

“Oh Ronin, I’m so close,” I breathe out.

Like I said the magic words, he has me thrashing beneath him. His tongue is licking at my clit fast and hard, while he pushes his fingers deep inside me. I moan finding it impossible to hold still. My body falls into a depth deep below and I’m not about to stop it. He bends his fingers, hitting just the right spot as he sucks on my clit. It happens so fast, it shocks me. My voice echoes around us as I scream out his name. He sucks at me, moaning against me as my orgasm rips me in half.

When I’m coherent once again, I notice he’s looking down at me, his mouth glistening in my release. “You taste so fucking good. So sweet.” He presses his lips to mine, letting me taste myself on him. It’s hot and unbelievably makes me still want more. Which is exactly what he gives me.

While he continues to kiss me, he pushes his unyielding cock into me. I

feel like I'm being torn apart in the best way. I moan in his mouth and he moves, slow and sweet. He's taking his time, making it last as long as possible. It's exactly what I need, what we need. When we both start breathing heavily, we break the kiss.

"Ronin," I whisper, looking into his heavy eyes.

"I'm here sweetheart, I'm right here."

It brings tears to my eyes, but in a good way. I feel cared for, I feel safe, I feel loved. The emotional and the physical feelings are taking over. When he walks out of here, I'll be alone and for the first time in years, it scares me. My thoughts are quickly pushed aside when he picks up his speed just a bit.

"You feel so fucking good wrapped around me. So wet and tight," he groans.

I close my eyes, letting his words and body wash over me. In the moment I realize he's making love to me. I snap my eyes open and they collide with his. A tear runs down my cheek and he kisses it away.

"I feel it too," he whispers, looking back into my eyes.

I tighten my hold on his shoulders as his hands cup my cheeks. He's making sure I look at him, although I had no intention of turning away. I'm getting close again and I want him to see me.

His dick pumps in and out of me, going deeper each time. His solid chest drags along my tits as he keeps moving. I moan out and he knows I'm getting close. He reaches down and rubs my clit. I moan louder, watching his eyes bounce between mine. The heat and arousal is enough to once again pull my orgasm out of me.

"Ronin," I shout, never breaking eye contact.

He picks up his pace, dragging my release on, and a few minutes later my name is falling from his lips. I watch his face and it's the most incredible thing I've ever seen. The look of absolute pleasure. I'll never forget it.

We lay tangled around each other until the sky turns pink. My head rests on his chest and I listen to his heart beat. I'm tired, but force myself to stay

awake. He won't be here long and I want to enjoy every second.

"I'm gonna make this right, Savannah. I'm going to get you the fuck out of here and back with your son," Ronin says.

"It's not that easy," I regretfully reply.

"Nothing worth it is." Just as he says that, the landline rings. No one has ever called that number since Joseph Prince died.

"Umm," I say. "No one has ever called me except for your grandfather. He's the only one with the number."

He grabs it off the nightstand and answers it on speaker phone. "Hello?"

I recognize Gabriel's voice immediately. "Ronin? Is that really you?"

"Gabriel, how did you get this number?"

"Did you have anything to do with Clementine's disappearance?" My eyes meet Savannah's and hers widen.

"She's missing?"

"Yes."

I can see the full panic on Savannah's face. "Is Tennyson with you?"

"He's safe," Gabriel replies.

"Where are you?" I rush out.

"I'm about to be at my hangar at the executive airport."

"I'll meet you there." I hang up and Savannah is already to her feet, searching for her clothes.

"Do you think Bishop took her?" she asks as she throws on a pair of jeans.

I shrug. "It's very possible. We need to go and get your sister back and end this shit once and for all."

Chapter Three

Many months later... **Savannah**

Since the night we saved Clementine from Bishop Blackstone, Gabriel moved me into his house right away. I'm grateful to be near my family. To be able to spend time with Clementine and Tennyson everyday.

We didn't tell Tenny that I'm his real mother as we didn't want to confuse everyone. We also never want it to be known that Tennyson is Bishop Blackstone's son. I don't know how many people Bishop may have told, but for now Tenny is safe with us.

Ronin moved into the estate as well, helping Gabriel out with the family business.

"Want some ice cream?" Ronin says as he walks into the living room where I'm working on some designs on my laptop. "Oh, I thought Tennyson was here too."

"No, Gabriel and Clem took him to see a movie."

"You didn't want to go?"

I shake my head. "I wanted to start my own design firm. Designing houses, and I was working on my website."

Since the night of the cabin, Ronin hasn't made a move on me. And I

can't understand why. He says he wants to make sure I've settled back into my life. And I feel I already have.

I follow him into the kitchen as he dishes out a bowl of ice cream and hands me a spoon.

If I could have him, I would. And why can't I?

He has integrated nicely into my world, and me into his. Everyone loves him. Everyone thinks we are great together.

But, it feels weird having him by my side after all this time. After all these years.

We haven't had the talk yet since we've been back, and I don't know how to bring it up.

He should hate me for having a kid with another man, but for some reason he's nice to me.

I take a bite of the ice cream, letting the flavors combine on my tongue. I need advice, preferably from Clementine. She would know what to say or do right now.

"What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?" Ronin asks.

I waggle my finger at him, smiling. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

He pulls me closer, dabbing a dollop of ice cream on my neck and sucking it off just as quick.

"You taste good."

I laugh. "That was cold. Don't do that again."

He doesn't listen, because he does it again. The ice cream hits my skin, freezing it, and sending a chill through my bones.

"You like that?" he asks.

"No, nobody would like that."

He sucks along my collarbone, his tongue as cold as ice.

"Go get on the couch, wait." He grabs both spoons. "I'll meet you over there."

My eyes widen. "Ok."

I do as he says, sitting on the couch as he puts the ice cream away in the freezer. “Close your eyes,” he calls out.

He heads down the hallway, his loud footsteps pounding until I can no longer hear them.

My mind unravels with all the possibilities of what he has in store for me.

His footsteps sound down the hall, and my anticipation grows.

“Keep your eyes closed, Savannah.”

He steps up behind me, wrapping a silk blindfold over my eyes. It’s my sleep mask he slips over me. Chills skate over my skin when he unties the belt around my robe.

He lays me back, positioning himself between my legs. “We’re about to have a party up in here.”

I lean forward. “What kind of party?”

“An ice party.” And with those words he wrenches my legs apart, my head falls back and his mouth is there, in between my legs.

My hips buck when I feel it. Cold, freezing. An ice cube slips from his mouth and he rubs it along my soft skin. “Ronin....that’s cold.”

“Shh,” he whispers, circling the cube around my clit.

The cold sensation turns me on as he licks and blows, rubbing the ice all along my pussy. It’s so damn good.

I could get used to this every night.

The ice numbs my skin as he trickles it across my inner thigh. So good.

My eyes roll back, my mouth hangs open. All kinds of different sounds I’ve never made exit my mouth.

My tummy tightens, goosebumps erupt, and my orgasm nears. My breath hitches, sparkles line my vision.

“Oh God,” I moan.

He doesn’t let up, playing the ice across my skin. He pushes a finger deep inside me as I grasp a hold of his hair. “Don’t stop,” I cry.

Pushing and pulling, rising and falling, my body reaches and reaches. This man is a skilled craftsman at making me come. At unraveling my soul. At making my body climax in the most erotic way.

And I let him. Oh boy, do I let him. I let him push all the right buttons. Turn all the right knobs. He licks and sucks and digs deep with his tongue and finger.

Pressure builds.

Fire ignites deep in my core. And then it happens. Ah, yes. "Don't stop," I yell.

Everything lets loose. A tumultuous orgasm rips through me piece by piece. Each climax he releases is better than the last.

He scoops me up, removing the mask from my eyes and tying my robe around me. He holds me on the couch in his arms. Running his hands through my hair, he kisses me tenderly by the light of the moon.

It's quiet. Peaceful.

I want to stay wrapped up in this nest for an eternity.

Chapter Four

Ronin

I don't want to impede on Savannah's time with her son. It's been years since she's seen him, so I stay back. I watch. Waiting for the precise moment I can really let her know how I feel about her.

At the cabin we were alone. I'd just found out she was alive. And poor Savannah hadn't seen a familiar face in a long time. So our emotions were heightened, weren't they?

She couldn't possibly have meant anything she said. Or even felt the way she said she had felt.

But one thing's for certain. I meant it. I still mean it.

I'm in love with her.

"You ready to get going?" I ask her.

"Will you tell me where we're going?" She smiles.

I hand her my extra helmet and motion to my motorcycle. "Hop on and you'll see."

She laughs as she puts it on.

Having Savannah on the back of my bike brings me joy. The good kind. The kind I never thought I'd have in my life. The kind I don't deserve.

We race through the city on dreams and fantasies.

Her arms are wrapped tight around me. It's the best feeling in the world.

I cross over the Brooklyn Bridge and head in the direction of Grady's Animal Shelter. When we park, Savannah lifts her brows at me.

"An animal shelter? Is this your community service work?"

Ouch.

"No, but I do work here sometimes. And tonight you're going to help." I grab her hand after removing our helmets.

She shakes her long curls out and it's like something out of a movie.

I clear my throat, mesmerized by her pure beauty.

"What exactly are we going to be doing?" she asks with a worried expression.

I wrap my fingers tighter around her precious hand. "Come on, I'll show you."

Turning the lock, I lead her through a set of double doors. The smell hits us both, and she scrunches her cute button nose.

"Oh God, that smell is fun," she says, laughing.

"You get used to it." I lead her down a long hallway, white and boring and through a set of double doors at the end.

Dogs barking rings around the poorly acoustic room. She smiles as she heads over to a cage of a small puppy.

"Baxter. He's a rescue that was brought in last week." I move closer to the Maltese as she reaches her finger into the cage so he can lick at her finger.

"Aww. He loves me, look," she says over her shoulder as the puppy tries to get her attention.

He jumps and barks, wanting to be held.

"Want to hold him?"

"Are you serious?"

"Of course," I walk away to get the key for the cages, "he won't be happy until you hold him."

She smiles wide, returning her attention back to Baxter and talks baby talk to him. Or I should say puppy talk.

He is kind of cute.

I retrieve the keys, unlocking the gate and I lift the white furball, handing him off to Savannah.

It's instant love. She hugs and kisses him like he's the best thing she's ever seen. He licks her chin, loving the attention. Attention dog hog.

I'm not jealous, maybe a little. And I laugh when he wiggles out of her arms and she lets him down to play.

"I love him." She smiles as she brings Baxter to where I stand with my arms crossed over my chest.

I raise a brow. "Is that so? I've been replaced by a snowball?"

She holds the dog up, whispering in his ear, "He didn't mean that. He's not as bad as he seems."

I move closer. "You sure about that?"

She stares deeply into my eyes. "Very."

My eyes dart off in the direction of the other cages. "I brought you here thinking we could meet all the dogs. You've met Baxter, care to meet a few others?"

"Can I bring him along?" She holds Baxter up and snuggles him.

"Yeah."

We spend the next half hour meeting all the dogs here at this rescue. Savannah's eyes light up as she plays with a few. She hasn't let go of the little white ball of puff at her side.

"I think Tenny would love him."

"Maybe we can come back tomorrow and adopt him."

She smiles wide. "We can even bring Tenny."

I nod, feeling like this is a very family kind of thing to do. I never thought I'd ever get married, or be in a type of serious relationship after Savannah died. But now, seeing her, feeling her, knowing I can have her for the rest of

my life if she'd have me, there's hope.

She kisses the puppy's nose and puts him back in the cage, giving him promises that she'll be back with someone very important tomorrow.

Chapter Five

Savannah

The next day I wake up bright and early. I talked to Gabriel and Clementine last night about getting the puppy and they were both very much on board with it.

So, today Ronin, Tennyson and I will go and pick up Baxter.

“Ready?” Ronin asks Tenny and I after we’ve had our breakfast.

I glance at Tenny, his big eyes staring at me.

“It’s time for a surprise?”

I laugh. “Yes, it’s time for the big surprise.”

Ronin leads us out to where the car waits for us, and we all pile into the back. The driver, Mayer, smiles and starts up the engine.

He already knows where we’re going, so as not to say anything to Tennyson.

Tennyson wiggles in his car seat, excited to be getting a surprise. The whole ride to the shelter he tries to get Ronin and I to tell him. I love how well Tennyson and Ronin get along. They’ve grown close over the last few months. We all have.

I didn’t realize how much I’d missed not being close to Clementine and Tennyson everyday. And I’m almost upset with myself that I had to fake my

own death, but then I remember I need to be upset with Bishop, not me.

We arrive at the shelter, and Ronin leads us inside.

Tennyson jumps up and down. “I get to play with puppies all day?”

I grab his hand. “Well, sort of.”

We enter through the front doors this time, and head to the lady standing behind the white counter.

“Ronin,” she says with a smile. “We’ve got him all ready for you.”

Ronin had called the shelter earlier to make sure no one came and snatched the puppy up before we could get here today.

We step forward as we wait for the lady to fetch Baxter. I can see the excitement all over Tenny’s face. He’ll be so happy.

I feel like I’m making up for lost time with my son. It’s almost selfish of me in a way, but I can’t help it. I love him so much and not a single day has gone by that I haven’t wished for a day just like this.

The lady has the little bundle of joy in her hands, and Tenny leaps forward, wanting to pet the dog.

It’s like Baxter can sense that Tenny will be his forever best friend because he’s practically leaping out of the woman’s arms.

She walks the two of them over to a small play area where she can set Baxter down. Baxter leaps into Tenny’s arms immediately and licks his face.

I laugh, trying to memorize this perfect moment.

Ronin leans down next to Tenny. “Meet Baxter, your new dog.”

“He’s mine?” Tenny asks through the onslaught of puppy licks.

“All yours,” I add on.

Tennyson and the new puppy are both overjoyed with the news. The puppy obviously feeding off Tenny’s excitement. I watch on as Ronin heads off in the direction to finalize the adoption paperwork.

I couldn’t be more overjoyed with how my life has turned out.

I have my son.

I have Clementine, and knowing she’s happy with Gabriel makes me

even happier for her. I've always thought there was something brewing there. The way Gabriel used to watch her when he was flying his kites.

I want to have Ronin, but there's still something holding him back, and I'm not sure what it is.

Ronin and I haven't discussed what we are to each other yet, but I know he means more to me than the world. We have time. Something Bishop never allowed us to have.

A chill skates over my skin at the thought of Bishop.

A part of me still pictures him alive, searching for me.

Another chill rushes up my spine, and I feel a hand on my shoulder and I jump.

"You're safe," Ronin whispers close to my ear.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. I still can't believe all of this is real."

He kisses me on the top of my head. "It's real, Savannah. It's all real."

He turns his attention from me and focuses on Tenny and Baxter. "Ready to show your puppy his new home?"

Tenny's face lights up like the Fourth of July. We gather our things and head toward Gabriel's estate. Last night, Ronin had gone to the pet store to ensure we had everything we'd need to bring Baxter home.



"They're both finally sleeping," Ronin says to Gabriel, Clementine, and me. He crosses the room and sits next to me on the loveseat.

I'd been sitting here discussing the future with Gabriel and Clementine, but it's hard to talk about a future when I don't know where Ronin's head is. Or his heart.

I know he loves me. At least, I'm almost positive he does, but does he want forever with me?

Will he be happy with this life?

We talk with Gabriel and Clementine for a few more minutes and then Ronin grabs my hand.

“We’re off to bed,” he says, rising from the couch.

My sister waggles her eyebrows at me, and I giggle as Ronin leads me to the room I’ve been staying in.

As soon as he closes the door, his eyes grow serious. “I know we haven’t talked about a future together, but you have to know that’s what I want, right?”

I bat my long lashes at him. “It is?”

“Yes.” He steps closer. “You have to know how much I love you. How miserable I’ve been all these years without you.”

My heart fills with a warmth I can hardly describe. Like everything’s falling perfectly into place.

“I’ve been miserable without you too,” I tell him as he erases the distance between us.

Chapter Six

Ronin

Being here with Savannah is like all the stars have perfectly aligned in my life. I take her in my arms, memorizing the way she feels against me.

“I love you,” I tell her again as I press my lips against hers firmly.

She moans against me, and I push us closer to the bed in the center of the room. I’ve been thinking about being with her all day long.

Newsflash, I’m always thinking about being with her.

It’s like I’m a teenager again, rushing out of my house to spend one minute alone with Savannah.

I break the kiss so I can get our clothes off as quickly as possible. As soon as we’re both undressed, she climbs onto the bed, and I watch her with hazy eyes.

I can’t stop staring at her. I can’t believe she’s real. I’ve thought she was dead for so many years that sometimes I feel like I’m dreaming all of this.

But now, I know I’m awake.

I know this is real.

“You’re exquisite,” I tell her and her cheeks tinge pink.

“So are you.”

The bed dips as I climb on it. I move myself between her legs, and kiss

along her open thighs, making my way toward the center. To the place that's become my own personal heaven.

"You're already so wet for me."

She nods and then closes her eyes, leaning her head back as I press my lips against her hot center. She moans and I get turned on knowing she's so turned on. "Oh, Ronin," she mewls.

I lick a path over her wet skin, settling upon her clit. I move it through my lips, humming, nibbling the soft skin. She's moving her body along with me, her fingers racing through my hair.

I keep lapping away at her heated skin, wanting to hear her get off a few times before I finally enter into her. Before I stick my dick where he so badly wants to be. I'm harder than iron, but this is all about her tonight.

I play with her, toying with her clit as her body grows hotter. Her legs wrap around me, and her fingers dig into my scalp.

"I'm so close," she calls out, and I just go harder, deeper into making her scream.

I love making her feel this way.

I'm so horny. So turned on. Eating her pussy is heaven, and I don't ever want to stop. She moans and writhes beneath me, and soon she's a chorus of yes's and oh's as she comes along my tongue.

As soon as I lift my head, meeting her eyes, I can't hold on any longer. "I need inside you," I tell her, moving up her body, positioning the head of my cock against her opening.

Normally we use condoms, but right now I need to feel her bare.

"Is this ok?" I ask her as I push the tip of my hard cock into her.

She nods, biting her lower lip. "Yes, Ronin. I want to feel all of you."

I know she's not on the pill. Why would she be?

And I know she's clean, and I am as well, but the thought of filling her with my seed makes my dick that much harder.

I want to paint her insides white with my cum. I want it madly, and it

makes me pump my cock deep inside her.

She moans as I push all the way in, and I still as soon as I'm balls deep within her.

“Goddammit, you feel so fucking good,” I groan against her ear.

I keep pushing inside her, enjoying the feel of her wrapped around me. I grunt out as I get deeper and further than I've ever been before. She wraps her legs around my waist, her nails raking down my back.

I could do this forever.

I could be with this woman forever.

Even when I thought she was dead, she still held my heart. And she forever will.

I keep pushing, keep fucking, as I pound into her. I move my lips across her collarbone, down to the peak of her tits, rubbing her hard nipple through my teeth.

“Ronin, please.”

I don't know what she's begging for but I make it my solemn vow to give it to her.

“I've got you,” I tell her, moving up a bit, resting my hands on each side of her head so I can stare into her bright eyes. “I've got you, baby. I've got you forever.”

Her smile is soft and sweet and I slow my motion, pulling my dick out, and then slamming it back into her at an unhurried pace.

I run one hand over her hair as I gaze into her eyes. “You feel so good.” I connect my lips to hers and kiss her. I'm still rocking into her, slowly, and she moves her body along with mine.

“I love you, Ronin,” she cries out as her body pulses and the inner walls of her pussy grip me tight. “I love you,” she whispers as her eyes squeeze shut.

She's breathtaking when she comes along my cock.

The feel of her pussy tightening around me, makes my body light on fire.

I'm close. No, I'm even closer than I thought.

"I'm gonna come," I tell her, not sure if she wants me to pull out or not.

She grips her legs tighter around me. "Come inside me, Ronin."

I stare into her eyes, making sure I'm hearing her correctly. "Are you sure?" I ask her before I explode.

She nods, and I close my eyes as my orgasm crashes through me. I fill her up with my seed. I dig even deeper with my engorged cock to fill her completely up. I want this with her.

I want her pregnant with my child.

I keep staring into her eyes as her pussy milks my cock dry.

"I want it too," she says, reading my thoughts.

"I love you so damn much, Savannah. I want to be with you always."

Her face lights up with a smile, and she holds me tighter. "I love you, too."

Our racing hearts slow. Our bodies come down from their incredible high.

I head into the en-suite bathroom to clean up.

When I come back into the room, Savannah's wearing a robe.

"Where you going?" I ask her.

"I just want to check on Tenny and Baxter one last time."

I nod, pulling on my pants.

Before Savannah can even open the door there's a knock on it.

She swings it open and Gabriel and Clementine are standing there. I know that wild look in my brother's eyes.

Something's happened.

"What is it?" I ask, stepping closer.

"It's Bishop."

Savannah gasps and covers her mouth. I move beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

"What about him?" I ask Gabriel.

“He’s not dead.”



Thank you for reading this bonus story of Ronin and Savannah. I love this couple, and want nothing but a happy ending for the two of them. They both definitely deserve it.

Keep reading the Taken Series to see what happens when Bishop returns.

Gabriel and Ronin call Dean Maddox as soon as word is out that Bishop Blackstone is alive.

Bishop’s got a new plan, and it’s up to Dean Maddox and his team (The Men of Maddox Security) to finally take Bishop down once and for all. With Gabriel, Clementine, Savannah, Ronin, and Tennyson (and of course Baxter too) in hiding, Bishop still doesn’t know Savannah’s alive. He’s got a new plan. To take down the Four Families of the mafia in America, and he won’t stop until he has gotten what he wants.

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If you'd like to join the Logang, you can [CLICK HERE!](#)

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Logan Chance is a USA Today, Top 20 Amazon, KDP All-Star, and KDP All-Star UK bestselling author with a quick wit and penchant for the simple things in life: Star Wars, music, and smart girls who love to read. He was nominated best debut author for the Goodreads Choice Awards in 2016. His works can be classified as Dramedies (Drama+Comedies), featuring a ton of laughs and many swoon worthy, heartfelt moments.

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