

CARRYING YOUR

Lies
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SAMIRAH ZAMAN

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Samirah Zaman

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-7393407-2-8

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-7393407-3-5

First paperback edition: October 2023

Cover art by: Rebekah Pell

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To all those who lead with their heart —

may victory be yours

PART ONE:

Savannah

1

HIS HAND COMES DOWN with a thwack on my ass cheeks as he growls in my ear, “Yeah, just like that baby girl.”

Men.

My mother always told me men are creatures who like to take. They are reckless with their belongings and unbothered by the consequences of their actions so long as they are satisfied. They will crash a car, straighten up, run their hands through their hair and plaster on a smile for the next car they already had their eyes on.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes even though he can't see my face. I continue to gyrate my hips against his evident bulge and lose myself in the R&B track playing through the speakers. A bead of sweat trickles down my back as my body moves like fluid to the rhythm of the music.

When I feel his hands slide up my back before attempting to grope my breasts, I turn around and give him a playful smile.

“I don't think so. This is not *that* kind of service.”

His thin lips curl into a smirk that makes my skin crawl. “Oh, come on. I’m sure a girl like you has gone too far with a customer once or twice.”

I should punch him square in the face, but I need some tip money, so I plaster on a teasing smile. “I could get fired.”

His eyes haven’t moved from my bedazzled bra since I turned around. Every word has been directed at my breasts, and it’s starting to piss me off. His index finger runs down my torso, stopping just above the waistband of my matching underwear. “They won’t fire you, baby girl.” He leans forward so his lips are at my ears. “They always need whores to entertain.”

My smile doesn’t waver. “How does your wife feel about you being here amongst the whores?”

The arrogance laced in his eyes is a tell-tale my guess was correct. “What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

As my mother said, men are creatures that like to take.

“Let me guess, she’s the perfect housewife who stays home to raise your children. She’s probably at home adding the final touches to her cookies while your dinner finishes cooking.”

His hands slide up my thighs before grabbing my ass cheeks. “She doesn’t have a thing on you.”

“You might want to be careful because a woman *always* knows. After spending her entire life slaving in the kitchen to cater for you, she can smell a *pig* a long mile away.” I push his hands off my body and climb off his lap. I stare down at him

as he sits there with a pissed-off glare. “I hope you were satisfied with my service.”



“Chris is pissed at you,” Mia says before I can tie my apron.

I ignore her glare, pulling my hair into a topknot and tying my apron. The pungent smell of coffee wafts through the air, masking the scent of freshly baked goods.

This morning is tranquil, with only four of the tables being occupied. *EspreSoul* is an indie café in Central London, preying on those who can’t function without their daily dose of caffeine. The eclectic décor stands out against the bougie competitors around us. While they have an *Instagram-able* aesthetic, this place has multi-coloured walls and mismatched furniture that isn’t easy on the eyes. Nevertheless, it has proven to be successful.

“Sav, are you listening to me?”

“Yeah, Chris is pissed. So what? I don’t regret what I said. I only warned him that his wife knows he’s a scumbag pig.”

Mia leans against the counter while I serve a customer. As soon as she walks away with her croissant, Mia starts again.

“This is your third warning. He’s going to fire you,” she warns.

“So? I’ll find another strip club.”

“He’s pissed at me too, you know?”

I look at my friend and feel slightly guilty. Her green eyes stare at me with worry as I try to muster up words of reassurance. I would tell her we can both find somewhere new to dance, but with her medium height and slightly curvier build, not everyone will take her on.

“I’ll have a word with him. I’ll tell him last night had nothing to do with you.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “I was the one that recommended you, so you reflect on me. Stop acting like a bitch to your customers.”

Knowing Hayley isn’t around to tell me off, I turn my back to the till and lean against the counter. “Listen, I’m grateful you got me in. It’s been great money, but I don’t know if I want to continue. Honestly, I’m tired. Working here full-time and then dancing four nights – I am exhausted. Let me save us both the hassle and quit.”

Mia flips her perfectly manicured middle finger at me. “Get off your high horse. Apologise to Chris and get back to shaking that money maker. Unless you suddenly have a money tree in your garden, how do you plan to repay the money you owe? Your shitty ex isn’t going to pay you back. You have your mum to take care of and bills to pay. You have got to learn how to control that mouth of yours. It’s too fucking big,” she laughs.

I tap my shoe against hers as a thank you. “If I see that man again, I’m going to dig my heel into his fucking dick.”

“Or you could use that big mouth and get more than just a load of his cash.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

A throat clears behind me, making me jump. The grey eyes flicker between Mia and me, with amusement dancing on his features. If a God exists, He took His time creating this fine creature. With thick locks of dark chocolate hair, a sharp jawline coveted by a beard and grey-blue eyes, any woman would swoon over him.

Today, he wears a navy suit, white shirt and sky-blue tie. *This is definitely my favourite colour on him.* His tailor-made suit makes him look taller and fits perfectly around his toned build.

I smile at him. “What can I get for you, Mr Rivers? Another refill?”

His chuckle is deep, and I feel it everywhere. “I’ve told you before, call me Xavier.”

“When your watch costs more than my rent, I would rather not. Another flat white?”

He nods at me.

“How’s business?” I ask over the noise of the machines as Mia makes his drink.

“Very well. How is your mother?”

“Good. She was delighted to see me yesterday.”

His perfectly shaped brow raises as he asks, “And the ex?”

I roll my eyes. “I believe you’re breaking your end of the agreement, Mr Rivers.”

His soft chuckle can barely be heard as the coffee beans grind behind me. “Ah, yes! You shared the information so long as I didn’t bring him up again. My apologies, Savannah.”

When the ping of a notification interrupts, he plucks his phone out of his pocket. His fingers deftly tap away on the screen, and I stare at the platinum band that rests neatly on his wedding finger. I can’t help but wonder if his wife is as beautiful as him.

Of course, she is.

A rich, successful, handsome man wouldn’t marry any ordinary woman.

I have wanted to Google *Xavier Rivers* since he first entered this ridiculous establishment. But I held myself back all because of that wedding band. I don’t need to add any ammunition to an obsession – especially with a married man. He has an aura around him that forces all your attention onto him. I haven’t figured out if it is his good looks, his staggering height or that he commands your attention with just one word. When he looks at me, I feel like molten lava – burning under his piercing stare.

I walk over to Mia. “Why is he so hot?” I ask.

She eyes him before turning back to me. “He’s hot for *you*, that’s for sure.”

“He has a wedding band on,” I whisper.

She scoffs. “So?” She gives me a pointed stare. “When has that ever stopped a man before? The guy has been in every single day for the past four months,” she reminds me. “He always makes conversation with you. Hell, the man invites you to sit and have coffee with him. He wants you, and I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to have sex with him on a bed full of cash.”

Before I can respond, she walks over to Xavier and hands him his coffee.

He stares at the cup briefly before looking directly at me. It seems as though he is having a conversation with himself. “Savannah, would you care to join me?”

Mia shrugs her shoulders as if to say, *‘What did I tell you?’*

I should say no because of the ring on his finger, but Xavier Rivers isn’t a man you can easily say no to. “I have five minutes before Hayley gets back.”

He leads us to the table he has occupied every morning he comes here. Every day is the same – he orders a coffee, takes the seat he has claimed as his own, works for thirty minutes, orders a second coffee, continues working, tips me a ridiculous amount and leaves.

He takes his seat with class and elegance. He straightens his cuffs and gestures to the seat in front of him.

I slide into the seat and offer an awkward smile. Everything about this man screams *money!*

“Are you afraid of me?” he asks.

More like intimidated. “I don’t trust men in business.”

His eyebrows pull together. “And why is that?” He slowly lifts his cup to his lips and takes a small sip. I watch as his Adam’s apple bobs up and down as the hot liquid slides away.

“You know what they say about businessmen... they’re all psychopaths in disguise.”

To my surprise, he laughs. The sound is the loudest I have ever heard from him. “I can assure you that I am no psychopath.” He smiles at me before speaking again. “I know you need to return, so let me cut to the chase. I have an opportunity that will benefit us both.”

Oh. I feign indifference. “What would that be?”

Disappointment comes over his features – which I have only seen on his face when discussing a specific topic. “Remember the surrogate I told you we found?”

I nod.

“It didn’t work out, so we’re back to square one.”

My heart hurts for the couple. A few months ago, he opened up about his wife’s fertility issues and their struggles to find a suitable surrogate. Nobody seems good enough for them, and every potential offer has fallen through for some reason. Part of me wonders if it’s his wife because Xavier is a nice guy. He’s sweet and polite, so I can’t imagine him scaring someone off. That only leaves his wife; is she hostile towards the women being asked to do the one thing she cannot do?

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

When you've grown up around sketchy people, you learn to read faces and emotions really well. You have to, or else you get fucked over. That is how I instantly recognise the blend of pleading and hope in Xavier's eyes as he watches me. He doesn't have to ask anything because his eyes do it.

This time, it's my turn to laugh. *Is this guy serious?*

"I know where this is going, so let me save you the time and effort, Mr Rivers. I'm sorry to hear about your struggles. I appreciate the offer but must politely decline. I can't afford to be off from work."

Not to mention, I would be fucking pregnant!

"The salary would be one hundred thousand pounds."

I don't let my eyes widen, or jaw drop in front of him. *That money would save me right now.*

I shake my head. "Thank you for the offer—"

"One hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

Take it!

"Once again, thank you—"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

My brain tries to comprehend how many physical notes that is. I know it would solve almost all my problems, but to be pregnant is crazy.

"That wouldn't include additional expenses. Clothing, food, travel, and private health care will be covered by us. Most

people don't earn that in five years, and you have an opportunity that will give you that within one."

I should decline and walk away from this table, but the thought of paying off my debts and never having to strip again keeps my ass glued to the chair.

"Why me?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Why not? You look healthy. You are pleasant." He pauses. "And I think you deserve a break. This allows you to escape the debt someone else left you in. Every day, I come in here and watch you work tirelessly. You have always served me well and were the first to decline my excessive tip. Most people see money and grab it with both hands." He leans back in his chair and smiles at me. "I like you, and I think my wife will too."

Could I really be pregnant? My first baby wouldn't even be mine. But the money... two hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

He digs into his wallet and places two fifty-pound notes and a business card. "Take a few days to think about it. When you've decided, call that number," he points to the card, "and we can arrange a meeting." He stands up and straightens his tie. "I look forward to our next meeting, Savannah."

And with that, he gracefully exits the café.

I pocket the cash and stare at the business card. I should throw it away, but I safely place it in my apron instead.

2

XR SECURITIES LTD matches the stature of the neighbouring corporate buildings. I expected the building to be blacked out and mysterious, but the glass exterior surprises me.

Seconds after I arranged this meeting, I regretted it. I don't know the first thing about pregnancy or his *wife*.

I didn't think it was possible, but the thought of his wife makes me more nervous than sitting in a negotiation with him. My imagination has run wild – imagining a dark-haired evil woman who is envious that I have been asked to carry her child. I see her narrow features judging me, the low-level barista and stripper, being asked to carry their child. I prepare myself for hostility and a firing line of questions.

I check my reflection to ensure I look as professional as the people bustling around me. My black hair is slicked back into a ponytail that will give me a headache. My beige trousers make my legs look longer than usual. I regret not wearing a layer underneath my blouse because the sheer material does little to hide my bra. Regardless, I like the way the neutral

tones complement my skin tone. With one final nod of encouragement to my reflection, I enter the building.

As expected, the security is tight. I confirm my identity twice before being shown to the elevator. Per the email I received, I take the lift to the top floor.

The theme of glass continues with offices being separated with ceiling-to-floor length glass. The open-floor space gives no indication of where to go. The offices around the perimeter are all occupied with people too busy to notice the woman lost in an open maze.

After some aimless walking, I spot a receptionist and smile at her. “Hi,” I breathe. “I have a meeting with Mr Rivers at noon.”

The brunette has a warm smile and kind eyes. She taps away at her computer before asking for my ID. “Mr Rivers is in conference room one. He is expecting you.”

Once again, I look around, unsure which way to go. Thankfully, this time, the receptionist notices and offers to walk me there. She stops in front of a door that reads *CR 1*.

Through the glass, I see Xavier reading over paperwork, unaware of my presence on the other side. Today, he is wearing a charcoal grey suit and a matching tie. I try to imagine him in regular clothing, but the thought makes me chuckle.

Next to him, a woman sits, lost in a daydream. Her fingers tap against the wooden table. The giant diamond ring catches

the sunlight and momentarily blinds me. My eyes move away from the hand to her face. Her perfectly curled hair frames her heart-shaped face. Her eyes aren't narrowed and sharp as I imagined. They are round and have a dark-coloured iris reflecting my nerves. Her fuller cheeks are blown out as she takes several deep breaths. She catches me through the glass, and her pouty lips curl into a smile.

“Should I knock?”

Instead of answering me, she knocks on my behalf. His head snaps up, and he gestures for us to enter.

“Miss Hayes is here.”

“Thank you, Francesca. Can you hold any incoming calls until the end of this meeting unless absolutely necessary?”

She nods at him and excuses herself.

The long room has a table running from one end to another and can seat roughly thirty people. The furnishing emphasises how *expensive* everything is. I choose the seat directly opposite them and gather my wits.

“It's nice to see you again, Savannah. How are you today?”

“A little intimidated by this office,” I chuckle. “It's a beautiful space.”

“Thank you. This is our headquarters. We opened this new building roughly six months ago.” He neatly stacks his paperwork before pushing it aside. “Let me introduce you to my wife.” He places his hand over hers. “This is Emery.”

She reaches across the table and offers a handshake. “It’s so nice to meet you, Savannah.”

I shake her hand and smile. “The pleasure is mine.” My heart is pounding in my chest as the couple watches me. I feel like a zoo animal.

“Xavier didn’t mention how beautiful you are.” Her smile and tone are sincere, but I don’t know how to respond.

Xavier clears his throat. “I thought it would be easier to look at today as a job interview. We interview you and vice versa. How do you feel about that?”

I feel like I don’t have a choice.

Xavier starts strong. “Are you currently in a relationship? Sexual or otherwise?”

I’m grateful for the mask of makeup covering my warm cheeks. I am a twenty-six-year-old woman who isn’t ashamed of my choices, but I still feel mortified at the abrupt question.

“No,” I splutter out.

He makes a note of my answer. “Okay. Do you have any STDs that could affect your or the baby’s health during pregnancy?”

“No!” I answer too harshly.

Xavier sits up taller and clears his throat. “Savannah, this is normal questioning. I am by no means placing prejudicial assumptions on you. There are factors we must consider first

and foremost. If you are uncomfortable, we can end this meeting now.”

I know he is right. I need to get over the unjustified embarrassment I feel. I match him by sitting taller. “No, let’s continue. What else would you like to know?”

“What are your current living arrangements? Are they suitable for a pregnant woman?”

My flat is small, but it’s not like *I* have to make room for a baby – it will be inside me. I suppress the queasiness that comes with the thought. It isn’t in the safest parts of London, but nothing has ever happened to me.

When I tell Xavier this, he has concern etched onto his face but doesn’t say anything else. We discuss my personal health, lifestyle, and current commitments. Emery sits back and observes the interrogation, only asking one or two questions herself. She seems to trust that her husband is asking the right questions. When he is satisfied with my answers, he leans back into his seat and shares a look with his wife. She smiles at him.

“Okay. That is all we need to know right now. Your turn, what would you like to know?”

I watch as she runs her hand along the length of his arm. He doesn’t return the affection, but his arm relaxes under her touch.

“How long have you known each other?”

They smile at one another, and he nods at her to answer. “Five years. It was a whirlwind romance and wedding, but sometimes you just know.” She stares up at her husband, and the adoration is clear. “He is more than I could have asked for. Now we just need to start our family.”

Their smiles turn sad at the mention of something that hasn't been easy.

“Would this baby be biologically yours? What are we talking about here?”

Xavier takes over from his wife and answers. “No biological ties to you. I have some leaflets that can better advise you. I can arrange a meeting with a specialist to go through every step in detail with you.”

I can't hide my relief that the baby won't biologically be mine. I don't know if I could ever be that selfless.

“What do you do? What exactly is this?” I ask, gesturing to the fancy building.

His face has a proud look as he talks about his company. “XR Securities started when I was twenty-one years old. I started by helping small companies protect their online databases and presence. As the years went on, the company grew, and we now cover PI work, online safety, physical security, surveillance, and background checks.”

I'm impressed at how much he has achieved. I finally gave in and threw his name into *Google* before this meeting to get a glimpse of his wife, but there was *nothing*. There was little on

the CEO himself, which isn't surprising as he can control the internet. In nine years, he has built a multi-billion-pound business that started from his bedroom. He is the definition of a self-made man.

“So, you're a glorified stalker?” I joke.

His laugh is a deep rumble, and I fight off the shudder that overcomes me. “I guess you could say that.”

Swallowing the wave of attraction, I turn to Emery. “How about you?”

“I've spent my whole life preparing to be a mother. I want to dedicate my life to raising my children.” She looks overcome with emotions as she thanks me. “I don't want to jinx it, but I feel great about this.”

“Slow down. She hasn't agreed to anything yet.” He tilts his head and studies me. “What do you want to do next?”

Do I walk out of here or choose to do this? There is no right answer. If I were a good person, I'd do this to make their dreams come true. But the only reason I would put myself through this is the financial freedom that comes after it. It's one year, at the most. It might be painful and exhausting, but I would be debt-free. I could start saving money to put towards my future. Maybe buy a house and put down some roots.

“Please send over the contract.”

Emery squeals in joy. She practically runs over to me and squeezes me too tight. Xavier also has a smile on his face.

Okay, maybe helping them is also part of it.

“I’ll send the contract to your home.”

I thank them for their time and exit the conference room. Xavier walks a few steps behind me to the elevator. He presses the button before I can, and we wait in silence.

I step into the lift, but I realise something just before the doors close. I hold the doors open and give him a confused stare. “How do you know where I live?”

There is a knowing look in his eyes and an amused smirk on his lips. He gestures to his surroundings. “Did you think you were the only one that did some research before this meeting? Don’t believe everything you read on *Google*.”

Holy shit.

“Have a good day, Savannah.”

3

I PUSH THE CONTRACT away from me and take a deep breath. The agreement only confirms what Xavier already told me, but this makes it feel *real*. As I continue reading, I realise I never thought about multiple births or forming an emotional attachment. What happens if I end up loving all seven babies squished inside me?

My phone lights up with another voicemail from Elliot. I ignore it and go back to reading. I skim through the legal terminology before focusing on the expectations and restrictions. I put a tick next to the ban on alcohol, drugs and other harmful substances. The requirement to follow a strict, healthy and appropriate diet is also reasonable. The next one, preventing me from having sex, is *not*.

That is a ridiculous rule. Pregnant people can have sex. That is one *year* of being a desert. I have barely made it through the last four months, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't screw the first decent man that came along; I just haven't found one yet.

I make a note to bring it up with Xavier when I meet with him tomorrow.

I'm reading the section on *residence* when there is a pounding at my door.

"Sav? Are you in there?"

I hide the contract in my bedside drawer before letting him in. "What do you want, Elliot?"

"Fuck! You could have answered my calls! I was worried you got hurt."

My eyebrows pull together. "What are you talking about?"

"Your street was closed off. There was a stabbing outside your building."

I peer out of my window at the empty street below. An apartment on the eleventh floor means I can see far out; there is nothing to note. "What are you talking about?"

"Jimmy got stabbed."

I shrug my shoulders. "I guess Cam and his boys finally got tired of waiting for their money. They were screaming at each other a few nights ago."

Elliot stalks over to me and takes my face in his hands. His brown eyes look lighter as the sunlight shines directly into them. "I was so fucking worried when you didn't answer my calls."

"I'm a big woman, Elliot. I can take care of myself, and even if I can't, we broke up," I remind him.

Over the past four months, I have repeatedly reminded Elliot of this. It's come to a point where the words come out with annoyance. When I decided to leave the five-year relationship, it wasn't easy because it meant I was all alone again. But it was drowning me, and not just financially.

“That doesn't mean I don't care about you,” he murmurs against my lips. “I miss you, Sav. I'm sorry.”

I turn my head away from him. “Too late. Unless you have my money, please leave.”

His thumb softly brushes my cheeks before sliding down my neck. He doesn't break our stare as his hands continue their journey over my breasts and down my torso. The thin T-shirt doesn't stop me from being affected by his touch.

After five years, he knows exactly where to touch me.

My breath hitches when he strokes my inner thigh before slipping into my panties.

Usually, I would push him off, but this might be my last chance of getting laid, seeing as I might be signing that contract tomorrow. I might as well have one last huzzah before the drought begins again.

Arrogance is laced through his smile as he watches my head fall against the window, and I let out a breathy moan. His expert fingers slide in and out, and his thumb brushes over my clit. His movements are slow and agonising as he brings me close to the edge. I hold onto his biceps as I tiptoe on the edge, but he removes his fingers just before I can fall.

I stare at him wide-eyed while he looks back at me with a grin.

He unbuckles his trousers and presses my back against the window. I rest one foot on the chair a few steps away. With an open welcome, he pushes my panties to the side and fills me, rewarding me with a deep moan.

The window takes a beating as Elliot pounds me into it. His thrusts are merciless as he gives me what I want and takes what he wants. My nails scrape against the rose tattoo I used to love so much.

“Have you missed being fucked?”

My hand covers his mouth to silence him. I don't want to talk. *I want to get fucked.*

He bites the middle of my palm and chuckles when I jerk it away. “You're so sexy,” he moans.

I close my eyes and focus on the movement of his hips thrusting. As I come undone around him, he pulls out and releases himself onto my t-shirt. Our breaths mix as we try to catch it.

“I miss this,” he whispers.

His sad words wash reality back over me, and I push him away. “You can leave now.”

He looks disheartened at my dismissal. “This can't be all we are. How did we end up as a quick fuck and go?”

I raise my eyebrow at his stupid question. “You rinsed all my savings and money and left me in a shit tonne of debt. You put gambling over me, and refused to get help when I begged. This wasn’t a case of growing apart.” I open the front door for him. “And this isn’t a quick fuck and go. It was a *mistake* and won’t be happening again. Next time I don’t answer, it’s because I don’t want to talk to you. Take the hint.”

Elliot steps towards me. “We had a plan.”

I step away. “You fucked it up.”

“We can still do it. You and me in Bali. A small hut selling cocktails and ice cream. Nothing but the sun, sand and water.”

His soft tone lights the few embers that remain from our relationship. We were young and in love. Two twenty-year-olds who wanted the world. Dreams of living on an island and spending our days on the beach. But it was only ever a dream because dreams like that don’t come true for people like me – unfortunate and unlucky.

I shake my head. “This is the real world, and it’s time for you to accept we’re done.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds. Elliot’s eyes fill with water, but he leaves before they tip over the edge.

I feel guilty about using him for sex, but it’s a minor offence after all he put me through. I shake my head and get into the shower, ready to scrub all traces of him off me.



“Savannah, welcome back,” Xavier greets me as I enter the conference room. Today, it’s just the two of us. His suit jacket is draped across his chair at the head of the table. Every strand of his hair and beard is perfectly placed.

“Good morning.” I sit a few seats away from him. “I’ve managed to get through the whole contract, but I have some notes.”

He has a proud smile on his face. “I would be disappointed if you didn’t. Would you like any refreshments, or are you ready to begin?”

I smooth out the invisible creases on my skirt. “I am ready.” I take out my annotated contract and handwritten notes. If I am going to get my way, I need to be as professional as him. I clear my throat. “Everything before page four I am happy with. The details are correct, and I am in agreement with the recommendations. If you could divert your attention to clause G, titled sexual activity.”

I don’t look up at him as he turns through the pages. The room is silent as he reads over the clause in question. “What amendments are you recommending, Miss Hayes?”

I don’t think about how sexy it is that he addressed me with a title. Instead, I lean back into my seat and shoot him a questioning look. “Don’t you think this clause is a little extreme? Many pregnant women have had sex before me.”

“Not when pregnant with *my* baby. I stand by this clause. In fact, I *insist* on it.”

“Mr Rivers, I believe it to be unnecessary. Having sex won’t hurt your baby. If I’m advised by medical professionals to stop having sex due to potential risk to pregnancy and baby, I, of course, will adhere to it.”

He spins his pen a few times as he considers my counteroffer. “You would still be at risk of contracting an STD.”

I can’t help the snort that emits from me. “Clearly, you’ve never heard of a condom.”

To my surprise, he looks amused at my comment. “Rough sex can be an issue.” He tilts his head and looks directly at me. “Are you into rough sex?”

If there is one thing I learn from this meeting, it will be that *one* look can make me feel lustful. The way he holds my gaze while asking such an intrusive, intimate question makes me feel weak and grateful that I am sat down so he can’t see me clenching my thighs.

“If the right man comes along,” I answer coyly.

He raises his brow at me before looking back at the contract. “That clause remains the same for the time being,” he decides. “What is next on your list?”

I suddenly wish I had asked for a glass of water. Clearing my throat, I continue. “How many times are we going to try?”

“As many times as it takes. I want this for my wife. I want a family with her. If you are willing, I will keep trying until I succeed.”

There is a conviction in his voice that makes me slightly envious.

“You seem like the type of man that always succeeds.”

He smiles but doesn't comment on it. “If this process becomes too much for you, we will compensate you for your time. What is next?”

We spend the next hour going through the rest of my points, and I am somewhat successful by the end. Xavier is a good businessman – never fully meeting my demands but giving me enough to keep me at the table.

“The amended contract will be with you by the end of play tomorrow. Please sign and return to this office. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” I joke.

“Before you leave, I have a few questions. What is your notice period for the club?”

I shrug. “Don't think there is one. Why?”

“A clause forbidding you from dancing will be added. With all this money, there is no need to continue doing something you hate. This salary should be enough to pay your debts.”

The word *forbidding* pricks at my skin and irks me in a way I can't explain. I have wanted to quit since the first day, but his

tone pushes me to defend it. “What’s the problem with dancing? It’s a good form of exercise.”

Xavier either doesn’t notice I’m annoyed or ignores it. “I don’t trust the customers.”

My scoff slips out before I can stop it. “You think I can’t handle myself against the rich assholes who wouldn’t risk getting their suit dirty to throw a punch? *Please.*”

He looks amused. “Is that how you see us *rich assholes?*”

I eye his tailor-made suit and crisp white shirt. His type usually pays money for a private dance – many of them also sporting a wedding band.

“I don’t know. Would you pay to have me on your lap?”

I regret the words dripping in a teasing tone the moment they come out. My attraction to Xavier is abundantly clear, but that is more of a reason to keep this as professional as possible.

His eyes don’t leave my face. He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth as he dwells on whatever thoughts consume him. “I’ve never been a man that’s had to pay for a woman’s attention.”

The confidence he exudes is sexy. I can only imagine all the women that have thrown themselves at him.

“You’re having to pay for mine,” I remind him, pointing at the contract.

“And the last four months?” He leans in closer. “Have I not had your attention, Miss Hayes?”

Is he flirting with me?

I will never admit he has intrigued me since our first interaction.

“No,” I lie.

“Very well.” He puts his pen down and focuses all his attention on me. The playful glint in his eye disappears as if the encounter never happened. “What incident occurred at your building yesterday?”

I go to ask *how* he knows but then remind myself I’m sitting in a building full of spies. “Some guy got stabbed for not returning money,” I answer.

His eyebrows pull together in concern. “You have a flippant attitude towards knife crime. Is this something I should be concerned about?”

I can’t help but roll my eyes. “No. It’s normal where I live. Nothing will happen to me.”

There is a stern look on his face as he says, “Please do not roll your eyes at me, Miss Hayes.”

I fight the urge to laugh at his authoritative tone. Something tells me I’d get a telling-off for that as well. “Sorry, force of habit.”

Xavier moves on to his next question. “The clinic has asked to clarify if there is any chance you could be pregnant?”

I open my mouth to say no, but memories of Elliot pressing me against my window come rushing back. Although he pulled out, they say there is always a small chance.

“I doubt it.”

He sighs. “What does that mean, Savannah?”

“He didn’t finish inside, but there was...” *Oh God, why is this so awkward to say out loud to him?*

“Now, who hasn’t heard of a condom?” he retaliates. “You knew this process was starting soon, yet you chose to be reckless. Is this the type of behaviour I should be expecting? Is this a joke to you?”

Guilt eats at me. This couple are relying on me, and I put satisfying my libido above this.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“If it does, you’re fired,” he snaps. “When was this incident? The exact date.”

“Yesterday.”

“Is there any risk of an STD?”

“No.”

“You seem fairly certain, considering you had unprotected sex.”

“It was my ex-boyfriend,” I wince.

“The one that gambled your money away?”

I nod.

Xavier looks at me with disappointment. “Make better choices, Miss Hayes.”

4

WORRIES ABOUT BREAKING A clause in my contract fade as the song's beat gets faster. The blonde-haired man watches me with hooded eyes as I work around the pole.

Private dances are few as they cost more than watching multiple women dancing on stage. I throw myself into the dance and let myself enjoy this false intimacy. This will probably be the closest thing to sex for the next year.

When the song ends, the stranger tips me fifty pounds on top of my fee and walks out of the room.

I stuff the notes into my bra and hydrate myself, readying to return to the main stage.

Chris waltzes into the room with a grin. "Savannah! You are on *fire* tonight. I've missed having you around."

I kept to the contract and quit stripping. But Hayley showed no sympathy when I kept taking emergency leave to be with my mum in the hospital. The past month has been rough for her, and she needed me. Last week, she pulled me into her

office to discuss my attitude towards work; I rolled my eyes and handed in my notice, *effective immediately*.

That probably wasn't the brightest idea, as the payments from Xavier haven't started yet, and I have the nursing home fees to pay next week. My only option was to make some extra cash by returning to the club.

My smile makes my cheeks ache. "Thank you."

"A gentleman in the room next door is waiting for you. Make the most of it," he winks before leaving me alone.

I loosely tie my satin robe and saunter to the room next door. The room is dimly lit, with only a small leather sofa and a dancing pole. I close the door and turn around with a smile on my face.

Even with the small amounts of light, Xavier's glare is prominent. He stares at me with a stern expression but doesn't say anything. His crisp white shirt is moulded to his perfect build. His jacket is neatly laid on the arm of the sofa. The top two buttons of his shirt are propped open, and today, there is no tie.

He's leaning against the backrest and watching me look dumbfounded. He doesn't say anything, and neither do I.

Instead of explaining why I broke one of the clauses, I walk up to the pole and start the show. The metal feels cold against my clammy palms. Xavier's eyes stay unmoving on me as I spin up the pole in tune with the music. With my legs wrapped around the pole, I drop back and let my arms free. Even upside

down, he is beautifully pissed off. Once I gracefully reach the bottom, I grab the pole with both hands and show off my best moves.

When my robe naturally slips off, I let it fall to the ground. Unlike most men, his eyes stay glued to my face – they don't move to ogle my breasts or ass. It's oddly attractive.

His stony reaction only pushes me to see how much it would take for him to waver. I drop to the floor and crawl towards him, maintaining eye contact the whole time. Xavier continues to watch with no reaction.

My hands creep up his legs but purposefully skip over his crotch. They feather over his torso and neck before threading through his hair. With my entire body flush against his, I grind my hips just as my favourite song begins to play. Xavier keeps his hands at the sides of his body, not pushing me off but not encouraging me, either.

“You haven't been at work for a week, Miss Hayes.”

I flip my body so my back is against his front. I lay my head in the crook of his neck as my hips rock in sync with the music.

“I've been off sick,” I lie. There was no way I was telling him the truth.

“You're here,” he points out. “Do you enjoy breaking the rules, Miss Hayes?”

I continue my assault as euphoria comes over me from the friction between our bodies. I know I should stop when I feel

the wetness soak my underwear, but I *can't*.

His hands grip my waist with unnecessary force, and it turns me on. "You're testing my patience," he murmurs into my ear.

I don't know if he is talking about breaking the rules or the fact that his cock feels like it might burst.

He pushes me down against his body, and an involuntary moan slips out.

Before I can blink, he flips us around so I am under him. He stands between my legs and leans down so his face is right before mine. I am consumed by his musky scent.

"If you ever step foot in this place again, I will chain you to a bed for the next year," he threatens.

I smirk at him. "I quite like chains, Mr Rivers."

His eyes darken. "Don't test me, Savannah."

I undo another one of his buttons. "Come on," I whisper. "This is *my* territory. Let's negotiate on my terms."

He steps away from me and leans against the pole. "You haven't been at work for five days."

I sit upright and cross one leg over the other. He doesn't look away from my face. "What are you doing here?"

"I was worried when I didn't see you at the coffee shop for a few days. I went to your apartment to check on you, but you weren't there."

"How did you know I was here?"

He checks the time on his watch. “I tracked your phone,” he says casually. “Why have you been off sick?”

If he could find me here, it would only take seconds for him to find out I no longer have a job. Maybe if I explained the situation, he would let me keep my job here. It’s not ideal, but it would be enough. At least until his payments start.

“I quit.”

“Why?”

I wave off his concerns. “It wasn’t the right fit for me anymore. Plus, the manager is a bitch.”

I have never found men in suits appealing, but Xavier makes everything look attractive. His fingers softly stroke his beard as he is lost in his thoughts.

“I’ll release the first payment into your account tonight. You aren’t coming back here.”

His authoritative tone annoys me. The surrogacy money was meant to pay off my debts. It wasn’t supposed to be my *only* income.

“One payment isn’t going to do shit for me, Mr Rivers. I have bills and debt to pay. I need a second income.”

He runs his hands down his suit as if brushing away imaginary dust. “Come and work for me.” His offer comes out as a demand. “That way, I can keep an eye on you,” he adds under his breath.

Shooting him an incredulous look, I say, “You can’t just offer me a job when I have no qualifications in your field.”

“Do you know how to check emails, take calls and have basic PA skills?”

I shake my head. “It would be unethical and a conflict if I was your PA. Plus, you already have one.”

He raises his eyebrow at me with a smirk. “Quite right, and I happen to like Francesca.” He chuckles. “I wasn’t talking about me, Miss Hayes. My COO needs some admin support, so I was suggesting working for him.”

“Oh.”

His eyes are alight with amusement. “Yes, *oh*. The job is yours if you want it. It wouldn’t be tied to the surrogacy contract at all. Once the baby has been delivered, your job will still be there. It pays well and is suitable for a pregnant woman. The choice is yours.”

Part of my brain argues this is a bad idea. It would intertwine our lives too much, and he would be there to watch my every move. But the other part argues that he runs the top security company in this country, maybe even the world, so he could be watching me all the time anyway. He managed to track me down tonight. This is more money and could be long-term. Plus, I won’t be working directly with him. Xavier would just be a colleague... *who is also my boss and whose baby I would be carrying.*

Thinking solely about the money, I nod. “Okay. Yeah, I’ll take you up on the offer. When do I start?”

“Do you own appropriate office wear?”

“Yes,” I lie.

“You start tomorrow. 8 a.m. *sharp*,” he narrows his eyes. “Ray does not tolerate tardiness.”

I smile. “I guess you have something in common.”

He doesn’t return the smile, but his face contorts into concern. He hesitates for a moment before ripping the band-aid off. “We need to discuss your living arrangements.”

I cross my arms over my chest and say, “I’m not moving. End of discussion.”

“Three men were arguing right outside your door when I got there,” he points out. “It’s not safe.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m a big girl, Mr Rivers. I can handle myself.”

“I have a guest house on my property. It is separate from my residence. It even has its own private entrance straight from the street. The option to move in during the pregnancy is always there for you.” He gives me a soft smile. “I know I would feel more reassured having you there.”

I eye him suspiciously. “I’m beginning to think you’re a control freak, Mr Rivers.”

There is a ghost of a smile on his lips. “You’d enjoy being under my control.”

Was that a dirty joke?

I slowly walk towards him. "I'd like to see you out of control. What does that look like?"

For the first time tonight, his eyes linger on my cleavage, which is bulging out. They roam down my body before coming up to my face again. "You wouldn't want to know." He grabs his wallet from his suit jacket and takes a handful of notes. "I'm a married man, Miss Hayes." He shoves the notes into my bra with the others. "This was your last dance." Before I can retaliate, he bids me goodbye. He stands by the door and watches me. "Consider my offer."

"My territory," I remind him. "You might have won on the job front, but you lose when it comes to where I live."

He slightly nods his head and straightens his suit jacket. Before he walks off, he pins me down with a stare. "It would be good for you to remember, I don't tolerate eye-rolling, Miss Hayes. Should you direct another one of those at me, I shall have to show you *exactly* how I exercise my control."

5

I FEEL OVERDRESSED WHEN I look at Francesca in her blouse, trousers and flats. Her natural dark brown curls hang free. Her face isn't painted like mine. Instead, her round cheeks have a natural flush to them.

My heels, blouse, matching pencil skirt and blazer feel excessive. My long hair is pulled into a sleek bun. I have to smile at her when I realise I have been staring at her for three minutes straight.

“Mr Rivers will be with you soon,” she reassures me.

If I could have avoided him today, I would have. I have convinced myself I was high on a drug called *Xavier Rivers*. I felt mortified at my actions once I came down from the high. At least Mia got a good laugh out of it – but she isn't the one being called into his office right now.

My heels are loud against the tiled floors. To no surprise, his office is large and surrounded by glass. His desk is centred against the back wall. I was expecting more personality from

the CEO, but it is clinically clean. There are no pictures on his desk. The surface only has a computer, laptop, and a stack of paperwork. A rectangular white ceramic coffee table separates the two small white couches.

I awkwardly stand in the middle of the room until he gestures to the opposite seat. I feel protected having his large desk between us. I take a moment to collect myself and find the courage to look at him. Plastering on a confident smile, I say, “Good morning, Xavier.”

There is a slight smile on his face. “Good morning. How are you feeling today?”

“Better than yesterday.” I square my shoulders. “When do I get to meet your COO?”

“He will be here soon. First, you need to sign your contract.” He passes it over the desk, and I shudder when his fingers brush mine. “Let me know if there is anything you’d like to discuss.”

I read through it as thoroughly as possible with him only a few feet away. He doesn’t pay me any attention as he works on his laptop. My jaw drops at my salary, which is enough to earn my signature.

Just as I hand it back to him, there is a knock at the door. Xavier shouts for them to enter, and when he does, my eyes widen in awe.

The six-foot-three muscular man carries the entire room as he approaches us. His long dark hair is pulled into a man-bun,

extenuating his sharp features. His beard is thicker and scruffier than Xavier's, but it suits him. Not many men can pull off the look, but on him, it looks heavenly. A pair of hazel-coloured eyes land on me, and I see the surprise in them. His eyes run down the length of my body before studying my face. He doesn't give me a peek into his thoughts as he maintains a poker face.

I might not be able to sleep with Xavier, but nothing is stopping me from stripping this perfect specimen of his suit and showing him a good time.

"You alright, Zav?" His baritone voice gives me the chills. He pulls out the chair next to mine but doesn't give me a second glance.

Xavier nods at him. "Very well. Did you sort the car business?"

"Fucking bastards just about got it done."

"About time." He looks back at me. "Ray, this is Miss Hayes. Your new personal assistant. Try not to scare this one off."

Ray looks at me as if he sees me for the first time again. He nods at me and offers a handshake. "Huxley Ray – but everybody calls me Ray."

I place my hands in his and squirm at how tight his grip is. "Savannah Hayes. What would you like me to call you? Ray? Huxley? Mr Ray?" I flutter my eyelashes at him.

He raises his eyebrow at me as his eyes dart to our boss. The corner of his lips raises a little, but it is barely noticeable. “Whatever you feel comfortable with.”

A dirty joke rests on my tongue, but I swallow it, remembering this is a professional place. “Huxley it is.”

He turns to Xavier, who watches us with caution. “Should I be worried?”

It peeves me that he is talking about me as if I am not sitting in the same room. “I can answer for myself,” I snap.

Xavier hides his smile with his hand. “Miss Hayes will do her best to support you.”

“If you say *please* and *thank you*,” I say with a sarcastic smile to Huxley.

He snorts in my direction. “Noon. In my office. You can compile a list of my expectations.” He nods at Xavier and exits without saying another word to me.

I stare at my new boss in disbelief. “What an arrogant prick. I am *not* working with him.”

Xavier leans back in his seat. “Yes, you are. Ray is tough, but it’s because he takes his job seriously. Nothing comes before this job – it’s why I have never seen him date or sleep around in the thirteen years I have known the man. He will work you hard and has high expectations.”

“If he talks to me like that again, I might have to kill him.”

“No trouble,” Xavier warns. “This is a workplace. I expect you to be on your best behaviour, Savannah. Aside from our agreement out of this office, I operate with strict rules and regulations in my workplace. I run a tight ship and don’t tolerate or excuse poor behaviour and attitude. You are an employee here. I extended the courtesy of offering you a job without going through rigid interviews and training, but I will fire you if you don’t take this seriously.”

This is a different side to him. His business means a lot to him, and as *weird* as our relationship has been so far, I want to retain this job.

I give him a sincere smile. “You have my word. I’m not taking this for granted. I’m going to work hard. What would you like me to do until he comes back?”

“Francesca has cleared her morning to give you a tour of the building.” He opens a folder and reads for a few seconds before peering over it. “You’re dismissed, Miss Hayes.”

Francesca is friendly throughout the thorough tour. She tells me she has worked for Xavier for roughly three years but couldn’t tell me three facts about him. But she doesn’t mind the impersonal relationship because he treats her respectfully and compassionately.

We stop at an office next door to Xavier’s. “This is Ray’s office. He should be back soon.” She opens the door and walks us to a smaller desk with a computer and telephone. “This is your desk.”

I look around the office. Similarly to Xavier's, the space is ample, but this one has more personality. I don't know if it's because his furnishing is wooden, unlike the bright white in the CEO's office. Or maybe it's the picture frames on his desk or the sports trophies lining the shelf.

My desk is in a corner, facing Huxley's one. I wish I had my little space outside the office like Francesca, but I appreciate my little privacy.

"How busy does it get?"

"It depends on what he wants you to do. Xavier handles all private matters on his own. I only manage his meetings and incoming calls. Ray might be the same." She gives me a sheepish smile. "I've heard he's quite full-on and harsh. He always expects one hundred per cent because *he* gives one hundred."

I take a seat in my office chair and nod. "Okay. At least I know what to expect. I can do this," I say more to myself than her.

Her phone rings, making her roll her eyes. "I need to sort this out. I've given you your login and security pass. I'm guessing you know how to log into a computer and check emails?" she laughs.

I laugh with her. "Yeah – I hope so. Thank you."

"Come to me if you need anything. I'm only around the corner."

I thank her again and watch as she disappears to her tidy set-up. I peer out the glass walls to inspect the rest of the floor. In this corner, we are slightly hidden away. I can still see a few people, but there is a level of privacy that isn't offered elsewhere. To my left, movement in Xavier's office catches my attention. I can't see his desk or seating area; only the refreshment table is visible.

His back flexes through his white shirt as he pours himself a coffee. When he turns around, his lips race as he talks on the phone. He looks confident and assured. It's an attractive look. I move away from the doors before he can see me.

Pushing past boundaries, I walk behind Huxley's desk to see who is so special they get a frame on his desk. I flop onto his seat – which is way more comfortable than mine – and pick up the frame. A small family smile at me. I don't know them, but I find myself smiling at the joy on their faces.

“Gathering intel?”

“Fuck!” The frame almost shatters on the ground, but I catch it. I give Huxley a sheepish smile. “I wasn't snooping, I swear.”

He stares down at me, making me feel hot and bothered. “Why are you in my seat?”

I try to think of a reasonable excuse but fail. “Shall I go and tell Xavier I lasted a whole four hours?”

His eyes are hard, but there is humour on his lips. “No need. But I would like my seat back.”

Unwillingly, I get off his seat and watch as he takes over. He unlocked the top drawer of his desk to reveal a phone.

“Is that phone for business or pleasure?”

His eyes dart up to me. “Privacy.”

“What’s so private?” I ask.

“My family. Phones can be easily tracked and traced, so my personal phone stays here while I’m in the field. It’s *locked* in case you also try to snoop through that.”

His dry tone makes me laugh. “What does the COO do that he’s worried bad men will stalk him?”

With a dead expression, he says, “I help people disappear.” He doesn’t give me the time to figure out what that means or if he was joking. He points to the seat in front of him. “Let’s talk business.”

I cross one leg over the other to seem more professional. His eyes flicker to them before focusing back on me. “I’ve heard you’re a difficult man. Can’t seem to hold onto a PA for long.”

He crosses his arms, making his biceps bulge. “No one has been good enough. Let me tell you what I expect.”

He starts to list his never-ending demands: coffee in the morning, lunch pre-ordered, diary management, monitoring calls and emails, support in meetings where necessary, running errands – basically being at his beck and call 24/7, and he means it literally. According to him, his job is every minute of every day, so if he calls me on the weekend, I am expected to pick up the phone.

I am beginning to understand why everyone leaves.

“Can you handle it?”

No. “Yes. I will be the best personal assistant you have ever had.”

He eyes me suspiciously. “Where did Zav find you?”

I roll my eyes. “I used to take his coffee order.”

“And now you’re here?”

I nod.

“When I ask you a question, use your words to answer me, Savannah. Let’s try that again. And now you’re here?”

“Yes,” I force out. “Is that better?” I flutter my eyelashes at him.

“Much better,” he growls. “Don’t forget who’s the boss.”

His tone pisses me off. I don’t care if he is the boss; I’m not his little bitch.

I stand up and walk around to his side of the desk. I perch on the edge of it, right opposite him. My skirt rides up a little, and it doesn’t go unnoticed.

“I am not your child. Don’t demean me like that again,” I order.

He looks at me like he wants to devour me, but I don’t know if it is lust or anger. He leans closer and whispers, “You need someone to teach you some fucking manners.”

There is a thrumming everywhere in my body. It's a pulse that is getting erratic the closer we get.

“Is that going to be you?” I whisper back.

His hand grips my thighs with force. “I'll fuck the manners into you. I'll have you saying *please* and *thank you* over and over again,” he murmurs.

I *whimper* at his threat. I can't work in proximity with this man. It will kill me.

A voice forces us away before I can think of a witty comeback.

“What is happening here?” Xavier looks between us with wary.

I can only imagine it looks exactly like it is – me with my skirt ridden up and him sat between my legs, our hot breath mixing as we fight our urges.

Huxley sits taller and pushes his chair away from me. “Just reminding Savannah about boundaries and limits in the workplace.”

I give Xavier a smile. “Yeah, Huxley was telling me *exactly* what he wants from me. You know me,” I laugh, “always following the rules.”

6

“HOW ARE YOU, SAVANNAH?”

I smile at Nurse Edith before giving her the baked goods I picked up on the way. “Exhausted. You working mornings or nights this week?”

“Nights. Wish me luck!”

I chuckle at her as I walk away. I know this nursing home like the back of my hand. I have been here every other day for four years. The place before this was horrid: grey walls, a draft that never seemed to go away, mean nurses, and food fit for a prison. Moving to this place is worth every penny.

The home doesn't smell like a hospital or death. The murals painted by the patients bring joy and light every time I walk past them. There are numerous activities and day trips for the patients. And the food isn't half bad!

I knock on her door before entering. She is sitting in her reading chair, staring out of the window. She doesn't notice me until I tap on her shoulder.

“Hi, mum.”

Her eyes are blank for a few seconds before she smiles. “You’re back. They sent you back!” She leaps out of her chair and squeezes me too tight. “Did those bad men hurt you?” She scans over my body, looking for any wounds.

“Nobody took me, mum. I’ve been busy.”

“No! I saw them! They were laughing at me. I saw them through my window!” She draws the curtains shut and curls back up into her chair.

I feel deflated. I was hoping today was one of her good days. I have missed her and wanted to have her to myself for a few hours, but today, I share her with her delusions.

“I’m here now.”

“Don’t go out there, Savvy! They’re going to get you like they got me!”

“I promise they won’t.”

I spent a large chunk of my childhood trying to convince her that her delusions were just that – a delusion. But the more I pushed back, the further she slipped away.

I try to have a normal conversation with her, but she won’t stop talking about the three men watching her from the garden. After forty minutes, I give her a kiss and exit her room.

Edith catches me on the way out and gives me a sad smile. “Not a good day, hun?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Maybe next time.”

She rubs my shoulder in a comforting way. “This is normal for patients with schizoaffective disorder. The depressive episodes fuel the delusions. We’ll continue working with her to tackle the depression, so you’ll have your mum back next time you’re here.”

My smile is sad. “Any chance you can cure her forever?”

The middle-aged round woman wraps her arms around me. “If I could cure anyone, it would be your mum, so you weren’t alone. Take care of yourself.”

“See you in a few days.”

The fresh air does little to calm me today. The August sun brings a sweltering heat, with sweat trickling down my back after a few minutes. The London Underground is packed with clammy bodies as everyone is out to celebrate the sunshine. I envy them. I’m spending my afternoon in Xavier’s back garden for Emery’s twenty-ninth birthday party. I would rather watch the paint dry but feel bad after the first embryo transfer failed. The sadness that enveloped her last month when the test came back negative was hard to be around.

My apartment has become a sauna in the time I’ve been gone. I open all the windows only for the humidity to swarm me.

“Fuck you,” I grumble to no one.

I feel frustrated. I’m exhausted. Huxley is a difficult man, to say the least. The man never smiles and feels no human emotions. He is a robot who only knows how to berate and

shout. He is yelling about something trivial if he isn't barking orders at me. He calls me at all times of the day, including the weekend. Only last week, he interrupted my movie night with Mia. I lugged myself to the other side of London all because he needed a folder from the office. I was so close to handing in my notice, but I need the money, and I refuse to let him win.

To add the fucking cherry to the top, my building is being seized, so I must find somewhere to live. It needs to be near public transport, my mum's care home and the office. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm half-tempted to ask Xavier if his offer still stands.

I'm calling that my last resort because I know how dangerous that could be. Xavier is nothing like Huxley. Compassion is ninety per cent of who he is. I've seen the ruthless CEO at work, but outside of that, he's gentle. He always has a smile lingering on his lips as if he's constantly part of a private joke.

But being late snaps that smile straight off his face. I need to start getting ready before I face his wrath.



The music can be heard before I join the party. The yellow-tied halter-neck dress makes me stand out against the other elegantly dressed guests. My cutout bodycon dress stops mid-thigh, exposing my legs, torso, and back.

I spot Francesca and walk over to her, ignoring the eyes watching me. “I look like a whore compared to these people.”

She grins at me. “Ignore them. You look hot.”

“How long do you think I have to stay?”

Her chuckle is low. “At least an hour, but I would appreciate if you would stay until I leave. These parties are so boring.”

The rich people stand around in small groups, talking amongst themselves. There is no dancing or games. They take small sips of champagne between their conversations. *How fucking beige.*

“I’m going to find Emery to wish her happy birthday. I’ll be back.” I walk away from Francesca to search for Emery.

The garden could pass for a park with its vast size. I find her in a corner with Xavier. Her face is set into annoyance while Xavier has a frown etched onto his. When they spot me, their expressions are replaced by a smile. It makes me feel unsettled.

“Happy birthday!”

Emery wraps her arms around me in a tight squeeze. “Thank you. You look beautiful.”

I look down at my dress before looking at hers. The white fabric falls to the ground. The thick straps rest comfortably on her shoulders as the bodice leaves everything to the imagination. Her single pearl necklace and earrings scream elegance. Her doe eyes and flushed cheeks are left bare as she lets her natural beauty do the work.

“Nothing compared to you.”

She loosely holds my hand. “Oh, please. Doesn’t she look beautiful, Xavier?”

Xavier’s hypnotised eyes don’t move from his wife. “I don’t know.”

She huffs at him. “Look at her and tell her that she’s beautiful.”

“Emery—“ His tone rings with a warning.

“It’s fine! You can tell her. God knows you’re thinking it,” she grumbles at the end.

Uncomfortable is an understatement. I look between the couple, trying to decipher what happened. They were clearly in disagreement before I walked over.

“Behave yourself,” he snaps.

“I’m going to...” I look behind me. “Francesca is waiting for me.” I take a few steps back before I smack into someone.

“Watch where you’re going, sweetheart.” Huxley raises his brow at me, which earns him an eye roll.

“You were the one who could see me. Or are you so deprived of a woman’s touch that you did it intentionally?”

He grimaces at me. “I would hardly call you a woman.”

My hand rests on my hip. “What would you call me?”

His eyes shift to a dark amber as he openly eyes me from head to toe. “A snake.”

His attempt at a dig goes over my head. “Aren’t you a ray of sunshine?” As I say the words, the pun registers, and I laugh. “Ray of sunshine,” I repeat. “How ironic.”

He eyes me once more before focusing on Emery and Xavier. “Happy birthday.”

As she did with me, she hugs Huxley. “Thank you.” When she pulls away, she gives me a playful smile. “Ray. Don’t you think Savannah looks beautiful?”

Oh God. Not this again.

Huxley looks at me while Xavier watches him. We all fall silent as we wait for his answer.

“I didn’t notice.”

Asshole.

Emery scoffs at them. “Blind and stupid. The pair of you. You two look good together.” She points at Huxley and me.

Our snorts of derision come out at the same time.

“Emery. Stop it,” Xavier orders.

She stares him down. I look at Huxley, who is also avoiding looking at them. I dart my eyes to the other side of the garden. He catches my drift, and we walk away without saying another word to the couple having a staring match.

Neither of us says anything. We walk to the drinks table, and I eye all the options. I would be breaking the no alcohol clause in my surrogacy contract, but I need something stronger than apple juice.

“Too slow,” he laughs when he grabs the vodka bottle before me.

“I’ll cut your balls off to get that drink.”

His eyes come alight with pleasure. “Or you could get on your knees and suck them.”

I choke on the air.

He grins. “Yeah, I’d choke you just like that.”

I look around to see if anyone overheard. When I face him again, I smirk. “I don’t think you’ve got the equipment for that, sunshine.”

He steps towards me. “Why don’t you check?”

I peer down to his crotch and raise my brow. “And what do I get in return?”

He shrugs. “A drink. You like to swallow, right?”

My mouth hangs open at his brazenness. “Give me the drink,” I deadpan.

“Open your mouth,” he orders.

“I’m not sucking your dick.”

He chuckles. “Open your mouth, sweetheart.”

Like a fool, I widen my mouth. He grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks my head back. He unscrews the drink and pours a small amount into my mouth. I greedily swallow the liquid. My body has craved the taste of alcohol over the past five months.

“Such a good girl swallowing it without gagging.”

The soft tone of his praise has me clenching my thighs. “I want more.”

His devilish smile adds to the throbbing in my core. He takes a swig from the bottle. “More what, sweetheart?”

I look down at his crotch, and the slight bulge tells me how erotic he also finds this. “Whatever you’re having.”

He nods. “Open your mouth.”

I tilt my head back and open again. He takes another mouthful before wrapping his arms around my waist. He pulls me flush against his body so I can feel how much he’s enjoying this. Instead of pouring it from the bottle like last time, he hovers his mouth over mine. The vodka comes out in a slow stream from between his lips into my mouth.

Once emptied, he steps back and watches as I hold the liquid in my mouth. “Swallow.”

In one swift movement, I gulp it down. “Satisfied?”

The groan that emits from him is low. “Not even close.”

I step up to him. My heels give me enough height advantage that my lips come just under his ear. “I can make it *rain* for you, sunshine.”

“And I’ll break your sweet heart,” he warns.

He thinks I want a relationship with *him*? He couldn’t be more wrong.

I take a step back. “Who said I’m offering my heart?”

He straightens his suit jacket. “I’m a man of business. What is your offer, sweetheart?”

I look over at Xavier as I remember the *no-sex* clause. He catches me watching and glances over. I look at Huxley. “One time. Never discuss it again.”

This time, he’s looking at Xavier. He seems lost in his thoughts before he shakes his head. “No deal. Better luck next time.” He walks away without saying anything more.



The hum of the engine fills the silence in the car. Xavier was kind enough to offer me a ride home after refusing to let me catch the underground this late into the night. My dreams of leaving after an hour vanished when Emery refused to let me go. By the night’s end, she was too intoxicated to know left from right. I sat alone in the kitchen while he put his wife to bed.

“My apologies for Emery’s behaviour earlier.” He sounds as uncomfortable as I feel at the memory.

I offer him a reassuring smile. “It’s fine.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not fine,” he bites out. His sigh is filled with exasperation. “She was tipsy before the party even started.”

I couldn’t tell until she laughed too loud and toppled everywhere. It would explain why she was acting out of

character.

“It’s fine, Xavier. You don’t need to explain.”

Despite my statement, he continues. “She took the first round failing really hard. Not that she needs much reason to drink the day away.”

I’m not sure I was supposed to hear that last part, so I ignore it. “It must be hard on her. She’s been waiting for this for a long time.”

When we stop at a red light, he pinches the bridge of his nose. “I know, but... she knew what was coming. I didn’t.”

What does he mean by that? *She knew it was coming?* I want to ask for clarification but realise it isn’t my place. The last thing I need to do is get involved in their marital spats.

“I have hope for the next round. And if that doesn’t work, then the next one will. I’ll keep doing this until we succeed.”

Xavier finally cracks one of his breathtaking smiles. The lampposts bring out the blue in his eyes and mesmerise me. “Thank you.” The light turns green, and he drives forward. “You do, by the way. Look beautiful.”

Not wanting him to see my smile, I look out my window. “Thank you,” I mumble. “I’m pretty sure your friends think I’m some sort of sex worker.”

He lets out a laugh that fills me with warmth. “People always have something to say. You shouldn’t pay any attention to it.”

“Wise words, Mr Rivers,” I joke.

“Ones to live by.”

“I’ve never met a woman who wants her husband to admit he finds someone else beautiful. Have I done something to make her think something is going on?”

Xavier scoffs. “It’s not you, Savannah. It’s all in her head. If she could, I’m sure she would keep me attached to her.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. She doesn’t seem the clingy type. “Well, if my husband looked like you, I would want to hide him from the world.”

When he turns his head to look at me, I practically melt from the panty-dropping grin on his face. “I didn’t know you were so attracted to me, Miss Hayes.”

My cheeks warm from embarrassment. I didn’t mean to make it known that I find him attractive, but he must know how easy on the eyes he is.

“Careful before your head gets too big for the car.”

He clicks his tongue. “It’s a big car.”

“Don’t tell your wife I find you hot. I don’t need her to think I’m fucking you in the office,” I laugh.

Xavier covers his gasp with a cough. “Very well. Maybe let’s not tell her that I dropped you home.”

The request is odd, to say the least. Why would she care if he dropped me home? Is she that obsessive?

Instead of asking, I nod my head. “Okay.”

He parks outside my building and kills the engine. “Is Ray treating you well?”

I roll my eyes. “He’s a ball of sunshine,” I retort sarcastically.

His eyes narrow. “What did I say about rolling your eyes at me?” His voice is like liquid seduction – low and penetrative. It sinks through me and fills me with want.

The atmosphere in the car becomes heavy as we stare at one another. Xavier presses his body into his seat as though he is using all his strength to restrain himself. Needing some space between us, I lean against the door. The movement attracts his attention to my bare legs. Now that I’m sitting, the material has ridden up. He will see the lacy thong that covers my modesty with one slight movement.

“You don’t tolerate it.”

He hums but doesn’t say anything more.

“I need to go,” I whisper.

I know I’ll do something stupid if I don’t get out of here. It’s been five months since I’ve had a real person to satisfy me. After the teasing Huxley did, I am tempted to climb over the console and ride Xavier in his car, parked on the street.

His voice is tight as he asks, “Why? We’re just talking.”

Does he not feel what I do? Is this one-sided?

I look down. “After five months of being alone, I don’t want to talk.” I clear my throat and offer a small smile. “I don’t

expect you to understand. The contract doesn't stop you from having a wild night." I don't mean for it to appear snappy, but it does anyway. They don't have to give up anything during this process, *and* they get the baby at the end. I know it's what I signed up for, but it's still unfair.

"Twenty months," he says as I open the door.

I look over my shoulder. "What?"

"Twenty months of being alone. It's not only a contract that stops you from having a wild night."

I don't know if he's trying to justify the mistake we would be making or if he wants me to understand why he's looking at me like he wants to tear my clothes off. Either way, I step out of the car.

"Go home to your wife, Xavier."

"I'm a good man. Even if it makes me an unhappy one. You're bound by your contract, but so am I."

I can't help but ask, "And if you weren't?"

He looks at me as if I'm the only thing that deserves his attention. "I'd be a gentleman and walk you to your front door. And after that... I'd take you to your bed and show you just how much of a gentle man I am not."

"Goodnight, Xavier." I close the door and walk away before I ask him to show me what he means.

“ANOTHER APPOINTMENT?” HUXLEY ASKS as I walk into his office. He doesn’t offer the courtesy to look at me while he speaks. His eyes stay glued to the laptop before him.

“Aw. Are you worried about me?” I dump my bag on the floor and slump into my seat.

I’m already dreading having to retake the prep medication. The second round failed. I watched as the hope fell from Emery’s eyes, and sorrow took its place. This time, she didn’t lean on her husband for support. She simply nodded her head and disappeared into the house. Xavier thanked me for trying again, and I tried to refuel his hope by reassuring him that the next round would work. It has to; this has already taken eight months of my life.

Summer came and went with blue skies and an even bluer mood. While Mia enjoyed cocktails in the sun, I worked and prepared for the second round. Autumn came with moving into Xavier’s home. Emery encouraged the idea with thoughts of being involved in the pregnancy being her only motivator.

Xavier ultimately left the decision to me, but finding something affordable and geographically suitable was almost impossible.

The sun is long gone, replaced with drizzly days and dreary moods. Work is the last place I want to be, especially with Huxley in the office. I've learnt to appreciate the days he's in the field. When he's here, I'm restricted to my desk and can only dream of gossiping with Francesca.

My phone buzzes with Elliot's name scrawled along the top. I silence the call and log into my computer.

"What good is having a PA when I get here for seven, and she rolls in at nine-thirty?"

"Did the building fall apart while I was gone?" I tilt my head. "Or were you just missing me?"

"I need ten copies of these," he barks. The bastard tosses it across his desk instead of walking it over to me.

"Say 'please'."

That catches his attention. He looks at me, and I melt at how handsome he is. His dark hair is pulled back. His facial hair adds to his rugged look. "Learn to follow orders. When I say something, you do it immediately. Unless I give you permission, you don't move."

Some days, I get the playful Huxley that came out at Emery's party. And then there are days he acts like a misogynistic pig. He would never speak to a man like that.

“Yes, sir,” I retort sarcastically. I stand up and collect the folder from his desk. I grin when I see Francesca standing at the copier machine. “Fancy seeing you here,” I joke.

She chuckles. “I missed our morning catch-up.” She peers past me. “I was going to come over but saw Ray’s in today.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s been five minutes, and he’s doing my head in.”

“Xavier’s in a bad mood as well. Maybe there’s something in the air.”

I peer over my shoulder into Xavier’s office. He aggressively types on his laptop, utterly unaware of the world around him.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Personal bodyguard left his post, and a client’s house got broken into.” Her eyes widen. “Incoming.”

“Francesca,” Xavier calls. He stops beside us. “Get in touch with Mr Brady. Within the next hour.” He doesn’t acknowledge me as he rushes off. His musky scent lingers in his absence, and I take a moment to bask in it.

“I thought you said he was in a bad mood?”

“That *is* him in a bad mood.” She gathers her papers and briskly walks to her desk to follow her orders.

I watch in a daze as the copier fires out papers. I envy Francesca. If that was how Huxley spoke to me while in a bad mood, I would relax in this job. Instead, I get yelled at like a child. *I’m over it.*

I walk back to the office with purpose. He wants me to only follow his orders? *Fine*. I leave the papers on my desk and resume my seat. I check for any meeting requests and cancellations.

“Do you plan on taking my meeting?” he asks.

I look at him with innocence. “You didn’t explicitly tell me to leave the copies on your desk.”

His eye twitches as he realises I will make him regret his tantrum. “Savannah—” A knock at the door renders him silent. “What can I do for you, Kingsley?”

Kingsley looks between Huxley and me before clearing his throat. “I actually came to speak to Savannah.”

I smile at the new friend I made at lunch last week. “What can I do for you?”

He takes a few steps to my desk. “I was going to check out that burger place you recommended. Do you want to join me?”

Kingsley is not my type. He’s average-looking but boring. He doesn’t get my heart racing or my thighs clenching, at least not like the man on the other side of the room whose sole attention is on this interaction.

“When were you thinking?”

His smile comes alive now that I haven’t rejected him. “Whenever. What day suits you?”

“How about Saturday?”

He licks his lips. “Perfect. I’ll pick you up?”

“Sure.” I wave him goodbye and turn back around.

“I didn’t say you could have a personal conversation during working hours,” Huxley says.

I don’t look at him. “You should have turned him away then.”

His hot gaze doesn’t move from me. Not even when his phone starts to ring. “You’re working on Saturday.”

The screen hides my smile. “Till what time?”

“I don’t know yet.”

I push my chair out so I can see him. “What does that mean? You can’t expect me to work twenty-four hours.”

He casually shrugs. “I don’t know how long the job will take.”

“Well, I’m leaving at eight whether or not you’re done.”

His hands flex as jealousy consumes him. “You work for me. *I* tell you when you’re done.”

I narrow my eyes. He doesn’t want me but thinks he has the right to get jealous when someone else does.

“I guess I’ll be taking annual leave on Saturday.”

“Leave request denied,” he fires back.

I groan in frustration. “What is your fucking problem? Do you enjoy acting like a prick?”

The smirk that graces his lips is sinful. “Perhaps I enjoy your company.”

Rolling my eyes, I tuck myself behind my screen again. He wants everyone to be as miserable as him. I won't give him the reaction he wants.

“Bring my papers to me. That's an order.”

I mentally fling every curse word I know at him. Grabbing the papers, I stand up.

“No.” He leans back into his chair. “Bring them over on your knees.” His eyes fill with lust as they roam over my see-through blouse and pencil skirt.

“What?” I hiss.

“Crawl and bring them over to me.”

“No.”

His eyes narrow. “That's an order, sweetheart.” The challenge is evident in his eyes, and I'm not one to back down.

“What do I get in return?”

“Saturday off.”

I have no intention to go out with Kingsley, but it would be nice to have a day without his calls intruding. Checking behind me to see if no one is watching, I crouch until I'm on my knees. With the papers in one hand, I begin a slow, seductive crawl towards him. My skirt rises slightly with every step, and Huxley enjoys the view. Our eyes stay stuck on each other like magnets. The hairs on my skin stand on alert as a chill runs down my spine from the arousal on his face.

“You look so good on your knees, sweetheart.”

I grin at him. “I look even better naked.” I stop right in front of his seat and look up at him.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Or what?” I goad.

“I’ll show everyone in this building how good you are at following my orders.”

The threat has a small bead of wetness coating my underwear. “I aim to please.”

His tongue darts out to moisten his bottom lip. “Are you going to be pleasing him on Saturday?”

I pull my bottom lip into my mouth, wishing it was his. “Maybe.”

“What are you doing on the floor?” Xavier’s angry tone shatters the erotic bubble we were encased in.

I close my eyes shut to think of a reasonable explanation. “There was something on the floor.” I stand up and pull the hem of my skirt down. “All done.”

Huxley raises his eyebrow at me. “As I said before, Savannah, your request for annual leave is denied.”

What?

“Why?”

“I’m not in the business of sharing.”



Even after a month of living here, the beige walls and furniture make me feel homesick. Aside from the mess, it looks the same as the first day I moved in. The door opens into a small living space area. To the right is a small kitchen, and to the left is a decent-sized bedroom.

I toss my bag onto my bed and flop back onto it. I'm exhausted, but Emery texted me to let me know she wants to have dinner together. It wasn't a request. It was another fucking order. I'm sick and tired of having people tell me what to do. Xavier's contract, Huxley at work and now Emery. But this is the first time she's asked for company since the second round. That is why I force myself up and start the long walk to the main house.

Emery is moving around the kitchen as she cooks our dinner. Everything smells delicious, and I tell her that. She thanks me and asks about my day.

Her aura fits the home. Just like her, the decor is simple but beautiful. The white marble floors meet the bright white walls. The small accents of gold elevate how much this house is worth.

I leave her in the kitchen and move to the living room. The white U-shaped couch is in pristine condition and looks barely sat in. The few times I have been here, the coffee table has a different flower and candle arrangement. The stack of fancy books and homely ornaments are all for show. She even put a fully stocked bookshelf in the guesthouse. It sits opposite my bed with a book collection no individual would read.

This house doesn't look lived in. It looks like something from the cover of a housing magazine. Even the bedrooms have no personality. As pretty as it is, I don't like it.

A home should reflect you. It shows people your personality. It's meant to be comfortable. This house is anything but. Everywhere I walk, I'm scared of ruining perfection by just breathing. I avoid the main house as much as I can, not wanting to feel like a burden.

I sit at their sixteen-seater dining table and wait for Emery to join me. The room is dimly lit and feels intimate.

"How are you feeling today?" she asks as she sits opposite me.

"Good. Is it just us for dinner?" I ask.

"He's headed back to the office. Xavier is barely home, and I felt like some company tonight." Her smile is sincere, and I feel bad for wanting to avoid her.

"He works a lot," I add.

"Work is his entire life. It's all he knows." The smile on her face can only be described as sad, but she snaps out of it as quick as it comes. "He's good at what he does."

"What do you two do on his days off?"

Her soft laugh deepens my sympathy for her. "Xavier doesn't know what a day off is."

Being alone in the small guesthouse is terrible enough. I can't imagine waking up, eating, and sleeping alone in this

mansion. It makes the recent losses sadder.

“I’m sorry the first two rounds weren’t successful. I am hopeful for the next,” I try to reassure her.

“Me too. Xavier said we can keep trying.”

“Family means a lot to you,” I say.

She sips on her wine. “I grew up in the foster system,” she begins. “It was a horrible time, but I always dreamed of a family. A husband and three or four children. But finding love is hard in our world, so I looked into doing it on my own. I longed for belonging because I spent my entire life floating alone.” There is a sad and distant look in her eyes.

I can’t look away, no matter how much I should.

She continues. “That got ruled out quickly because the doctors said I had an abnormal womb and could never carry to full term. I knew that before I met Xavier. He was a proper gentleman in the beginning,” she laughs. “So sweet and endearing. He took me on proper dates, and we spoke about the future. He told me he wanted a family one day, and I should have told him I could never give him that. But I didn’t. I hid it until I kept miscarrying. He was so angry when I told him the truth.”

What. The. Fuck. How could she lie to him about something so big? Who does that?

“I can see the way you’re looking at me, Savannah. I admit it was wrong of me. But I didn’t care. He was the first man who saw me. He was kind and proper, and he wanted me. Telling

him would mean losing him, and I didn't want that. I loved him."

As fucked up as it was, I understand her. Love makes us irrational. Emery lied, and I gave away all my money to a man I knew had a gambling addiction.

"He would have still chosen you because he loves you," I argue.

Emery stops eating and takes a large gulp of her red wine. In the soft light, her irises resemble a black hole I can't look away from. "He pulled away from me when I couldn't fulfil my duties as a woman and wife. He stopped looking at me with love. He didn't touch me anymore. He didn't desire me because I failed him."

I almost reach out to take her hand but stop myself. Her struggle with infertility has damaged how she values herself. "I don't think he sees it as a failure." I try to offer a reassuring smile. "Xavier loves you very much. He is doing all this for you."

Little droplets of wine spill over the edge as her glass comes down with force on the table. She gives me a pointed look. "No man does anything unless it's for themselves. He is doing this to have the perfect life he sketched for himself. If it wasn't me, it would be another woman living in his home. I saw an opportunity to have a good life. Does that make me any worse than him?"

While I disagree with her, I understand why she chose this path. Not wanting to get any more involved in their marriage, I

offer an evasive answer. “I don’t think of either of you badly.”

She sips her wine achingly slow and nods. “My husband is no angel. He may look like the doting husband, but I don’t exist to him within these walls. I am a showpiece for the world – the perfect CEO with a darling wife on his arm.”

“So why have a baby with him?” I retort.

She smiles. “I didn’t always resent my husband. The resentment grew when I would wake up and sleep alone. The baby is mine. I will raise it alone the way I have been in this marriage alone. Men like Xavier want things until they have it. Once it’s in their clutches, it loses its shine and is tossed aside.”

8

I CLUTCH THE PAPERWORK close to my chest and open the back entrance door. I wince when I almost drop it, knowing Huxley would slaughter me if any damage was done to the contract.

“I was trying to help,” Emery snaps. Her voice travels down the staircase to me, standing in the hallway.

“You’re drunk, and it’s barely the afternoon!” he booms loud enough for me to recoil.

Emery’s response comes out as a mumble before her footsteps tumble down the stairs.

There’s not enough time to walk out and pretend I heard none of it, so I act as if I just walked in. I smile at Emery. “Is Xavier in? I have some papers for him to sign.”

Her smile is so convincing I question if I misunderstood what I overheard. “It might be better to come back another time. He’s a little preoccupied right now.”

I nod at her, but the weight of the papers reminds me of Huxley's impending rage. He already berated me for not getting it signed yesterday, and I don't dare to tell him I failed again.

"This will take two minutes. Is he in his office?"

She eyes me as if she doesn't believe me. "Yes." Her smile is plastered back onto her face. "I'm off for lunch with my friends. I'll be back soon." She turns on her heels and walks away.

I stand at the bottom of the stairs and take a deep breath. Xavier in a foul mood is no easy feat, and I don't plan on being on the receiving end. I take each step with false confidence until I am outside his office. With three sharp knocks, I wait for permission to enter.

"Not now, Emery!"

I clear my throat. "It's Savannah. Huxley needed something signed."

He calls for me to enter. The midnight blue walls, mahogany desk and dark chairs throw me off momentarily. This room doesn't look like it belongs to this house. The bookshelf is stocked with neatly placed boxes that are precisely labelled. This room is the only room that has character and looks lived in. Even with the blinds open, the room still has a darkness that I like.

Xavier is casually dressed in jogging bottoms and a t-shirt. His usually styled hair is in its natural state and surprises me

with its slight curl. His biceps bulge as he leans his arms on his thighs. This is the first time I have seen his arms... and feet.

Why am I staring at his feet?

I snap out of my reverie as I remember what I came to do. Xavier doesn't pay much attention to me as he stares at the marble chessboard before him. He appears to be mid-play with himself, so I stand awkwardly and wait until he acknowledges me.

A few minutes go by before I sit on the other side. "Shall I leave these here and go?"

He finally moves one of his pieces. He hums in agreement with himself. When he looks at me, I find it hard not to become mesmerised by his hypnotic eyes. "What is that?"

"Contract extension. Huxley asked for these yesterday, and I forgot." The silence is making me feel suffocated, so I continue my ramble. "I think he might kill me if these don't get to him in the next hour." My awkward chuckle makes me cringe.

Xavier offers a small smile. "I'll let him know it has been sorted. Leave it on my desk."

I follow his instructions and awkwardly stand in front of him. "Thanks."

What I thought was anger, I realise, is sadness. Xavier is *upset*. Even with the failed transfers, I never saw this type of

sorrow in his eyes. He doesn't look at me, returning to play the opposing move.

"Do you play chess?" he asks, analysing the board for the next best move.

"No. Chess is for nerds," I joke.

A small smile makes an appearance, and it makes me giddy that *I* made it happen. "Take a seat. Let this proud nerd teach you a thing or two."

I don't care to learn, but I sit opposite him. He points at each counter and explains the rules of them. There are too many rules for me to keep track of, but I nod.

He picks up one of the crystal pieces. "This is the king. Ultimately, the aim of the game is to protect him. If he gets killed, then it's game over."

"Of course, it's the king that matters. What about the queen?"

Xavier tuts at me. He places the king down to pick up the queen. "Don't underestimate the queen. If you lose her, you may as well quit. She is the most powerful piece in chess."

I shoot him a smug smile. "That's more like it. The king is useless without his queen."

For the first time today, Xavier has a genuine smile. "Yes, he is. She is his ultimate protection. She will move anywhere across the board to protect him." He places the queen gently back on the board. "Chess is all about strategy. It's about

analysing and reading your opponent and the board. My favourite is getting someone into a zugzwang.”

“A what?”

Xavier laughs quietly at my confusion and rearranges the board. “In this situation, white is in zugzwang. It means that no matter what move white makes, it will cost him a counter or, in this case, the entire game. Essentially, they are forced to hurt themselves or forfeit the game.”

I don’t understand his enthusiasm, but it makes my heart full seeing the childlike excitement on his face. “Have you always enjoyed chess?”

The shadow of sadness darkens his features again. “My dad loved playing chess. He’s the one that made this board and gifted it to me.”

The heavy black and white marble board and crystal pieces look professionally made.

“This is beautiful. Does he do this for a living?”

“He died seven years ago. Today’s his death anniversary.”

His sullen mood makes sense now. Xavier has never spoken about his family to me, and I never thought to ask. I assumed there was history there he didn’t want to bring into his present.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Providing comfort doesn’t come easy, so I change the subject. “How long did it take for him to make?”

He shrugs. “Not that long. He was a good craftsman and tried to teach me.” He pauses for a moment. “Do you want to get out of here?”

The sudden subject change gives me whiplash. He stares at me with hope. *He needs to get out of here.*

I nod. “Sure. What did you have in mind?”

He stands up. “Follow me.”

I follow behind as he walks to his bedroom. He smirks when my eyes widen and explains he needs to change. My shoulders relax, and I sit on the armchair while he enters the closet. When he comes out, my mouth runs dry at the sight of him casually dressed.

“Close your mouth, Miss Hayes. Or else you’ll catch a fly,” he jokes.

I purse my lips shut but still admire how the t-shirt clings to his toned muscles. I peek at the abs underneath as he lifts his arms to pull his jumper on. It should be illegal for someone to be hot *and* rich. My laugh at his shoe choice has him looking over at me.

“What’s so funny?” he asks.

“Millionaire with *Converse*?”

His eyebrows shoot up. “What’s wrong with *Converse*?”

I grin at him. “Nothing at all.”

He ties his laces and begins the walk down the stairs. “Don’t offend me by calling me a millionaire again.” He smirks at me

as he holds the front door open. “I’m a *billionaire*, baby.”

If it were physically possible, my ovaries would have imploded from the arrogance laced in his words and eyes. The confidence he emits is just enough to be sexy.

“Sorry, Mr. Billionaire.” I climb into the passenger seat of his car. “Where are we going?”

There is a youthfulness to his smile. “Ice skating.”

I don’t want to dampen his mood by telling him I don’t know how to skate. Maybe, by some miracle, I’ve developed the instinct. Instead, I change the topic. “What’s the most you’ve spent on shoes?”

He shrugs. “A couple of thousand.”

“Thousands?” I screech. “Why?”

“I bought them when XR started making real money. I only wear them to my board meetings as a reminder of what I have achieved. Power and authority aren’t just shouting or making threats. It’s how you present yourself; how you feel about yourself.”

I’ve seen the shoes, and they don’t look a penny over fifty pounds, but I understand the sentiment. Xavier worked hard to get himself where he is. The company started with him and his laptop. It’s admirable.

The car ride is filled with soft melodies, and Xavier lost in his thoughts. When we park, he walks ahead and pays for our tickets. Seeing him do something ordinary is odd but adds to

his attractiveness. After a few minutes, he walks to me with two pairs of skating boots.

“How did you know my size?” I ask as I lace up the second boot.

Xavier is already done and watching me with an amused grin. “I took a guess. I hope you are more graceful on the ice than when trying to tie two pieces of string.”

My laugh is one of embarrassment. “Not really. I’ll be observing as opposed to doing.”

He offers his hand to me. “It’s a good thing I’m an excellent teacher.”

Despite my eye roll, I take his hand and stand up. The blades wobble under my weight as we slowly make our way to the arena doors. “Handsome and humble.”

His eyebrow arches. “Was that an eye roll, Miss Hayes?”

“No,” I lie.

Xavier says nothing more as he practically carries me to the rink. There are no other bodies around us.

“At least nobody will see me fall a thousand times,” I joke.

He lets go of my hand and steps onto the ice. “It’s a good thing I paid for a private session.”

My eyes widen. I look around to see if he is being truthful. There is nobody else here except the workers of a few food stalls. “When?”

“Just now.”

“You’re crazy.”

“You say that like you’re surprised. I thought all businessmen were psychopaths?”

“I stand by my statement. Especially after meeting Huxley,” I laugh.

His lips press into a thin line as he holds back his smile. “Come on. Let me teach you a new life skill.”

Xavier slowly helps me onto the rink and doesn’t let go the entire time. We move at a snail’s pace with one hand in his and the other gripping the barrier with an iron fist. My yelps echo in the empty space as I come close to facepalming the ice one too many times.

Xavier attempted to conceal his laugh, but after forty minutes, he gave up. His laugh is loud and soft all at the same time. The skin around his eyes crinkles as he laughs, making him look adorable. The cold brings a tinge of pink to the tip of his nose.

After much convincing, he managed to get me to the middle of the rink. My hands hold onto his as he moves us around in small circles.

“My legs are aching,” I moan.

“You were a dancer before you met me.”

“That’s different. Why don’t you do a few laps? Show off your real skills.”

He nods and slowly lets go of my hands. I use all my power to stay upright while he spins around me a few times. He starts slow before he really soars. He does full circles around me, getting faster and further away each full round. The smile on his face warms me despite the ice that has chilled me to the bone.

“How did you get so good?” I shout.

“My dad!” he shouts back. “Every winter!” His legs move with grace as he skates back to me. “He always made time for me. Especially after my mum left.”

Oh. I didn't know that.

The drop in his tone makes it clear he doesn't want to talk about her. “I think that's sweet. He sounds like a lovely man and a wonderful father.”

Xavier's eyes gloss over. “He is. He *was*. I loved my father very much. He was a good man, an honest man. He did everything right by me. He supported me even when he was angry at me. I am who I am because of him. When my mother left, he didn't sit around and wallow. He put his best foot forward, and we moved on with our lives.”

“He's the reason you're going to be an amazing father,” I compliment. Despite what Emery said, Xavier won't toss his child aside. I can see it in his expression; he will love his child the way his father loved him.

“I hope so,” he says, snapping out of his reverie. “And how about you? Do you want to be a mother?”

“One day. My mum did her best considering our situation.”

He nods his head before smiling. “I think she did a perfect job. You are nothing short of magnificent, Miss Hayes.”

His marble eyes melt into mine as we stand still, watching one another. There is a look of conflict in his eyes, and I know I need to say something.

“Emery is a lucky woman,” I choke out.

Xavier’s eyes don’t waver even for a second. “Let’s not talk about her.”

I try to put a little distance between us, but my legs don’t move. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Anything else.”

My chest heaves up and down as we stay wrapped in our feelings. “Xavier—“

“We made a vow, and she broke it.” He swallows hard. “She broke me.”

Emery had an affair? How could she want anyone but him?

“Do two wrongs make a right?”

I need him to pull away because he’s too much of a temptation. I would take Xavier in a heartbeat.

His eyes lower to the ground. “I don’t know anything anymore. All I know is what *feels* right.” He skates a few steps away from me. He offers a sad smile. “I hope when you have a baby, it’s not the outcome of a loveless marriage.”

I can't think of anything to say. I nod and wait for him to make the next move.

"Let's go."

When he takes my hand in his, it feels intimate. It's as though the secret of us is hidden from the world between our hands. Neither of us says anything as we slowly return to the brink and off the ice. We silently remove our skates and put our regular shoes back on. The car doors get the brunt of our frustration as we slam them shut.

I finally find the courage to ask, "Why not divorce her?"

His eyes flit over to me. "You don't know my wife. She often reminds me it's till death do us part."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she can never know about today. In Emery's game of chess, the king belongs to the queen. He cannot exist if the queen is knocked off the board."

9

I EYE MY REFLECTION in the mirror, wondering if there is too much on display for tonight's event with the deep V-neck plunge and the thigh-high slit. I nod at myself as I decide to stick with the outfit. If anyone is offended at some boob and leg showing, that is their problem. I complete my outfit with a thin gold bracelet and matching necklace.

I lift my dress as I walk through the garden to the main house, ready to face Xavier's rage over being thirty minutes late. Once I am through the doors, I inspect my dress to ensure no dirt tarnishes the midnight blue material.

"You're late," he remarks when I join them in the foyer.

I roll my eyes. "It's your own party. Can you really be late?"

"Yes."

Emery shoots him a pointed stare. "It's no big deal. You look beautiful."

While I went for sex appeal in an obvious way, Emery went for subtle sexy. Her cream dress is floor-length and teases a

little cleavage. The way the fabric clings to all the right places makes it impossible to look away. Her doe eyes and minimal makeup make her look youthful, but not in an immature way. Her simple makeup, complimented by her red lips, is the perfect balance of sexy and beautiful.

“Have you seen yourself? You look stunning!” I compliment back.

Xavier wraps his arms around his wife and kisses the top of her hair. The action makes me feel a pinch of unjustified envy. When she looks up at him with a smile, the feeling intensifies.

Tonight, he is in a full black tuxedo and bowtie. With her in his arms, they look like the perfect couple. Emery’s words about Xavier using her as a showpiece come rushing back, and I wonder if there was some truth in it, especially after our ice-skating outing.

I spend the ride to the event staring out my window in the backseat. There is a soft melody filling the silence.

Xavier hands his keys to the valet before intertwining his fingers with his wife and making his grand entrance. I stay back for a few moments, letting the man of the hour and his wife have their moment.

I stand on the steps, looking up at the grand exterior of the venue. I can only imagine how extravagant tonight will be. Emery probably spent more money than I’ll ever see to celebrate the tenth anniversary of her husband’s company.

“Did your invite get rescinded after they realised a stripper is distasteful?” the deep voice says as he emerges from behind me.

I peer at Huxley from the corner of my eye. As ever, he looks dashing in his suit. “Did you stalk me so we could wear the same colour?”

He looks down at my outfit and chuckles. “I have better things to be doing.”

Even though most of our conversations involve him acting like a prick, I find myself smiling around him. “You took the time to find out I was a dancer,” I point out.

He scoffs. “Is that what we’re calling strippers now?”

“I’m sure you have plenty of experience with them. You tell me.”

He stands behind me and places his hands on my hips. The breeze rewards me with a waft of his cologne. I don’t think anyone smells as incredible as Huxley. “Women like you are dangerous. I know better than to lay in the snake’s den.”

I turn my head slightly so my lips are at his jaw. “Scared to get bitten?” I whisper back.

His grip on my hips tightens, but I don’t wince. “Be careful, sweetheart. You just might tempt me enough.”

“Don’t worry,” I turn around so we face one another. “If you get bitten, I’ll *suck* the poison out.”

He stares at me for a few seconds with lust radiating from him. He clears his throat and stands taller. “Let’s go.” He walks a few steps ahead of me to the main hall.

As expected, the décor is excessive. The floral arrangements, fancy table setting and candles all scream *Emery Rivers*. The only pops of colour are the flowers; otherwise, everything is neutrally coloured.

I find my name allocated to table one and weave through the crowd to get there. I sigh a breath of relief when I see Francesca sipping on her wine, looking bored out of her mind.

“Hey,” I smile.

Her eyes light up at the sight of me. “Thank fuck! I was already trying to find an excuse to leave.”

I laugh with her. “I’m glad you’re here too.”

“Is my presence not enough?” Huxley says as he slides into the seat next to mine.

“Back to stalking me, sunshine?”

“Wouldn’t that make your dreams come true?”

I cross one leg over the other, exposing the skin on the one closer to him. He doesn’t hide eyeing up my tan skin and grins at me. His gaze flickers to Francesca, who is watching us with wide eyes. “Good evening, Francesca.”

“Ray,” she greets with a smile. She raises her eyebrow at me as if to ask *what the hell?*

Emery stands front and centre as she gives a speech about how proud she is of her husband for his hard work and drive.

Blah. Blah. Blah. Just the other day, she was bitching about how he never has time for her. I stifle a snort when she ends the speech with a declaration of love despite openly telling me she resented him.

Xavier takes over, and his speech also drones on, talking about how the company started, his dream, his belief, and finally ending by thanking his wife for her *‘unwavering support’*, *‘sharing his passion’* and *‘patiently loving him’* while he works to build a future for them.

The entire thing makes me gag at how obnoxiously fictitious it is. In fact, they deserve an Oscar for their award-winning performance tonight. But I am the only one who can see through it, so I stand with the crowd and applaud them as they gently kiss each other.

The dinner is delicious, and I enjoy it with Francesca’s company. I ignore the flirtatious smirks Huxley sends me whenever I put something in my mouth. I catch Xavier’s curious gaze when he glances over at us.

After dinner, I excuse myself to the ladies’ room. I touch up my makeup and exit into the dimmed hallway.

“Savannah,” Xavier calls.

I sigh as I walk over to him. “Yeah?”

“Is there a problem?”

Yeah, your marriage is a joke, yet you want me to give up everything in my life to carry your child.

“No.”

“Did my speech bore you?” he jokes. “You looked unimpressed.”

I purse my lips and fight back a laugh. “Yeah, lies are usually unimpressive.”

“What does that mean?”

My stare is full of surprise. “Are you really asking me that question?” I go to walk away before changing my mind and giving him my honest opinion. “I don’t understand you, or her, for that matter. Why are you putting me through this if you don’t love your wife?”

He reaches out for me before changing his mind. “Are you unhappy?”

“You’re the unhappy one in your loveless marriage.” I throw his own words against him.

“Lower your voice,” he orders calmly.

My fists ball at my sides. “I grew up in a hostile home. I know how it can fuck a child up. I don’t want to be part of that.”

His features contort into a deadly stare. If looks could kill, I would be dead instantly. “You need to remember your place, Miss Hayes. You are not here to critique my marriage.”

“Then maybe you and your wife shouldn’t bitch to me about your marriage.”

His shoulders square as he stares me down. “You do as I say, and I don’t remember ordering you to analyse my marriage.”

Standing before me is not the man who said whatever felt between us was *right*. As I look at Xavier, I realise what a fool I’ve been. He’s a man who wants to screw over the wife who screwed him. It’s not love or lust that has him looking at me like he does – it’s betrayal and revenge. He wants to hurt her the way she hurt him.

I clench my jaw and get into his face. “You might have a wife that follows your orders like a *bitch*, but not me, Mr Rivers. You don’t own me.”

He grabs my wrist. “I have a contract that says otherwise.”

Don’t hit him.

“The baby is your property.” I step up to him. “A baby that isn’t inside me yet. Right now, I can do whatever I want.”

He smiles at me as if he didn’t look murderous seconds ago. “What would you like to do, Savannah? Drink alcohol? Go back to stripping? Have sex?” He looks down at me. “Is that what this is about? Do you want my permission to go out there and fuck your pathetic ex again?”

The laugh comes out before I can stop it. “Does that make you angry?”

He closes the little distance between our bodies. “You fuck him, and we’re done.”

“There was nothing to even start with.”

He dares to look hurt at my words. He physically flinches but doesn't retaliate.

I grin at him. “And who said anything about Elliot? I'd much rather have Huxley.” I take a few steps back without looking away.

His eyes darken. “He would never.”

I run my hands down my dress before purposefully leaving my bare leg on display. “All men have a breaking point.”

“When a woman throws herself at him, of course he does.”

Throws herself at him? Does he think that's what I'm doing with him? His words *hurt*, but I won't let him see that.

I square my shoulders and look him dead in the eyes. “Let's get something straight – I will *never* let a man shame me for who I am or what I have done. I will never let a man tell me what to do. So if I want to *throw* myself at all the men in the world, it's none of your damn business.” My exterior is calm, whilst inside, I am *burning*. I take one second to pull myself together before walking away.

He grabs my hand with force. “You are *not* going to fuck him, Savannah!”

I turn back with a wicked grin. “Watch me.”

His hold tightens. “I'm warning you.”

“Would you like it in portrait or landscape? Just a heads up – I look *real* good bent over. You can watch me *throw* it back for

him. “I snatch my wrist out of his hold.

“You are bound by contract,” he reminds me as I walk away.
“Savannah! Don’t walk away from me!”

I don’t stop. I don’t turn around. I storm back to my table with anger fuelling each step and decision. “Take me home,” I demand to Huxley.

He looks taken aback by my order. “You okay there?”

“Yes,” I grit out. “Just fucking peachy.”

I feel him before I see him.

“Miss Hayes, can we continue our discussion?”

Huxley and Emery watch us with caution.

“No. Huxley was just about to take me home.”

“Is everything okay?” Emery asks.

I place my hand on my chest, willing my heart to stop beating erratically. “Fine. I’m tired, and I’d like to leave.”

“The party isn’t over,” Xavier bites out.

I shoot him daggers. “I don’t give a fuck.”

He pleads with his eyes. “I’ll take you home,” he promises.
“Just enjoy the rest of the party.”

I turn to Huxley. “Can you take me home?”

Before he can answer, Xavier cuts in. “No. I’ll take you.”

“It’s your party,” Emery argues. “How can you leave?”

Xavier looks exasperated as he stares between the three of us. "I'll be back."

Her eyes turn into slits as she gives him a murderous glare. "I put so much effort into this party for you." Her eyes soften slightly when they land on me. "Get some rest. Let me call you a taxi."

"I'll take her," Huxley steps in. "I was just about to leave anyway."

"*Ray*," he warns.

Huxley looks at me one last time before affirming his decision. "Whatever it is can wait until tomorrow."

"Congratulations on ten years and a successful marriage," I say to the couple.

"Savannah," Xavier pleads.

I don't stop to listen to his pathetic begging as I follow Huxley out. He doesn't speak to me as we wait for the valet to bring his car to the front. I'm too pissed off to admire his black Audi and the red interior. Instead, I lean back into my seat and stare out the window.

"Don't fuck up my car," he warns. "I love this thing more than my mother." His attempt to lighten the mood falls on deaf ears. He wisely chooses to sit in silence. Unfortunately for me, that silence lasted a total of five minutes.

"Where are you living?"

“His guesthouse,” I grumble. The question is a reminder I can’t avoid him forever.

“Are the two of you fucking?”

“No,” I deadpan. “I wouldn’t touch him with a barge pole.”

Huxley chuckles. “What did he do to piss you off so much?”

“Can you drive without talking?” I snap.

He watches me for a few moments but does as I ask. When he pulls up, he surprises me by getting out of the car and walking me to the gate.

“What is it with you men thinking the woman always needs saving?”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “I know you can hold your own. I just want to make sure you don’t set his house on fire with the mood you’re in.”

I lock the gate and walk to the guesthouse with Huxley on my tail. Even once I am indoors, he doesn’t leave. He observes me shoving the mess into any drawer and falling back onto my bed.

“Can I trust you’re going to behave yourself?”

I don’t want to behave myself. I want to screw Xavier over in any way I can. Maybe that will relieve some of the tension in my shoulders. I eye the specimen that is Mr Huxley Ray – leaning against the bookshelf, watching me seethe to myself. Xavier *told* me not to go there but fuck him and his stupid rules.

I sit up and smile at him.

“I don’t like how you’re looking at me,” he says.

I slowly walk over to him and run my hands down his arms. “Let’s just do this once. One hot, steamy fuck, and we call it quits.”

He shakes his head. “No. Xavier—“

“Shut the fuck up about him,” I snap. “Who cares what he wants? Does he tell you when to take a shit, or do you still own your own balls?”

My words knock on his ego, and he grabs my throat. “Why don’t you get on your knees and check for yourself?” Single-handedly, he unbuckles his belt and pushes me onto my knees.

Like a starved being, I pull his boxers down and smile at the beast before me. I look at him through my lashes as my tongue starts at the base and teasingly works its way up. I feel the blood rushing to his cock as he hardens under my tongue.

“Open your mouth and take it all.”

“My pleasure.”

I follow his instructions and take it as far down my throat as I can. His fingers weave through my hair as he pushes further down my throat. My gag reflexes kick in, but that only fuels his lust. He grabs both sides of my face and fucks my mouth like his life depends on it. He forces his length down my throat, making it hard to breathe. But when he releases a guttural groan, it makes it worth it.

As I peer up at him, the sight makes me weak. Huxley's eyes are trained on me as I work him until that familiar salty taste of pre-cum laces my tongue.

I push him away and stand up. "Your turn," I order. I walk backwards until my knees hit the back of the bed. He watches as I pull my underwear down my legs and toss them to the side. Spreading my legs, I let the slit of the dress fall to the side, giving him glimpses of what lies beneath.

Huxley smiles at me in a deranged way, the lust burning in his eyes. I don't care that he only wants sex. That is what I want, too; it doesn't mean I have no respect for myself.

When he doesn't move from his spot, I pout. "Do I have to do *all* the work by myself, or will you pull your weight?" I lay on my back and spread my legs, giving him a clear view of what he is missing. My fingers trail over my breasts, down my torso before applying pressure just where I need it.

My wetness instantly soaks my fingers as I push two inside me. I have done this many times with images of Huxley in my mind, but with him *watching* me, it's sexier than I thought. My free hand pinches my nipples through my dress as I bring myself closer to the edge. Just before I get there, my hand is ripped away.

"Can't have all the fun by yourself," he grins before pressing his tongue against my clit.

His tongue runs down the length of my slit, and I squeal when he pushes the tip into my entrance. The bastard doesn't

give me what I want, instead wrapping his lips around my clit and sucking *hard*.

“Give me what I want, or fuck off,” I snap.

He lifts his head, and the lust-driven drunken state is enough to let him do whatever he wants to me. “What do you want? You want this, sweetheart?”

His head dips down as his tongue flicks over my sensitive clit. He starts slow, but like a starved man, he laps up the evidence of my arousal.

I wrap my legs around his neck, squeezing the life out of him. I buck my hips and grind harder, coming alive with each of his licks.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come,” I groan.

He moves away, leaving me disappointed. He smiles, knowing what he’s done. “I want your first orgasm on my dick, sweetheart.”

I hastily rummage through my drawers and find the condoms I always kept on hand. I didn’t think I would need them anytime soon because of Xavier’s rules, but *oh fucking well*.

I throw the box at him. “Hurry up.”

Despite how lax he seems, his fingers do a rush job of unwrapping the condom and rolling it onto his thick shaft. “Take the fucking dress off. I want to feel your entire body come undone while I fuck you.”

I slide the thick straps down my arms and let the dress pool at my feet. Stepping over it, I lay back down on the bed.

Huxley pulls me closer to the end of the bed and bends my legs at my knees, putting my pussy on full display. He rubs the head of his cock on my clit before pushing in with no warning.

My gasp is caught in my throat from being filled after so long. He sits snugly deep inside me, stretching me enough to make it feel good without pain. There is no easing into it. He pounds into me without a care in the world; we are lost in this haze of lust. I don't want him to kiss me or caress my body. I want him to fuck me until my limbs are too heavy to move.

“Shit! That feels good. Does it feel good, sweetheart?”

My only response is a moan as my eyes squeeze shut at the impending explosion.

He entirely withdraws and tuts at me. “When I ask you a question, use your words, Savannah.” He slams into me again. “Does that feel good, sweetheart?” he repeats.

“Yes,” I breathe. “So fucking good. Holy shit! I'm gonna...” My words fall into nothingness as I come undone around him. The tightness in my body evaporates as I am finally given the release I have been looking for.

Huxley pulls out of me and watches as my pussy convulses from the orgasm. “I need to feel that again.” He flips me over so I am lying on my stomach. He pulls my legs apart before straddling them. He pushes his thumb into my pussy before replacing it with his hard cock.

My moans are swallowed by the bed as I scream into the mattress. His large hand comes down on my ass, and I revel in the pain. Huxley presses his body into mine and uses one hand to grab the back of my neck. He holds me in place as he fucks me without remorse. He throbs inside me, letting me know he's close, but I don't care. *I got what I needed.*

“Come on, sweetheart. Come on my cock again.” His hand reaches under my body until his fingers find my throbbing clit. With his uncontrolled thrusts and fingers working their magic, I come again, and he follows seconds after.

We lay there for a few minutes, catching our breath and sweat mixing. When he pulls out of me, I whimper at the loss. I turn around to see him tying the condom.

“Want to keep it as a souvenir?” he jokes.

“I don't think I need something to remember this,” I laugh.

Huxley's stare lingers on me. “Seeing as we're not doing this again...”

I bite my bottom lip. “What are you suggesting?”

My skin burns in the trail of his lascivious gaze. His naked body is crafted to perfection. I regret not taking my time to graze my fingers over every curve of his muscles.

“We might as well make the most of this one-time experience.” He joins me on the bed. “What do you say, sweetheart?”

“You're the boss, sunshine.”

Huxley takes me in every position he desires. My fingers feel every inch of his skin. His lips describe every filthy thing he wants to do before fulfilling his craving. Our bodies move in chaotic synchrony. Sex is our drug after an involuntary abstinence. When he fills the condom, I worry about the withdrawal symptoms because this won't be enough of a fix.

My body aches, and I can only lay limp as he gets up.

He pulls the covers away and points at it. "Go to sleep."

I watch as he pulls his boxers and trousers back on. With his shirt tucked in again and hair smoothed over, nobody would ever know he gave me the best orgasms of my life.

"Shut the door on your way out," I dismiss him.

"Xavier can never know," he warns.

I shoot him a sweet smile. "Xavier, who?"

10

I SLAM THE CAB door harder than I should when I see the familiar dark mop of hair. I try to walk past him, but he catches me before I can get into the safe confines of XR Securities.

“Hey.”

My deadly stare says it all as I look at Elliot. “What do you want?”

“You can’t avoid me forever,” he says annoyed.

I want to tell him I can and have over the past few months. Every call and text went unanswered. One of the perks of moving into Xavier’s fortress is that Elliot doesn’t know where I live; even if he did, there’s no way for him to get in.

“Let’s see about that.” I walk past him, but he grabs my arm, stopping me. “Let go of me before I scream for security.”

He lets go as if I electrocuted him. “What happened to you? Who is this?” He scans me from head to toe. “The hair, the clothes, the job... this isn’t you. He’s changing you.”

I square my shoulders, refusing to let him bring me down to his level. “I’m happy. I’m financially stable. I have a future. You can’t recognise me because I never had these things with you. So, tell me what it will take to get you to leave me alone.”

He strokes my face so gently I can barely feel it. “I want us,” he pleads.

“Too late. Please stop calling me, or else I’ll change my number.” I turn on my heels and walk away.

“I need money.”

I halt. I take a deep breath and turn around. It only takes three steps to stand before him again, but it takes all my strength not to slap the audacity out of him. “That’s why you’re here?”

A shadow of guilt comes over his face. “I need some money, Sav,” he pleads. “You know I wouldn’t ask you if—“

My incredulous laugh cuts him off. “*Of course*, you would ask me! You are a joke!” I open my mouth to tell him exactly what I think but realise there is no point. “Fuck off.”

He pulls my arm, stopping me from walking away. “I’m desperate. I owe money—“

I shrug his hand off my arm. “You owe me money.”

“These people aren’t playing about, Sav. I need to pay some of it back today before they fuck me up.”

I hate that I once loved this man; if I didn’t, maybe his stupid, sad, desperate face wouldn’t weaken my defences. I

can hate him without wanting him to die.

“How much?”

“Only two hundred. I’ll sort the rest.”

Like a magnet, I feel the pull to Huxley as he walks in our direction. He looks divine in his light grey suit. His eyes are calculating as he watches us.

“You need to get out of here. *Now.*”

“I swear this will be the last time you hear from me. I promise.”

His begging stops when Huxley stands next to me. He eyes Elliot with mistrust. “Is there a problem?”

Elliot scoffs. “No.”

The slight twitch in his left eye tells me the response irked him. “Do I need to remove *this* off the property?”

I shake my head. “No. He just needed directions. I’ll be up in two minutes.” I try to look at ease, but it’s hard when I feel like I am being choked by testosterone.

“You’re already late,” he snaps before walking away.

“Is that that whose baby you’re having?”

“No.” I look back to see Huxley still watching us from inside. “I’ll transfer you the money. Just get out of here.”

His arms come around me in a tight embrace, but I don’t return the gesture. “Thank you. I swear I’ll pay you back.”

I don't have high hopes for that, but paying him two hundred pounds is better than the non-stop calls and texts. I enter the office and brace myself for Huxley's cold mood and temperament today. It's been a long morning, and I don't have much energy left.

Our eyes meet through the glass as I walk past Xavier's office. I haven't spoken to him since the party on Friday, and I don't plan to talk to him today. I divert my gaze, jut out my jaw and walk with self-assurance towards my desk.

"Why are you late?" Huxley asks before I can put my bag down.

"I had some stuff to do."

"You are paid from eight a.m. Not," he checks his watch, "ten thirty. What was so important?"

Being unbothered to fight with him, I tell him the truth. "I went to see my mum. The nursing home called me to tell me she was lucid today for the first time in weeks. I had breakfast and a conversation with her like normal mother and daughters do."

I hang my jacket on the back of my seat and log into my computer. He doesn't say anything else as I check my emails.

"Your afternoon meeting with Intelligence has been cancelled," I inform him. "Would you like me to request a new date?" When he doesn't answer me, I look up to see him staring at me. "What?"

"I'm sorry," he mumbles.

“Whatever. What would you like to do about the meeting?”

He stands up and walks to the front of my desk. “I’m apologising,” he states.

Shrugging, I say, “I don’t care for your apology.”

I hate the way he is looking at me. I hate that I want to cry. I feel overwhelmed and *exhausted*. I am back on the injections and pre-natal medication, which exacerbate my emotions.

He walks over to the other side of the office and sits on the sofa. “I was an asshole. Let me make it up to you by sitting here in silence. I won’t speak to you, and you can have a nap. Lord knows you look like you need it.”

I need to keep my mind busy, but I didn’t sleep much last night. I lay across the charcoal grey couch opposite him and close my eyes. The warmth coming through the windows helps to relax me, unlike his burning stare.

I sigh and open my eyes. “I can’t sleep if you keep watching me like that.”

He smiles at me. “I can’t help it.”

I turn my head so I am looking at him too. “What do you want to know?”

“If I wanted to know something, I don’t need to ask.”

“But I’d rather you hear it from me,” I explain. “A doctor’s report will probably paint her as a terrible mother, but that isn’t true.”

He rests his arms on his knees and leans forward. “What is the truth?”

I can only share what I know as I wasn't alive when it happened, but I was born because of it. I tell him what my mother and professionals have told me. “She was gang raped. She says it was at least four men. She fell into a deep depression and didn't even realise she was pregnant until it was too late to do anything about it. She always says I was the best thing that ever happened to her and that I *healed* her, but you can't heal schizophrenia.”

His jaw clenches and swallows hard at the harsh truth. “Is that what she has?”

“Schizoaffective disorder,” I correct myself. “It's when someone has schizophrenia and a mood disorder, like bipolar and depression. The two feed into one other, so when she is depressed, her hallucinations are worse.”

Huxley looks down at the ground as he absorbs the saddest reality of my life. When he looks at me again, he seems *proud*. “You're a good daughter. You did right by placing her in a home that can fulfil her needs.”

The guilt I felt the day I started enquiring about homes attacks me again. I feel like I abandoned her; I gave up on her.

“I couldn't manage anymore. I spent my childhood taking care of her. It was like having a toddler. I had to watch her all the time. Before I went to school, I'd have to lock all the windows, hide any potential weapons, and barricade her inside the house. When I'd get home, she would be curled into a ball,

hiding from the bad men watching her from the garden.” My snuffles fill the silence. “I was so tired, Hux.”

He surprises me by kneeling in front of me. His amber eyes lock onto mine as he speaks with conviction. “You did everything right. The only thing you did wrong was waiting so long to ask for help.” He takes my hand in his. “Anytime she needs you or is lucid, you go to her. I don’t care what else is going on. The world could be burning, but I’d run through flames for my family.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

A soft knock at the door bursts the bubble we were encased in. Francesca enters as Huxley stands up. “What can we do for you?”

She looks at me. “Mr Rivers is asking to meet with you in his office.”

Nobody speaks for a few seconds. “Tell him I’m busy.”

She fiddles with her fingers but remains lingering in the doorway. “He said it wasn’t a request.”

I don’t want to get her into trouble, but he doesn’t get to exert his CEO status over me. I smile at her. “Tell him I’m not his bitch.”

“Thank you,” Huxley says, dismissing her.

Her head hangs low as she walks away.

“Still haven’t kissed and made up?”

“I was too busy sucking your dick. Or have you already forgotten?”

He chuckles. “Maybe you need to remind me.”

Fucking him would really help with the tension in my shoulders. An orgasm or two would make all my problems disappear for a moment.

Another knock at the door reveals Francesca looking terrified. “He’s said it’s urgent.”

“I don’t care. Tell him I don’t want to see him.” I feel bad when she pleads with her eyes, but I refuse to give in.

“I don’t think I can say that.”

“I’ll handle it,” Huxley intervenes. “Why don’t you take a bathroom break?”

She nods at us and scurries away.

The smile on my face is involuntary but present. “Aren’t you a sweetheart?” I tease, using his nickname for me.

He grunts. “She looked like she was going to shit her pants. She shouldn’t get shot in the crossfire.”

“What are you going to do?”

He walks over to his desk and resumes his seat. “Call him.”

I join him on his side of the desk and run my fingers down his arms. “There’s enough space for me under your desk. Maybe I should remind you how it feels to have your dick sucked by me while you *handle* this.”

He laughs but doesn't give in to the temptation. He dials the number and waits two seconds before the line is connected.

"It's Ray." *Pause.* "She's a little busy now." *Pause.* "I understand, but—"

I can't hear what is said on the other line, but the conversation lasts less than a minute. When he hangs up, I stare at him. "Well?"

"Incoming," he warns.

Xavier barges through the doors and stares at me. I hate how handsome he is, even when angry. "When I order you to my office, you come," he snarls.

I rest my elbow on the top of the chair. "I don't have to do anything you say."

"Savannah." He takes a calming breath before continuing. "Come to my office so we can talk."

With my attention on Huxley, I say, "Didn't you ask me to go and get your lunch?"

He doesn't match my smile, but there is amusement in his eyes. "I am rather hungry."

I turn back to Xavier, who watches us with caution. "See. I'm busy." I walk over to my desk and grab my jacket. "You need to try these burgers from my old area. I'll be back in about two hours."

Xavier walks over to me and grabs my arm.

"Let go of her," Huxley orders.

“This doesn’t concern you,” he fires back. When he looks at me, I see past the anger. He looks hurt and *desperate*. Under his eyes are hollow, and he looks unkept.

“It does when you’re harassing my PA.”

Xavier lets go and turns to his friend. “She is my surrogate. That is why she is here and why I gave her a job. So, when I say this doesn’t concern you, I mean it. Leave us alone.”

His eyes dart between us as a flurry of confusion, shock, and betrayal shines in his eyes. “When were you going to tell me about this?”

I don’t know who he is asking, but I don’t have the words to answer.

“When the time was right,” Xavier answers. “Please. Give us two minutes.”

He grabs his phone and wallet. “She’s all yours,” he mutters as he walks out.

I can’t shake the sadness I feel from the way he looked at me. He looked disappointed before the anger took over.

“Why did you have to tell him like that? You just ruined the relationship I spent the last six months building!”

“What about me? What about us?”

I push him away from me. “There is no us!” I shout.

“You’re tied to me whether you like it or not.”

“No, I’m not!” I walk to the other side to put distance between us.

“Please. Let me make this right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I did. It never came out right.”

“What were you trying to say?” I laugh.

His mouth opens and closes like a fish. His fingers weave through his hair before he pulls on the ends in frustration. He lets out a deep sigh before speaking. “I was jealous at the thought of you...” He struggles to finish his sentence.

“You have no right to be jealous.”

“I know that, but I do. I hate that I do. I don’t want to feel like this. I’m scared of betraying my vows when you’re in my presence.”

“Are you trying to blame me?”

“Do you feel it too?”

I answer his question with one of my own. “Does it matter?”

He stares at me in defeat. “Perhaps it doesn’t.”

The three words confirm what I already knew: I would never be worth ending his marriage for. It doesn’t matter what he proclaims; he would stand in his marriage even if I gave in to my temptation. I would only ever be the mistress the world slut shamed.

“You should have ended the contract before we got here.”

He makes his way across the office until we’re standing toe-to-toe. “Please don’t go.”

My eyebrows furrow as I try to understand what he wants. He won’t leave Emery, yet he wants me around. He won’t step

over the line but wants me to stand at it with him.

What he wants doesn't matter. It's about what *I* want.

"If the next round fails, I want out of the contract."

He looks at me in surprise. "And work?"

"I don't want to be around a man who only sees me as a fuck."

"That isn't what this is."

I grab my jacket and stare at him. "I'm not looking for a love story. I look out for myself because I have no one else to do it. I make decisions that benefit me. I don't claim to be a good person, but at least I'm not a liar. I'd respect you more if you could admit you wanted an affair to hurt her."

"I'm a good man."

I shake my head. "A good man wouldn't have welcomed his sin into his home."

THE DAYS AFTER THE implantation felt stretched out as Xavier watched me like a hawk, and Emery became my second shadow. Everywhere I turned, there they were. A selfish part of me hoped it didn't work so I could get out. It was hard being around Xavier when I knew I had to keep some distance between us.

But life has never been kind to me, and we finally got a positive pregnancy result. It's an odd feeling knowing there is life inside of me. Despite the circumstances, I will do whatever I can to deliver this baby safely.

Mia engulfs me in a tight hug as I walk into *EspreSoul*. "What can I get you?"

I haven't seen my friend in two months. Her medium-length blonde hair has been cropped to a pink pixie cut. Her curves have started to disappear, and new ink covers her skin. *So much has changed.*

"One apple turnover, please."

I sit alone for another twenty minutes until her lunch break rolls around. She joins me with a coffee and cake slice. She listens intently as I tell her the latest updates, ending with the pregnancy.

She eyes me up and down. “Are *you* okay? How are you feeling?”

“Dreadful. Why is it called morning sickness when it comes in the afternoon?”

My friend laughs at my misery. “This is just the start. Are things any better with the COO?” She seems more excited about this than the pregnancy.

I shake my head. With Huxley, it’s back to the start. There are no more playful moments – only hostility. When he returned to the office, he made me promise to never tell Xavier the truth. I still don’t understand why he cares so much.

Things between Xavier and myself are strained but civil. I avoid being alone with him. It’s easy to get lost in the moment with Xavier. There’s something about him that’s hard to walk away from. Perhaps that’s why Emery likes to keep him close.

I change the subject and ask about her. While she talks, I look around the familiar walls, and a strange pull of sadness tugs at me. My life wasn’t easy before, but it felt easier than *this*. I miss living on my own, without two people watching over me. I miss getting on The Underground to get myself places. I miss laughing with Mia behind the till for eight hours a day. *I miss my freedom.*

But the one thing I don't miss is walking through the door with his sidekick. Jordan and Elliot let out a bellowing laugh as they queue for a coffee. The feeling of my gaze pulls his attention away from his friend. The glee on his face irritates me. He walks over to us with a smile on his face. Mia follows my steely gaze and rolls her eyes at the sight of them.

“Long time,” Jordan greets.

“Not long enough,” I mutter.

Jordan was the fuel behind Elliot's gambling. Promising to make quick money while having fun started an unhealthy gambling habit. On the few nights I convinced Elliot to stay home, Jordan would ring off his phone until they were glued together at a betting shop.

“Sav, it's so good to see you.”

“What do you want, Elliot?” I ask.

Uninvited, he takes a seat at the table. “I've missed you. How are you?”

“Pregnant,” I answer.

There is a pain in his eyes, and the naïve part of me feels sorry for him. He was good to me. He did love me; it's a shame he loved gambling more.

“You went through with it?” I don't answer him. “Why are you doing this? You'll regret it. You'll be giving your first baby away. All this pain and for what?”

“I could say the same about my time with you.” I fire back. “Five years I poured into us, and look what you did to me. All that heartache and for what?” I don’t let him answer. “Only for you to choose *money* over me. It was always *Jordan* and *Elliot*. At least this pain will last nine months and be worth it.” I stand up and stare at him. “I can’t say the same about my wasted time with you.”

Walking away, I hear Mia cuss him out for ruining our catch-up. I walk back to the office with emotions brimming my eyes.

I hate these stupid hormones.

I walk into Huxley’s office and ignore his questioning stare. I slump into my seat and count to ten, trying to push my emotions down. But it doesn’t work. No matter how hard I purse my lips, the cries break out.

Tucked into the corner of the office, I cry to myself. Maybe it’s the hormones, the lack of freedom, or the Savannah I feel has already been lost, but I cry while trying to ignore the way Huxley is watching me with caution. I scold myself to hold it together in front of him, but I can’t stop the outbreak of emotions. I hide my face in my hands, wishing it would silence the cries pouring out of me. I don’t expect him to come over and comfort me. *Hell, I don’t want him to.* I can build myself back together.

But that doesn’t stop my heart from wavering when he silently places a box of tissues on my desk and walks out of the office, shutting the door behind him. Maybe he, too, knows

that sometimes you need a moment to cry your losses silently and alone.



Emery has asked me to join her for dinner today. I wanted to say no, but I've declined three times already. I open the garden door, but before I can announce my arrival, a shout thunders through all the rooms.

"I gave you everything! What more do you want?" Xavier shouts.

The noise comes from upstairs, but I still tiptoe across the kitchen and closer to the source.

"You!" she shouts back. "I want my husband back!"

"Tough luck," he replies coldly. "Your husband left when you *lied*."

The laugh that emits from Emery brings a chill to my bones. The eerie sound is not one I have heard from her before. "You left a long time before that! The second you signed those marriage papers, you became someone else!"

"Because I realised what a psychopath you really are! Fucking hell, Em! You clung to me like a lost fucking puppy. What more do you want from me? I gave you everything!"

The ceiling above me creaks as someone paces around. From the heavy steps, I assume it is Xavier.

"You gave me everything except your love!"

“Don’t start with this bullshit again. I had work. I had a life outside of you.”

“I should have been your life, not a fucking showpiece!”

“You are one ungrateful bitch, you know that?”

I flinch as he swears at her. It’s hard to believe that it’s Xavier speaking.

“You had nothing before me. I took you in. I gave you everything you wanted. I loved you. And what did you do? You fucked every man I let into this house!”

“Because you wouldn’t touch me!”

I jump at her loud screech. When she speaks again, her words are mixed with her cries.

“You didn’t even pretend to want me. You wouldn’t fuck me even if I was eagle-spread for you. You didn’t kiss me unless we were out in public. You made me feel unloved.”

“You *tell* me that,” He sounds much calmer now. “You don’t cheat.”

“I shouldn’t have to! A husband craves his wife in every way. When was the last time we fucked? It’s been nearly two years.” Her laugh has a ring of crazy to it. “No man can go that long without sticking his dick somewhere – especially you. You always wanted to fuck me, to turn me into an obedient whore. So tell me, my dear husband, which new whore are you fucking until she can no longer stand?”

“You make me sick. You are fucking delusional. Why would I want to touch you when half of this city has been inside you?”

My hand goes to my mouth to catch my gasp at Xavier’s crude words. Both are firing disgusting things at each other, but his slut-shaming makes me feel sick.

“Because I wasn’t getting anything from you! You only touched me when we were trying for a baby and when I couldn’t give you that you didn’t sleep in the same bed as me.”

“Because I couldn’t tolerate lying in bed next to a liar,” he replies, void of emotion. “It had nothing to do with you being unable to carry a child. It was because every time I looked at you, I remembered that you were not the woman I married. You became my mother – the one woman I despise.”

There is silence as his harsh words hang in the air. The pacing has stopped, as have her cries. I can imagine the two of them staring at one another across the room, unwilling to be the first to look away.

“I might not be perfect, but at least I accept who I am,” she calmly states. “I can see you for what you are. Maybe your mother did too.”

As angry as I am with him, my heart hurts for him. It only took one conversation about his absent mother to know it was a sensitive topic, and Emery just threw it in his face.

“Don’t worry, I won’t ruin your perfect image,” she consoles. “I’ll sit pretty and carry on being the mould you

forced me into.”

“I didn’t force you to become an alcoholic, crazy lunatic. *You* did that. Pathetically drinking yourself to your grave. Carry on, Emery. You’d do me a favour if you dropped dead.”

The footsteps coming down the stairs are fast, and I hide in the first corner I can find.

Please don’t walk this way.

Thankfully, Xavier storms out the front door, slamming it behind him. I stay glued to the wall, unsure of what to do. I should quietly leave and pretend I didn’t hear anything. There is no movement upstairs, so I take it as my cue to leave.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that,” she says, making me jump.

I slowly turn around to see Emery looking at me with puffy eyes and red cheeks. The strings on her slip dress slide off her shoulders and her hair is dishevelled.

“I didn’t mean to. I just came to…” It feels useless to explain why I came. “I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

She shrugs and walks past me, leaving me confused about where to go. She rummages around in the kitchen and joins me two minutes later with a bottle of wine. “Come.”

She doesn’t give me a choice as she leads me to a hidden area of the house that wasn’t part of the original tour. She holds the door open, and once I am in, she locks it.

Like the rest of the house, the room has bright white walls. The double bed is made of a deep-coloured wood and sits against the wall. Two matching armchairs and a small round table are placed next to the window, looking out into the garden.

She takes a seat on an armchair and opens her bottle of wine. She slowly pours herself a glass, filling it to the brim. I cautiously watch her as she takes a large gulp. Her eyes close, relishing in the comfort the drink provides her.

“I would offer you a glass...” she doesn’t finish her sentence. She points at the empty seat opposite her. “Take a seat. Despite what my husband said, I won’t try to kill you.”

I swallow hard. Leaning into my seat, I ask, “Are you okay?”

Nursing her drink, she watches out the window. In the distance, all I can see is the stretch of grass in the garden. From this height advantage, I can see my little home and wish I was hidden within my four walls.

“My marriage is a despicable thing. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.”

She snorts at my impassive statement. “You probably blame me.”

“No. I think it takes two people to get to where you are.”

Her eyes turn to me with a sharp expression. “No. It takes *two* to make a marriage work and only *one* to break it.”

I cross my arms over my chest, watching her drown her sorrows in wine. “Who do you blame for your marriage breaking?”

The red liquid sloshes against the glass as she refills it. As a matter of fact, she says, “Him.”

“Did you cheat on him?”

My mum always told me you can read people through their eyes. Mouths lie, but the eyes don't. When I look at her dark eyes, I don't see guilt in them. She seems reassured in herself.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he didn't care. He knew about the first man the second it happened but kept quiet until he could use it to hurt me.”

She sees *herself* as the victim even though she is the cheater.

“You are looking at me like I'm the devil.”

Maybe the devil's twin sister.

She puts her wine glass down for the first time and stares at me. “I tried to get his attention, but it didn't work. Men are possessive over their women. I thought if he knew I was looking elsewhere, he would come back to me. But he didn't.” She picks up her glass and takes a long sip. “He didn't care until the world almost found out. Only then did he call me out on it. *Only* then did he remind me I was his wife.”

As she laughs to herself, I try to find an excuse to leave. She isn't threatening, but she gets into my head.

Imagine how Xavier feels.

She stops to take a drink before continuing. "Are you in love with my husband?" Her eyes hone in on me – unwilling to move as she scrutinises the shock on my face at her blunt question.

I square my shoulders. "No. Why would you think that?"

Her tongue darts out slowly as she runs it along her bottom lip. "I wouldn't blame you. He's handsome and charming. He's very well endowed." There's a spark in her eyes as she reminisced about his cock.

"No," I bite out. "I'm not in love with him."

The smile is gone in an instant. "But you want to be? You want him all to yourself?"

She is fucking crazy. I have done nothing to make her think I'm after her husband.

"I have no interest in Xavier."

A pool of tears brims in her eyes. "You are naïve. My husband wants you all to himself. He looked at me the same way once upon a time. It was meant to be a fairytale, but it's nothing but an ugly tragedy." She looks around the room as she says, "This is the only room in the house I can freely be me. I don't have to be Emery Rivers. I'm just plain old orphan Emery. She doesn't have expectations forced on her. She isn't made to feel like a failure. She doesn't have a husband who

watches her every move.” Her gaze turns back to me. “This is the only room where he can’t hear and see everything.”

What?

My throat runs dry, and I feel violated. “The rest of the house has cameras?” I try to remember everything I have said and done in this house.

She nods. “Yeah. He watches everything. All the fucking time. I had to beg him to give me one space without an invasion of privacy.” She gestures to the room. “This shitty small room and the hallway outside is all I have. I used to come up here and lock myself in all day to piss him off. It would be the only time he would care about my existence. He hated not knowing what I was doing.”

I feign indifference as I ask, “What about the guesthouse?”

She waves me off. “No. He didn’t need cameras there because it was always locked. He put these in to make sure *I* was behaving.”

I make a mental note to check for cameras anyway.

I pull the half-empty wine bottle away when she reaches for it again. Taking away all the terrible things she has done, I can’t help but feel bad for her. She wants to feel loved after spending her whole life chasing it. She wants a place to belong, and I resonate with that. Being part of this life makes me miss the one I left behind. Since signing the contract, I feel like I have tried to meet everyone’s expectations and failed at

it. I wander the world with no safe space, no place to call home.

“You have to find a way to make things work in your marriage. You have a baby coming.”

Emery stares out the window as tears streak her cheeks. “I have no fight left in me,” she declares.

She doesn't look or speak to me after that.

12

WHEN THERE'S A LOUD knock at the door, I let Huxley in. He doesn't look happy to see me despite me doing him a favour tonight, one that might get me murdered if Xavier finds out.

“We're going to be late. Let's go.”

I grab my purse and follow him to his car.

A few minutes into the drive, Huxley gives me the run down for the hundredth time. “Just act normal. We're on a date. I need a few minutes with his phone. Find a way to start talking to the mistress. He won't engage with you straight away.”

I nod. “Yes, I know. I got this.”

“This is my only chance, sweetheart.”

I fight my smile at the returning nickname. His mask lapses at the unconscious slip. He doesn't let me call him out on it as he continues.

“I won’t be able to get close to him again because he’ll recognise me. Here,” he reaches into his pocket and tosses something at me.

I catch the diamond ring and wedding band before they can fall. “What’s this?”

He flashes his left hand in my direction. With a dry tone, he says, “Congratulations. We’re married.”

My laugh is soft as I slide the rings on. “Perfect fit. I’d ask how you know, but...”

“Don’t let me down, Mrs. Savannah Ray.”

I hate how good that sounds.



“Can I get you a drink to start with?”

“Two glasses of water,” he answers for us.

The waiter walks away, leaving me and Huxley to stare at one another. The restaurant is small but fancy. All the tables are cloaked with white fabric, and the waiters wear identical tuxedos. The staff move with a fluidity I haven’t seen before. The two tall candles set the mood for a romantic night. Around us, the sound of soft mumbles and clinking wine glasses fills the silence that sits between us.

“Where is your target?” I whisper.

“Not here yet.”

I like how his eyes scan me, taking in every inch of my skin. This black dress is one of my favourites. The fabric clings to me like a second skin – not obnoxiously revealing but letting admirers know there is something to desire underneath. Pregnancy has made my stomach bloat, but with the way Huxley is staring at me, I don't feel any less sexy. When his hazel eyes darken across the table, I want to climb into his lap and let him run his hands all over me.

I smile at him. “Who do you get your eyes from?”

He looks confused at the random question but smiles. “My father. How about you?”

“My mum. I assume so, seeing as I don't know my father.” I tilt my head and smile at him.

“Have you ever wanted to know who he is?”

I contemplate my answer. I know what he has done, and I hate him for it. He's a rapist; nothing will change that, even if he has changed or regrets his actions. But everyone deserves to know who they are, and DNA plays a big part.

“Sometimes. People see my almond-shaped eyes, long black hair and tan skin and are curious about my heritage. I don't have an answer for it. I don't know what health risks I have. So maybe I'd like to meet him to get those answers.” I shrug my shoulders. “I don't think I'd ever want a relationship with him, even if he is sorry.”

He unbuttons the top button of his shirt. “How often do you visit your mum?”

“Whenever I can. A couple times a week.” If he’s asking questions, so will I. “Are you close to your family?”

“Yes. What was your favourite childhood snack?”

“Ice cream with a handful of cereal. How many siblings do you have?”

“One. A sister. What colour was your childhood bedroom?”

And it continues. A back and forth of simple questions – ones that aren’t too personal but give an insight into who we are. I learn that Huxley is a family man. His parents are madly in love, and he would do anything to protect his younger sister, Hadley. His favourite colour is green, but he hates eating olives. His go-to meal is a burger, and he works out every day.

“Playtime is up,” he whispers as a middle-aged man and a young-looking woman sit beside us.

The starter I devoured churns in my stomach now that playful Huxley has vanished. It’s almost as if a switch has flipped, and he is tuned into every one of his senses and not me anymore.

We order our mains, and I think of a way to start a conversation with the stranger next to me. She is beautiful, and I wonder if she knows her date is dangerous. Huxley didn’t say as much, but why else would he be difficult to get close to? She clings to every word her date says. The gentleman looks nothing out of the ordinary.

“Excuse me,” I say, tapping her shoulder. “I was wondering where you got that dress from? I’ve been looking for

something like that for my sister's wedding."

She looks down at her pink sparkly dress that barely touches her thighs. Her eyes roll down the length of my long legs before smiling. "There's this boutique. It's quite expensive."

Under the table, I clench my fists at her obnoxious tone. "My husband doesn't mind. Do you, darling?"

At the mention of him, she diverts her gaze to Huxley. I don't miss the way her eyes linger on him for a few seconds too long. Her date doesn't seem too bothered about her wandering eye.

"Janie." She puts her hand out, offering him a handshake with a not-so-subtle seductive smile.

He smiles at her. "Alex," he lies smoothly. "And this is my wife, Lily."

"This is my boyfriend, Graham."

I have to physically bite down on my lips to stop my snort. The man of the hour looks up from his phone. My vagina curls up as he gives me a perverted smile. He doesn't hide his interest despite his *girlfriend* being sat opposite him.

"How did you two meet?" I ask, with a smile so sweet it could give someone diabetes.

She reaches over and takes his hand. "I slipped down some stairs and fell into him," she laughs. "Call it fate. How about you two?"

"Would you like to do the honours?"

Fuck. I hate him for throwing me under the bus.

“Childhood friends. I moved away, but this guy couldn’t forget about me. He waited for me, believing one day I’d return. He even took a vow of abstinence while we were apart,” I throw in at the end.

His eyes narrow. His words come out forced. “Anything for you.”

She gasps and feigns fainting. “Isn’t that so sweet, Graham?”

“How did you find one like her?” he jokes with Huxley.

His jaw ticks, and I take his hand to bring him back. “If I tell you, I’d have to kill you.” His stony tone is broken with a forced chuckle. “I think God made her just for me.”

I know this is all fake, but nobody told the swarm of butterflies in my stomach. They don’t stop fluttering as we look at one another.

“That ring is gorgeous!” she exclaims, taking my hand without permission. “How did you know she was the one?”

Huxley looks uncomfortable while I sit with a smug expression. I wonder how the unemotional man is going to say something nice.

“I spent my life alone. I never understood why people get attached. I didn’t crave someone until her. There was no one before, and I don’t believe there will be anyone after. So whatever time we have, I want to make the most of it.”

The softness in his voice matches the solemn look on his face. Maybe it's a lie, but something tells me it isn't. Nobody is that good of a liar.

Nothing about my time with Huxley has been sweet or loving. Most of the time has been spent with him being angry at me, sometimes with reason and other times not. But I've seen glimpses of the man he hides from the world. I can't understand why because he seems to have a normal family and upbringing. But I like that version. I like Huxley because he doesn't apologise for who he is. I envy that reassurance. I pretend to have it, but I long for it.

"You're fucked," Graham laughs. "Never let a woman into your head, or else you think with your cock, not your brain."

Janie looks disheartened at his words but plasters on a smile. "I think it's beautiful. Congratulations on finding true love."

"Thank you."

"How about you?" Graham says. "You love him enough to stay loyal?"

"Yes."

"Then you wouldn't mind joining me on the dance floor?"

Just as he says that, two large doors on the other side open, and the flock goes running. I look at Huxley, who shakes his head.

"Don't trust her?" he goads.

"Let's go," I say.

“*Sweetheart,*“ Huxley says with warning.

I smile at him. “We came to have some fun. Let’s do that, and then we can go.” I try to reassure him with my eyes, but he doesn’t look convinced. “Two songs. Six minutes. Can you be without me for that long?”

“Four minutes, absolutely maximum.”

I lean down and kiss his cheek. “I’ll be okay,” I whisper before taking Graham’s hand.

“If there is one scratch on her...” He doesn’t have to finish his threat.

Graham laughs. “Don’t worry. That’s not my kink.”

The upbeat dance music is not what I was expecting. I look around at the men and women, all elegantly dressed, and realise what this *dance* floor really is. Heads dip down, followed by the sound of cocaine being snorted. Cheers echo as the high forces sweaty bodies onto the dance floor. Grown men and women dance on one another like horny teenagers.

Oh fuck. I rub my belly. Sorry, little one. Please forgive me, and don’t ever tell your dad.

I pull Graham into the middle of the dance floor, ensuring he can’t see into the dining area. My moves are pathetic, but I don’t want to dance on this man who makes me feel sick. There’s something evil in his eyes as he fucks me with them.

“How tight is your pussy?” he murmurs into my ears.

I’m going to vomit.

“You’ll never know.” The words come out with force rather than as a tease.

His hands come around my waist and rest above my pubic bone. “If I had you, I’d never let you out of the house. I would fuck you every day.”

His cold hands can be felt through my dress. He inhales my scent, and I fight the gag. Goosebumps raise in a terror alert as he holds me in place and thrusts his hips against my ass. I look around at the other dancers, but they’re all too drunk and drugged to notice I am one second away from hurling all over the floor.

Two hands pull at my arms and out of his embrace. “Four minutes, sweetheart.” Huxley practically drags me off the dance floor.

“Your wife is a wonderful dancer!” he calls out after us with a laugh.

But I’m already running out of there. The night air does little to ease the queasiness. The second we round the corner, I vomit and don’t stop until I’m retching.

He hands me a napkin, which I use to wipe away any residue. “What that pregnancy or...”

I shake my head. “Let’s go. I need to shower.”

Huxley helps me into the car before climbing into the driver’s seat. He stares at me for a few moments before speaking. “I would have killed him if he hurt you.”

My fingers twist into a nervous knot. “He didn’t.”

He offers his palm between us. There's an overwhelming sadness as I place my hand in his. Huxley threads his fingers through mine and squeezes.

"You're trembling," he states.

I've danced with men as disgusting as Graham, but I've never felt like this.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

Huxley lays a gentle kiss on my hand. "Never apologise for being human."

I shake my head as tears fall. "I'm being ridiculous, crying over nothing." I clear my throat. "Let's go."

"No," he murmurs. "Let it out, sweetheart."

So, I do. In the silence of the car, I cry to myself.

Except, I'm not alone. Huxley holds my hand tight and doesn't let go.

HUXLEY HUFFS FOR THE tenth time when the crunch from my crisp echoes in the room. To purposefully wind him up, I shove a handful in and chew louder.

“Is it your lunch break, Savannah?” he asks.

I check the time on my computer. “It’s only ten thirty,” I point out.

“Exactly,” he growls. “I’m not paying you to eat.”

“*You’re* not the one paying me,” I remind him with a smile.

“I hope you choke on those crisps,” he mumbles.

My loud chortle startles him. “I bet you wish it was your cock I was choking on.”

Having grabbed his attention, he looks up from his laptop and glares at me. “We’re not doing this.”

Resting my feet on my desk, I expose my long legs to him. “Doing what?” I ask, putting on my best innocent face.

The look of hunger vanishes when Xavier barges through the door. He frowns at my posture. “This is an office, Miss Hayes.”

I rub my flat belly. “Baby feels more comfortable this way.”

The joke doesn’t unknot his features. “Please sit appropriately.”

Huxley smirks in my direction, and when Xavier turns away, I salute my middle finger at him.

“Very mature,” Huxley remarks before focusing on Xavier. “Everything okay?”

It only takes five seconds to zone out of their business jargon. Instead, I skim-read Elliot’s texts. I don’t know how many times I can ask him to leave me alone. I decide the best way to get the message across is to ignore him, so I do.

“Do you need anything?” Xavier asks before he exits.

“A car? A time machine so I can skip to the end of the pregnancy?”

His chuckle is soft and fills me with warmth. “My meeting finishes at six, but I’ll leave earlier if you want.”

“Six is fine.”

The rest of my morning is spent organising Huxley’s calendar, getting his lunch, and listening to him aggressively type. By mid-afternoon, I feel a headache coming on and my morning sickness kicking in.

After my fifth trip to the bathroom to dry heave, I slump onto my desk. My body is aching, and I am tired. Hidden behind my computer screen, I allow myself a quick ten-minute nap.



“Are you dead?”

I open my eyes to see Huxley standing above me. “Hopefully.” I sit up. “What do you want now?”

He tosses a folder at me. “Thirty copies. Now.”

I nod and stand up.

“You’ll be making up the thirty minutes you spent sleeping,” he warns as I exit the office.

I ignore him and hobble over to the copier. I make a mental note to buy flats because heels and pregnancy do not bode well. With thirty fresh copies in hand, I walk back to the office. A dizzy spell hits me, and I hold onto my desk to stop myself from facepalming the floor. I wait for the feeling to pass before handing them over to him.

His gaze burns into my back as I shuffle over to my desk and fall into my seat again. I rub my temples to stop the assault on my brain, but to no avail.

“Let’s go,” he huffs.

“Where?”

“I’m taking you home. You’re no good to me in this state.”

All I want to do is curl up in my bed so I don’t protest. He doesn’t speak to me the entire way there, but like last time, he exits the car with me and walks me to the front door. I thank him for the ride, expecting him to leave, but he loiters.

“Do you need anything?” he asks awkwardly.

“A cuddle buddy?” I joke.

Huxley rolls his eyes but pushes past me into my home. He plonks himself onto my bed.

“Aren’t you going to get back to the office?”

He waves his phone at me. “Magic of technology. I’ll work from here until Xavier or Emery are home.”

Shit. “I need to call him and tell him I’m home, or he’ll look for me.”

“I’ll text him. Go to sleep,” he orders.

Stripping into my underwear, I match his burning stare. “Does this bring back memories?” I tease.

His throat constricts as he swallows hard. “Go to sleep, sweetheart.”

I climb into my unmade bed and smile. *Huxley is a softie at heart.* I fall asleep with a ridiculous smile on my face.



My eyes slowly peel open as sleep evades me. I'm confused as a pair of amused golden orbs stare down at me.

“You comfy there?”

Only then do I notice my head is comfortably lodged in his lap. Instead of feeling mortified, I smirk at him. “Very much so. Want to have some fun?” I whisper.

“I think you get a thrill out of breaking the rules.”

I sit up and straddle him. “What fun are rules if you don't break them?” I ever-so-lightly rock against him. “Let your hair down for once.” I grab and pull on his bun, dying to see his locks loose and free.

He grabs my hands, stopping me from going any further. “Don't ever touch my hair.” The serious look on his face makes me laugh.

“What can I touch then?” I playfully pout.

His fingers skim over my waist before trailing up my body and neck. He pulls my hair out of the ponytail. His fingers run through my hair before gathering it to one side. The tip of his nose grazes the length of my neck. “How about you show me those stripper moves?”

I undo his tie and the two top buttons of his shirt. “You have too many clothes on.”

He grabs my wrist, stopping me from undressing him any further. Arrogance is laced into his smile. “You have to earn what is underneath.”

“I like a man that plays hard to get.” I lean in so our lips barely brush. “It makes breaking him just that much more *fun*.” I climb off his lap to grab my phone. I pick one of my favourite slow R&B songs, put it up to maximum volume and toss it onto the bed.

Huxley sits up against the headboard. His eyes darken as I slowly prowl towards him. He meets my seductive stare as I climb back onto his lap. I start slow and tease him enough to get him excited but not enough to satisfy him. I close my eyes, having missed the feeling of dancing.

He grabs my hips, forcing me to move faster against him, but I push his hands away. This time, he doesn't stop me when I undo his buttons. My fingers lazily graze over his bulge before creeping up to his belt and swiftly undoing it with one hand.

“Fuck, that was hot,” he compliments.

I pull his trousers down the length of his legs before tossing them to the floor. I turn around so my back is flush against his front. My insides fill with lust as our most sensitive parts brush against each other. My moan vibrates through both of us.

“Your panties are soaked,” he groans. He palms me over my underwear, and I feel my juices seep through. Huxley gently pushes me forward so I'm on all fours. His palm comes down on each ass cheek. “One of these days, I'm going to fuck that ass.” He rubs his thumb over my asshole, and I giggle.

“Not my kink, sunshine.”

“Take it all off,” he growls.

There’s a thrill with him that no man has ever made me feel.

I throw my underwear at him. “Your souvenir.”

He brings it to his nose and takes a deep breath, filling my cheeks with warmth. “Smell delicious.”

He removes the rest of his clothes, so we are both as naked as the day we were born. I rush to grab a condom and feel weak when I see him stroking himself. The action is so filthily ungodly that I want to get on my knees for him.

“Get on the bed and spread your legs, sweetheart.” I follow his direction without thinking. He rubs his palm over my womanhood. Using two fingers, he spreads me open. “Such a perfect pussy,” he murmurs.

I don’t have the chance to say anything because his head disappears between my legs, and his tongue begins its assault. My legs wrap around his neck, putting him in a headlock and cutting off his oxygen supply. The way he is devouring me, I think he would happily die like this.

The music blaring from my phone is interrupted by my phone ringing. Ignoring it, I pull on his hair, earning a sexy moan. Immediately after the ringtone stops, it begins again.

In the haze of lust, I panic something has happened to my mum. I unlock my legs as I reach for it. Drunk on desire, Huxley looks at me confused.

“Shit. It’s Xavier! Why is he calling me?”

Huxley pushes two fingers into me, shrugging. “I don’t know.”

I show him the screen at the third incoming call. “Did you text him?”

More focused on his fingers bringing me to my first orgasm of the day, he says, “I forgot.”

“He’s going to be waiting for me.”

“Answer it,” he smirks.

“No!” I hiss.

His thumb presses against my sensitive bundle of nerves. “You wanted to suck me dry in the office while I called him,” he reminds me. “Let’s see if you’ve got the balls.” He stares down at me. His eyes are wild and controlled all at the same time. He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth when I convulse around his fingers. “Answer it,” he orders.

My deep breath comes out as a whimper when he curls his fingers inside me. “Hello?” I breathe into the phone.

“Where are you? Are you okay?” His words are rushed and panicked.

I pull my lips together to stop my moan from slipping out when Huxley’s tongue meets his fingers. “Sorry. I was...” I cover my mouth as my legs begin to twitch. “Sleeping,” I eventually finish.

“Where are you?” he asks.

There's a squelching sound as his fingers thrust in and out. Every movement makes me wetter, and I pray Xavier can't hear it through the phone.

"Home. I wasn't feeling good." My core tightens, letting me know I am about to fall entirely apart.

"Is the baby okay?"

Huxley looks up at me, and I lose it at the look in his eyes. He looks like a sex God, and it's all it takes for me to cover my mouth and silently come over his fingers. His tongue darts out to lap up my wetness and elongate my orgasm.

"Savannah?" Xavier snaps on the phone. "Are you okay?"

My limbs fall limp as I come down from my high. "Yes. Sorry, I was daydreaming. I'm fine. I was tired, so Huxley brought me home."

"You should have told me," he scolds. "I would have left early."

"Sorry," I squeak. "I completely forgot."

"Do you need anything?"

Just as I go to reply, Huxley pushes his tip into me. "Fuck, that's tight," he quietly moans.

My eyes widen, and I hold my breath to see if Xavier heard anything. Huxley is focused on pushing his length painfully slowly into me. Just as I open my mouth to say something, his entire length fills me, swallowing any words on the tip of my

tongue. My eyes squeeze shut as I adjust to his size. I rock slowly with him until Xavier repeats his question.

“No. Huxley took care of it,” I say, smirking at him while he slowly eases in and out.

“Is he still there?”

“No,” I lie. “He dropped me off and left. Is he not at the office?”

“No. I’ll be home soon. Text me if you need anything.”

“Okay. Bye.” I don’t wait for a reply before I hang up and throw my phone onto the floor. “I hate you.”

He grins. “But you love my cock.”

I press my foot against his chest and push him away from me. “My turn to be in control.” I push him onto the bed and straddle him; this time, nothing separates us except the condom. I slowly lower myself onto his shaft and moan from the sensations burning all over my body. I push him down until he is lying flat on his back. Pressing my hands against his chest, I lean down and ride him how I have wanted since I first saw him.

Huxley watches in awe and lust as I bring myself closer to the edge. His hands go to my waist, guiding my movements. “Back and forth,” he instructs.

His hands rock me back and forth, and the sensation is explosive. While filled to the hilt with his dick, my clit rubs against his pelvic bone. When his lips close over my sensitive nipples, I let my body collapse on him, riding out my orgasm.

His hand runs up and down my back, as I come down from the only high I need.

“That was so good,” I mumble.

He pulls my loose hair in a fist, forcing me to look at him. “I’m not done.” He stands up, still buried inside me.

I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he walks forward until my back hits the bookshelf.

He holds me in place as he slowly thrusts in and out. The slow movements drive me crazy. I lean my head against the bookshelf and enjoy the slower pace. When I look at Huxley, he watches me as if he has never seen me before.

“You’re quite exquisite, sweetheart.”

The smile slowly spreads across my face. I tighten my arms around his neck and lean my forehead against his.

“I’ve never wanted someone so much before,” he admits. “Most women won’t even get a second glance, but *you*...” He moans as my walls clench around him. “What is it about you that makes me crave you?”

He doesn’t let me answer because his lips attach to mine. The kiss is not slow and loving. *No*. It is filled with a hunger we both reek of.

Huxley is right. I have always enjoyed sex, but I haven’t wanted anyone the way I want him. I could have him every minute of every day, and it still wouldn’t be enough.

His sucks on my lower lip, and I enjoy the sting of pain. “My balls are about to explode.” He pulls out of me and places me back on the ground. “Turn around and hold on.”

I grab either side of the bookshelf and part my legs. Huxley adjusts me so I am slightly bent over. He spits onto his fingers before rubbing them against my entrance. Before I can enjoy it, he thrusts in, filling me whole once again.

There is no slow pace anymore. He is brutal and ruthless with his movements. Pulling on my hair, my head falls back, giving him the access he needs to suck on my neck.

“Not yet, Hux. I’m almost there,” I beg.

“Say please,” he pants.

Any self-respect flew out the second I climbed onto his lap. “Please.”

He growls into my ear, and he pounds even harder. The bookshelf shakes as it takes the brunt of our sexual dalliance.

“Come for me, sweetheart.” His hand comes round to my stomach before trailing down and rubbing my sensitive nub. That’s all it takes from me to scream his name repeatedly.

“That’s it. Scream my name,” he grunts as he joins me in oblivion. His arms wrap around my torso as he holds me in place, enjoying his release.

I open my eyes and breathe a laugh. My body is sweaty and more exhausted than before.

Huxley pulls out and ties the condom. “A few more sessions, and your manners will be right where I need them.”

I don't reply to his teasing tone. My eyes stay focused on the wall in front of me. Rage consumes the high I feel as I lean forward and stare at the small hole in the wall. I brush my finger over it, hoping the plaster just cracked and isn't what I think it is.

But I know I am right when I feel the smooth glass of a camera lens.

I DOUBLE-CHECK THAT ALL my necessities are packed into my weekend bag. I'll have to come back for the rest of my belongings another day, but I *need* to get out of this madhouse. On the one hand, Emery is a bubbling alcoholic with attachment issues, and her husband is a stalker with raging, controlling tendencies.

Once I confront the pervert, I will ask Mia to let me stay with her until I find somewhere else. *Anywhere but here.*

My long strides to the main house oozes confidence. My jaw is tight, my eyes hardened, and my chest strong.

I don't care what he says.

“Good morning, Savannah.” He smiles.

It takes everything not to gouge his fucking eyes out. “We need to talk,” I demand.

He looks at his watch. “We need to leave for the office. Can this wait until then?”

“No,” I snarl.

His face is a picture of innocence, but I don't buy it. “What is this about?”

“You know exactly what it's about. Before I tell Emery what a creep you are, you better sit down with me. *Now.*”

The look of confusion stays plastered on his face the entire way to his home office. He opens the door for me, and I push past him.

Xavier twists the blinds open before sitting on the small couch and gesturing to the seat beside him.

I opt to stand next to the door for a quick escape. I start my argument strong. “I want out of this contract. I don't care about anything else. As I'm already pregnant, I will carry the baby to term *on my own* and hand the baby over, or we can terminate, and you can find another target.”

The sadness on his face is so believable. “What are you talking about? What happened between yesterday and today?”

I shake my head in disbelief. “So, you're going with the clueless angle?” I nod my head. “Okay. Let's play that game. You and your wife are fucking crazy! This sham of a marriage, her alcoholism, you hating her but choosing to have a baby with her... oh and your fucking *cameras.*”

There is recognition in his eyes as I spit the last word at him. “She told you about the cameras.” He doesn't look as panicked or worried as I thought he would be. Rather, he looks *distressed*. “Let me explain. I didn't have a choice. She

would call me at work and threaten to kill herself if I didn't come home right then. You have no idea how many times I broke every speed limit to get back here only to see her sipping her wine as if she didn't scare me like that."

I hate that it seems somewhat plausible. Emery craves his attention. She cheated on him just so he would pay attention to her. *But would she lie about killing herself?*

Not only that, but he automatically presumed I was talking about *this* house. Why wouldn't he assume I was talking about the guesthouse if he was guilty of watching me?

"Why are there cameras in the guesthouse? She told me you never installed them because you locked the doors," I ask, controlling my tone. I don't want him to know he has cast a doubt.

He looks confused but then shakes his head. "I forgot about those," he mutters, more to himself than me. When he continues, his eyes latch onto mine. "Those aren't even on. Savannah. She doesn't know about them because I never told her."

"Why?"

"I built that guesthouse for Emery because she begged me to. She wanted to start a business and asked for a workspace. It didn't even finish being built before she told me she was *testing* me. She wanted to see if I loved her enough to build it."

"Why would she do that?"

Feeling frustrated, he stands up and runs his hand over his face. “Because this is what she does! She plays mind games. After I built it, she would hide there for days without coming out. I had no idea if she was dead or alive.” He looks lost in his thoughts as he relives the distraught. He swallows hard before he continues. “So, one day, I installed the cameras without telling her. But *only* so I could make sure she was okay. I didn’t tell her because she would have hidden somewhere else. She would sit and drink non-stop for days. One day, she passed out and started choking on her own vomit. I locked the doors that day and told her she couldn’t go there anymore. I turned the cameras off that day. I can prove it to you.”

If he is lying, how could he come up with such a convincing story on the spot? It sounds so believable. But that doesn’t mean he hasn’t been watching. He could have listened to my private calls, watched me sleep, get dressed, and have sex with Huxley. The thought makes me feel nauseous.

But if he did watch all that, would he have kept quiet? Emery said he knew about the cheating but never said anything. Is that what is happening here? From my experience, Xavier is too controlling. He turned up at Chris’s club when I broke that clause.

No. He would have said something.

I stand taller. “Prove it.”

He looks confident as he powers up his laptop. I watch over his shoulder as he logs in, passes all the security checks, and

loads the live feeds. My stomach plummets when I see every corner of the house appear on his screen. He doesn't linger on the screen for long. Instead, he pulls up a different menu and clicks on the tab labelled *Em's Office*. I wait for something to happen, but the screen remains blank.

“See, they're off.”

“How do I know you didn't turn it off yesterday?”

His fingers move fast until he pulls up a page of coding. He highlights a line. “Look at the date, Savannah. The cameras were turned off more than a year before you moved in. I can do many things, but I can't rewrite these codes. It's built into the security system.” He swivels his chair around, so he is facing me. “Is that enough proof?”

I want to say no. I want to tell him he is lying, but he's given me a reasonable answer. “For now.”

“You came in here ready to walk out,” he says. “It's like you're looking for a reason to leave me.”

I can't face the sadness on his face. It's making it hard to hold onto my anger. “How can you expect me to stay when you're married?”

“And if I wasn't?”

The question leaves me stumped. What would I do? Huxley is fun but can't even commit to a friends-with-benefits situation. With Huxley, it's purely sexual. Xavier, on the other hand, it's more profound. He makes me feel safe. He looks at

me as though he can really see me. I've never had that, and I want it.

“You'll never leave her.” As painful as it is to say, I know it's true.

“But what if I did?”

His question brings hope to my heart. Hope is equally beautiful as it is destructive.

“Until then, I won't risk my heart. I'm not the pawn in this game of chess.”



I stare at the doctor in disbelief. “And when were you going to tell me?” I shout.

Xavier holds my hand as I stand up to throttle the stupid man. “Calm down, Savannah.”

When my mum's care home called me for an emergency meeting, I was expecting bad news – maybe her medication needed changing again, or worse, she had hurt herself. Nothing could have prepared me for news of stage three blood cancer.

Dr. Grange gives me a sad smile. “I understand this is a difficult time for you. We will continue to give your mum the best care possible.”

I force away my tears. “How did you miss the signs? I never would have missed the signs! I never should have put her in a

home.” I finally let my tears fall as I lean back in my seat.

Xavier wraps his arm around me. “We’re going to get through this. I promise. She’s going to be fine.”

“She’s dying,” I sob. My mum may not be like most mothers, but she’s the only family I have. She’s been through enough – how is this fair?

“Her oncologist would like to meet with you to discuss her treatment options. Nobody has lost hope.”

The rest of the meeting is filled with information being thrown at me. When it comes to an end, I practically run to my mum’s room. Her smile is bright as I walk over to her.

“Savvy.”

I wrap my arms around her tight. “How are you?”

Whatever she was about to say fails to be voiced. Her eyes are cold as Xavier lingers in the doorway. Unlike most people, my mum isn’t enthralled by Xavier’s presence. Instead, she scowls at him and pushes me behind her.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Phoebe,” he says. “My name is Xavier Rivers.”

My mum ignores him. She turns to me with a wild look. Her eyes move to my stomach before looking back at him. “You’re carrying the blood of the devil.”

Surprise renders me silent. I haven’t told her I was pregnant yet. I shake my head. “He’s not the devil. He’s a good man.”

“They’re all bad, Savvy. It’s in their blood. He’s going to suck you dry.”

I shoot Xavier an apologetic look. “He’s married.”

She backs away from me. “It doesn’t matter. His spawn is going to kill you from the inside out. That’s what happened to me. The devil’s spawn grew inside me.”

Whatever remained of my heart, shatters at her words. My mum always made it clear she never wanted me. I was a living reminder of what they did to her. But the way she’s looking at me in disgust hurts.

“It was me that grew inside you,” I cry.

“It was the devil, and now he’s turned all my blood bad. It’s all bad,” she mutters.

She backs onto her armchair until her legs are tucked underneath her, and she stares out the window and into her delusions.

My feet stay rooted to the ground as I stare at her with heartache pricking my heart. I can’t move. I can’t speak. My tears silently stream down my cheek.

Xavier gently places his hand on my shoulder and forces me to face him. His arms embrace me, and I fall into them. Just like my mother, I live in my delusion; maybe someday, somebody will love me entirely. And if that day comes, I hope they hold me as tight as Xavier is.

IF THERE'S SOMETHING I'VE come to learn about Emery Rivers, it's that she loves to host parties. She has been chattering about this Christmas lunch since September, and I knew there was no getting out of it.

I spent the morning with my mum. She was happy today and close to lucid. She loved the new jumper I bought her but was more excited about her Christmas dinner. She didn't mention the pregnancy today, and I didn't want to ruin her mood by telling her about the upcoming scan.

"How are you feeling? Has the morning sickness passed?" Emery asks.

This might be the first time she is dressed in colour. Her green dress is still true to her elegant style.

"Yes. I should be good to go."

"Christmas without alcohol is going to suck," Francesca laughs as she walks over and Emery leaves.

“This lunch is going to suck without alcohol,” I correct her.
“Who are some of these people?”

“I don’t know. I only came because Xavier made me.”

“Why?” I laugh.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe because he knew you would be bored without me.”

I know she’s joking, but perhaps there is some truth. I couldn’t think of any other reason why he would force her to come when everyone wants to spend the day with family.

With that thought in mind, I excuse myself and walk towards Huxley. I perch on the arm of the chair he has had his ass glued to since he walked in.

“What does Christmas look like in the Ray household?”

He smiles up at me. Today he is dressed in a jumper, jeans and trainers. I try not to fuck him with my eyes, but it is impossible because he looks divine. Most men look frumpy in a woollen jumper, but he makes it look fashionable.

“Food, games, and more food. But my folks are on holiday in Hawaii this year, so my sister is coming to London.” The scowl on his face is amusing.

“You seem like such wonderful company, sunshine.”

His arm subtly wraps around my waist before trailing down to my ass. “The sun could do with spending time with the moon.”

I can't help but laugh at his pathetic attempt at a pun. My smile vanishes when I remember the cameras that are watching us. I shuffle away from his hold but offer a small smile. "Not here."

He looks at the people around us and nods. "Want to meet at yours in five minutes?"

"Make it two," I mutter as I hurry off.

Thankfully, no one stops me to ask where I am rushing off to. As expected, Huxley is prompt with his timing. Our lips attach the second the door closes. I close the curtains while he kisses every inch of bare skin he can access.

The sound of his zipper coming down fuels my libido, and I rush to the bathroom to get a condom. He follows behind me and snatches it from me. He bends me over the bathroom sink before rolling the latex over his stiff shaft.

"Hold on, sweetheart. It's going to be hard and fast."

I grab onto either side of the sink. The anticipation is killing me. It has only been a few days since we last fucked, but my body craves him. I want him to wrap his large body over mine and take it as his.

In one thrust, he is deep inside me. His guttural moan is heavenly as my walls grip around him in a tight vice.

"One day, I'm going to fuck you raw," he promises.

Today, there is no teasing or playfulness. It's rushed and chaotic. My dress is hitched to my waist, and my underwear is pushed to the side. I usually love having his bare chest pressed

against me, but right now, I don't care that our clothes create a barrier between us.

It only takes five minutes for my knees to give in. Huxley holds me in place as his movement becomes sloppy, and he finds release.

After he pulls out, I wipe myself clean and pull my dress down. He ties the condom and throws it into the trash. With his pants pulled back up, we exit the guesthouse and return to the main house.

"Want to save me from this horror show?" I joke as we enter the kitchen.

"I don't think we're at meeting the family stage, sweetheart."

I didn't mean it like that, but his laugh that follows makes me feel foolish. He's not laughing *with* me; he's laughing at the idea of introducing me to them.

"I don't plan on ever being at that stage with you, sunshine," I fire back.

He looks annoyed at my response. "Glad we're on the same page." He saunters off, leaving me wondering what got his knickers in a twist.

As we sit around the table, I eye the feast that Emery cooked. Everything looks and smells delicious.

"Fran was going to sit there."

Huxley shrugs. "You snooze, you lose."

"She's in the bathroom," I explain.

“Not my problem.” He slides into the seat next to me and begins plating his food.

When she joins us, I mouth *sorry*, and she winks at me in return. It feels weird having Huxley on one side and Xavier at the head of the table on the other. Emery sits opposite me and offers to plate my food.

“Don’t worry. I got it,” Huxley butts in. The plate he puts in front of me has enough food to feed a family.

“What the hell?”

“You’re eating for two. And you look like you’ve worked up an appetite.”

“I hate you, sunshine.”

While Emery smiles at our interaction, Xavier watches us with wary. I offer him a smile, which earns me a ghost of a smile.

The conversation is mundane and as *beige* as everything in this house. The gentleman opposite Huxley makes small talk with me. His attempts to charm me are less than subtle. He is handsome, but not in the way Huxley is. He doesn’t have eyes that fill me with a hurricane of emotions or lips I want pressing against me.

“Are you single?”

I’ll give the guy kudos for being so brazen.

I feel both the grey and amber eyes trained on me, waiting for my response. With both of them sitting on the edge of their

seats, I realise, for once, I have all the power.

“Why do you ask?”

Under the table, a hand grips my thigh, but I push Huxley’s hold off me.

“I’d like to take you out sometime.”

“Is that how you court a woman, Christian?” Xavier interrupts.

“What century are you living in? Women don’t want to be courted. We want to be fucked.”

Emery chokes on her wine at my crude words. Xavier looks hurt. Christian looks pleased. But Huxley’s glare burns through the side of my head and melts my brain. His hand is back on my thigh, and his grip is tighter than before.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Christian laughs.

“I hope you’re not as holy as your name. I like a sinful affair,” I tease.

“Most women still want to be courted,” Xavier argues. “They want romantic gestures and dates.”

“Men only do that as part of the chase when all you really want is to tie the woman to your bed and fuck her senseless. Wouldn’t you agree, Emery?”

She side-eyes her husband. “Yes. Once they have her, they only see her as a baby maker.”

“Case and point.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Christian is too eager now that he thinks I’ll fuck him. “I can pick you up.”

This time, Huxley is the one to intrude. “Savannah, did you arrange that meeting with Mr Sharman?”

I smile to myself. He knows I booked that meeting. His grip will leave a bruise if he holds on any longer.

“Yes. And you’re being rude by interrupting my conversation,” I scold.

Before I can speak, he cuts me off. “Did you tell Mr Sharman I don’t share my business?” The cold look on his face makes me shudder.

He doesn’t want me enough to meet his family, but he also doesn’t want me to find someone willing to take that step. I know that person isn’t Christian, but the principle remains.

I stare at the desperation on his face, but it solidifies my thoughts. I’m done letting either of these men pick and choose when they want me. If Huxley wants me to himself, he needs to man up and commit.

“Yes, I did. But he wanted me to remind you that right now, the business isn’t yours. He can do whatever he wants.”



The cold air makes me shiver, but I don’t want to move. I watch as the last of the guests leave the premises.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

I jump when Emery appears behind me silently. She imitates my actions and leans against the balcony.

The lunch ended twenty minutes ago. It may only be 6 p.m., but I'm exhausted. I want to change into some comfy clothes and climb into bed. There is a heavy weight on my chest – a bout of sadness I can't explain. Breathing feels difficult, and unsolicited tears brim in my eyes.

I tell myself it's because this is my first Christmas without Mia and Elliot. They would always come and fulfil the Christmas tradition I had with my mum.

But a part of me knows it was Huxley's departure without a goodbye. He didn't acknowledge me after the table encounter. It's irrational, but I want him to beg me not to look at someone else. I want him to tell me he sees me as more than a quick fuck.

“I'm just tired. Where are you going?”

“The ladies are gathering at the club. Why don't you join us? I would love to introduce you!”

Just then, Xavier joins us, and I beg him with my eyes to get me out of it.

“It's been a long day. Plus, all you do is get ridiculous on wine.”

The dig is less than subtle, but Emery ignores it. “Very well. Get some rest.” She walks down the few steps and looks at me again. “May I offer you some advice?”

I nod.

“Men can’t see what is right in front of them; they need you to spell it out.” She gives me a knowing smile. “Call Ray before the night is over. God knows you are a good match.”

I don’t know what to say or how to react, so I give her a short nod. Once she climbs into the car, I turn to Xavier.

He grins at me. “*We* are going on an adventure.” He takes my hand in his and leads me back into the warmth of the house. He locks the front door and carries on to the kitchen and garden. When he stops at my front door, I glare at him.

“This is the adventure?”

Despite my attitude, his childlike smile doesn’t go anywhere. “Okay, maybe it is more of a journey back.”

The cold air makes me shiver, so I reach into my bag for my key but can’t find it.

“Looking for this?” He holds my key in front of me. “I asked Francesca to swipe it so I could sort this out.” He doesn’t elaborate further. He opens the door and lets me in. Everything looks the same until I peer into my transformed bedroom.

A large fort has been assembled in the middle of the room. Fairy lights are draped across the top and sides.

A lump forms in my throat, and the tears I’ve spent the day holding back fall at the sweet surprise.

“How did you know?”

“I asked Mia if you had any Christmas rituals, and she told me you and your mum would make a fort and eat pizza bagels

and ice cream.”

Before I can stop myself, I throw my arms around his neck and hug him tight. “Thank you,” I whisper.

His hold on me starts loose before he closes the gap. He lets out a sigh of relief at my positive reaction.

We climb under the fort and sit on the floor. Seeing him seated on the floor is odd, but at least he wears everyday attire, not formalwear. He hands me a warm pizza bagel, and I moan at the familiar taste.

Xavier stares at it with a puzzled face. “Why pizza bagels?”

“My mum was never able to make a proper Christmas dinner, so it was on me. At nine, all I could use was the toaster and grill,” I laugh. “She loved it and was proud I could care for myself when she couldn’t. Every year after that, it stuck. Well, until she was placed in a home.”

He looks at me as if I’m a mythical creature he can’t believe is real. “And the ice cream?”

“I have a sweet tooth. So does your baby, by the way.”

At the mention of his baby, he snaps out of his daze. “I think it’s sweet. You’re a good daughter, Savannah. I hope you don’t doubt that.”

“Thank you.”

We continue to eat in silence, but I enjoy it. When you’ve spent your whole life in chaos, you appreciate the silence. I’ve spent my life fighting for my mum and myself. I’ve had to

scream to be heard, so when silence comes, I find peace in it. The peace doesn't last for long before Xavier breaks it.

“Merry Christmas.” He digs into his pocket and hands me car keys. “It’s a BMW 8 Series Coupé.”

My brain struggles to comprehend the extravagant gift. How rich do you have to be to buy someone a *car* for Christmas?

“I’m not taking that,” I finally say.

He forces the key into my hand. “Don’t let my money go to waste. I bought it just for you.”

“*Why?*”

Xavier’s smile is breathtaking. The blue in his eyes brightens, and his lips curl into a perfect grin. “I asked what you wanted, and you said a car or a time machine. I’m good with technology, but not that good. And now you can get yourself wherever you want without relying on me.”

My heart swells in appreciation for the man. It could have been any cheap car, and I’d still feel overwhelmed with joy. Because it isn’t the gift that makes me smile; it’s because he *listened*. He silently observed and knew I needed some freedom back.

I return his smile. “Thank you.”

His thumb brushes over my knuckles. “You have to put the petrol in,” he jokes. “You can even drive it to your date with Christian.”

My nose crinkles in disgust. “I’m not actually going to go out with him.”

“Does Ray know that?”

I shrug, feigning indifference. “He’s probably worried I might spend more than five minutes thinking about anything besides my job.”

“It’s more than that.”

“To who? You or him?” I hold his stare. “Say it, Xavier. You were jealous.”

I don’t know why I want to hear him admit it. Maybe it’s to make myself feel better after Huxley’s cold departure. Xavier hasn’t shied away from his feelings, even if he doesn’t act on them; in the same way, I haven’t hidden my raw attraction to him. Since the day we met, I felt a physical pull towards Xavier, and every small or big gesture only intensifies it.

He surprises me when he says, “Yes. I felt like I was burning.”

Why can’t Huxley be like that? Or is it because he doesn’t like me, only my body?

“What does that change?” His voice drops, and the sadness I’m becoming familiar with returns. “I’ve had this burn inside me ever since I met you. Every time I see you with Ray, it gets stronger.”

“There’s nothing between me and him,” I half-lie.

“What does that change?” he repeats.

That heavy weight is back as I'm unable to give him the answer he wants. It doesn't change anything. Whether I go on a date with Christian or Huxley, nothing changes because he is still married.

"I've spent my whole life trying to be enough. My heart is in the right place, even when I can't explain myself," I begin. "People misunderstand me because I can't articulate what's in my heart. I say things without thinking and am too stubborn for my own good. I'm not going to change the world or cure cancer. But I want to leave this world having done *one good* thing. Just one."

I rub my belly, which has life growing inside. I look back at him as I continue. "This is my chance to do that. Please don't make me ruin it. Part of me knows that *we* would feel right. If there was no ring on that first day, I wouldn't have stopped it from happening. But there is, so we can't."

"Even if my marriage has become a piece of paper?"

"Yes. For two reasons." I lift one finger. "One. This baby is real and deserves a chance to have a normal family. God knows it was all I wanted as a child." I lift a second finger. "And two. You would hate yourself because whether you hate her or not, you took a vow to stand by her."

"She destroyed those vows."

"Yet you chose to stay."

Xavier shuffles closer and takes my face in his hands. His nose runs along the bridge of mine. My eyes close from how

intimate it feels. His breath lightly fans over my lips.

“I would have left if I knew you existed.”

My hands close over his as I allow myself a moment to feel his love, no matter how wrong it is. “We can’t,” I whisper. I pull his hands off my face and stare at the rejection in his eyes. “No matter how much I want to.”

Xavier kisses the back of my hands. “Please don’t leave me.”

I give him a sad smile. “Leave to go where? I have no place to call home and nobody that belongs to me.”

Loneliness is a scary thing. People speak of loneliness as if it’s only a physical thing. But to *feel* loneliness is daunting. It’s a cloud that follows you everywhere. You can be in a room full of people but feel as if you are alone. You can laugh and smile but feel empty inside. That is all I have known my whole life.

With a look of conviction, he says, “You have me.”

Xavier is probably the only person who sees me for *me*, but there is one glaring problem.

I let go of his hands. “You’re not mine,” I remind him.

EMERY GLARES AT HER husband as he hands me his copy of the scan. Even with her eyes narrowed in our direction, I smile at the little blob. It felt surreal hearing the heartbeat. Everything feels real now. I caress my stomach and once again promise to protect this baby.

Thankfully, Dr. Roe confirmed a single pregnancy. The baby is as healthy as can be at six weeks. Emery cried with joy while Xavier quietly thanked me. It was the first time I realised that even if they aren't one unit, they will love this baby more than anything.

“A reminder of at least one good thing you've done,” he mutters.

I give him a tight hug. “Thank you.”

The cold tone of Emery's question has me jerking away from him. “When did you buy a car?”

“It's not our concern what she does with her money,” Xavier responds.

Knowing she would fly off the handle, I don't tell her the truth about the car. She looks like she wants to murder me just for having a copy of the scan.

"It was a Christmas gift to myself," I lie.

She doesn't smile. She arches her brow. "Very well."

Xavier sends Emery home in his car and carpools with me, though he doesn't let me drive. The tan leather seats heat up within seconds, and I nestle into it.

Just as Xavier kills the engine, my phone rings. I see Elliot's name across the screen and huff to myself. When I ask Xavier for a few minutes, he eyes me suspiciously but walks away.

"What now?"

"I've fucked up, Sav. I've fucked up real bad." His voice shakes with worry.

Anxiety crawls into every crevice of my body. "What happened?"

He mutters under his breath. "That money I told you I owe? It's to Cam."

I close my eyes tight and pray this is a dream turned nightmare — and my morning alarm will save me any moment now. "How much?"

"Six."

An avalanche of curses rests on my tongue, but I know it won't achieve anything. Cameron and his boys are bad news; if you cross them, you end up in a morgue.

“I don’t have six grand on hand.”

“Can’t you ask your boss?”

“No!” I shout. I lower my voice to a hiss. “Are you crazy? He wouldn’t help you.”

“Say it’s for you,” he begs. “If I don’t give him something by tomorrow, I’m done.”

Annoyance fills me as he once again forces his problem on me. He’s trying to guilt trip me into handing more money over, and I’m pissed that it’s working.

“You were the one that was stupid enough to take a loan from a man that stabs someone for looking at him the wrong way.” I rub my temples. “I can’t help you.”

“Anything! Please. Whatever you can. Maybe it will buy me some time.”

My hand grips the scan picture tight, and I remember my promise. I stand my ground. “No. You did this to yourself. I’m not going to jeopardise my future for you. Xavier has already given me so much.”

“He has millions! What is six grand to him? Just ask him for an advance on your payment. I’m desperate. I’ve learnt my lesson. I swear I’m going to stop. After this, I’m getting out of London and starting fresh. I know you gave up on our Bali dream, but I’m going to do it. I’ll show you, Sav... I’ll prove I’m done with this.”

I close my eyes and try to find the strength I just had, but it’s gone. Elliot wasn’t perfect, but he was there when I had no

one.

“Two grand.” Before he says anything else, I carry on. “But this is it. No more calls. No more texts. No more asking Mia about me. If you contact me again, I’ll change my number. I’ll tell Xavier to put your name and face on security’s watch list. We’re done after this.”

I tell him where to meet me tomorrow morning. He repeats *thank you* until I cut the line. I take a few deep breaths before making my way to the office.

I stop outside the door when I see long blonde hair sway as the owner laughs at whatever joke Huxley shared. She places her hand on his arm seductively, and he grins at her.

He doesn’t even look up at the door to notice me watching with jealousy coursing through me.

I back away from the door, and I’m in Xavier’s office without realising.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

I stare at the ground, trying to control my emotions. I have no right to scream at him for doing what I did. This is the first time I have seen him in two weeks, and now I know why. Huxley hasn’t been to the office a single day, but every morning, I would wake to an email with a list of tasks. Normally, he would call with any additional jobs, but he has been emailing me – not even a text.

“Yeah. Can I sit here? Huxley is in a meeting.”

When he nods, I plop myself onto his white couch. I zone out of reality. Xavier flicks between calls and emails for over two hours without speaking to me.

When there is a knock at the door, I don't have to turn to see who it is. I can feel him before he enters the room.

"It's done," he gloats. "*SkyeRight* just hired us!"

The two men shake hands with laughter on their lips.

"I knew you were the right man for the job! How did you manage that?"

"A little Ray magic goes a long way."

They begin a conversation about specifics in the contract while I sit there, stirring in my emotions. From the little I steal from the exchange, I learn that the mother was more interested in setting up her daughter with Huxley than talking business with him. Of course, the greedy woman wanted to nab him for her daughter.

Midway through their conversation, Huxley realises I am also in the room. "Have you completed your list of tasks?" he asks.

No greeting. No asking how I am. No happiness at seeing me after two weeks.

"No."

"You're not being paid to sit there and daydream."

I give in to my urges and look at him. His beard is thicker than usual, and I want to run my fingers through it. His suit

jacket is missing, but he has on a waistcoat. *Was the three-piece suit to impress her?*

“And I didn’t think Xavier paid you to sleep with clients.” I gather my things and stand up. I had every intention of walking out, but I stop in front of him and smile. “I guess that makes you a *whore*.” I tilt my head. “Or maybe his *bitch*.” And with that, I walk out of there and to my desk.

Just as I sit down, he storms into the office. “What the hell was that?” When he doesn’t get a response, his fists come down on the table. “I asked you a question! What is your problem?”

I snap my attention to him. “What is *your* problem? You get territorial over me at dinner, even though it’s clear where we stand. You don’t say goodbye when you leave. You avoid me by not coming into the office for two weeks – only sending me stupid fucking emails! Then you come into the office to brag about fucking a client to sign her! And *you* are asking *me* what the problem is? You’re so hot and cold with me, and I’m over it!”

I have to catch my breath at the end of my rant. I can feel my heartbeat in my ears, or maybe that is the blood rushing to my brain.

“You think I’ve been avoiding you?” He sounds surprised at my accusation.

“Yeah. Why though? What is the problem? If you want to end it—”

He stops me mid-sentence. “I haven’t been avoiding you.” He sits on the edge of my desk and holds my attention with his stare. “I acted like a dickhead at the table, and it was unfair of me to get territorial. We both agreed to casual sex, but I hated the thought of you letting him touch you. I had no right, but it doesn’t change how I feel about it. I want your body to myself.”

His words affirm what I already know – this is only physical to him. Instead of opening a can of worms I’m not ready for, I funnel my rage in a different direction.

“Don’t you see the double standards? You can screw who you want, but I’m supposed to stay loyal to a relationship that doesn’t exist?”

The amused smile on his face irritates me. “I didn’t sleep with Skye. I wasn’t even with her these two weeks.”

I try to make sense of a puzzle that is missing pieces. “Where have you been?”

I feel anxious at the look of uncertainty on his face.

“I’ve been looking for your father.”

THERE IS AN ORGANISED chaos to the mess sprayed across the kitchen island. Magazines are stacked in categories on one side, and the other has strips of card with a range of nude shades.

Emery hums as she returns to the kitchen with an easel and a blank whiteboard.

“What are you doing?”

She jumps at my voice and holds her hand to her chest. “I didn’t see you there! Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. What are you doing?”

Her eyes widen excitedly like a child with free reign in a candy store. “I’m starting to decorate the nursery.”

I want to remind her that we are only ten weeks in, but remember that she has been waiting her whole life for this moment. Instead of bursting her bubble, I sit at the island and steal a few of her cookies.

“What theme are you going for?”

She pulls her hair into a bun and pulls off her jumper, leaving her in a t-shirt and cargos. She looks *normal* for once.

“I don’t know yet. Because the gender is a surprise, I was thinking neutral.”

Big surprise there. The entire house is white and bland.

“You can have gender-neutral colours without it *being* neutral. How about a zoo theme with pastels?”

Her mouth drops open in shock, but I don’t know if it is a good thing.

“I don’t know,” I throw in, fearing I’ve overstepped. “What does Xavier think?”

Since that conversation in her secret room, she doesn’t hide her bitterness towards her husband. Her nostrils flare, and she diverts her gaze. “He doesn’t care. It’s all on me.”

That wave of sympathy comes over me again. She’s not perfect, but every woman daydreams about decorating the nursery with her husband. She imagines rubbing her growing belly while her husband trials a multitude of colours until she finds the perfect one. He would wrap his arms around her bump and kiss her cheek when the walls were painted and the furniture built.

But Emery doesn’t have that.

I try to cheer her up. “His ideas probably suck anyways. I’ll help you. If you want?”

Her eyes light up again. “Yes. I would love that. I really like the idea of a pastel zoo. I haven’t seen that in any of the magazines.”

I can’t help but laugh at her. “Who uses magazines anymore?” I wave my phone at her. “The internet exists. Why don’t you show me the nursery so we can sketch some ideas?”

Forgetting all about her award-winning magazines and beige paint colours, she skips up the stairs, and I follow.

The hours zoom past as we go back and forth with ideas. I incorporate as many of hers as possible, not wanting to take too much away from her dream. She watches over me like a hawk while I sketch a rough idea.

“The animals aren’t very good, but it’s a start.”

She takes the paper and stares at it with a smile. “It’s perfect.” She looks at me. “You’re good at this. You could make good money from this. I have friends I could recommend you to.”

I chuckle at the excitement in her voice but shake my head. “No. I’m not very good or that excited about it. I have to really enjoy something to pursue it.”

The smirk on her lips warns me of the danger approaching. “I didn’t know you enjoyed taking phone calls or checking emails so much. Or does that have a little something to do with Ray?”

Hearing his name reminds me that I’m pissed at him. Today was a nice break away from thinking about his *research*. I was

enraged when he told me he was looking for my dad. He had no right. I've gone twenty-seven years without knowing, and I was fine. I could tell myself whatever story I wanted. Maybe he died or turned his life around. Fiction was easier than knowing he's still out, living and enjoying life while his actions caused my mum to have a mental break.

But Huxley didn't understand that. He took me saying I wanted to know about my DNA too literally and thought I would appreciate him finding the man. When he realised I had no intention of meeting him, he argued that he could gather the intel to answer my questions. But I asked him to stop, no matter how close he was.

"He might be the reason I quit," I reply.

"I miss that fire when you meet someone. That back and forth of *I want you... no, I don't*. The playful smiles and glances you steal when no one is looking. It's exhilarating."

Was that how it was with Xavier? From what I've heard, they fell in love straight away. They spent every minute together as if there weren't enough in the day. Xavier said he knew from the start she was the one. *So, what changed?*

"That's not what's happening with me and Hux. I think he enjoys pressing my buttons." Wanting to change the subject, I turn my attention to her. "What about you? Did you work much before?"

I do believe that the cameras are off in the guesthouse. He proved it to me and even offered to have someone come and plaster over them if it made me feel more secure. But a part of

me wants to know if Xavier's story about the guesthouse is true. His explanation made sense, but that doesn't mean it's true.

Her eyes drift away with a light in them I haven't seen before. "The odd jobs here and there. Menial. I didn't do well in school, so I couldn't get a fancy job. But it was nice."

Wanting to draw more information out, I ask. "What about after? I mean, with Xavier's money, you could have done whatever you wanted." I want to ask more direct questions, but I am very aware of the cameras watching us.

"In the beginning, I wanted to do so much." She looks around at the four walls that surround us. "It got exhausting waiting for him to come home. I needed something to pass the time, but he wasn't ready for a baby yet. I thought about running my own business. He even built the guesthouse for me."

Okay. So that part was true.

"Why didn't you?" I push.

"I thought starting a business would make him see me, you know? I thought he would realise I'm more than just a pretty face. I imagined us spending our time discussing plans and sharing the dream." She looks away from me as her body goes stiff. "But all he did was throw some money my way. He didn't care what I did with it if I didn't bother him. So, I told him I didn't want to do it anymore."

I shuffle closer to her and take her hand in mine. It feels unusual, but she doesn't pull away. From what I know about Xavier, he probably wanted her to have something for herself. Maybe a selfish part of him needed something to take her attention off him so he could have room to breathe. I don't tell her that though.

“I think he wanted you to have this for yourself. He didn't want to be the reason behind your success.”

“But *I* did. I wanted something that was *ours*.”

As irrational as her beliefs are, I understand it. When you have spent your whole life feeling out of place, you crave something solid – something real. She grew up alone in a horrible care system. In her mind, marriage would be that all-consuming love where you finally feel at home.

“You really love him, don't you?”

Her features pull together in wonder before she shakes her head. “No. I think I loved the idea of him. I wanted someone to love the broken parts of me back together. I wanted someone to hold me and stop me from falling apart. I had no family and meaningless friendships. Xavier gave me purpose. My life became about making him happy.”

I squeeze her hand tight. “He doesn't have to be your purpose anymore. It's not about making him happy anymore. Stop drinking. Start doing things that make you happy. Find your peace. You have to Emery because you have a baby coming, and he or she needs you to be strong and powerful.” I

pin her down with a stare. “Stop giving him all the power and take it back for yourself.”



When I open the door to see Huxley, I’m not surprised. I dodged all his calls and messages today.

He doesn’t wait for me to welcome him in, choosing to barge past me and straight into my bedroom. “When I call you, you answer the fucking phone!” he barks as I lean against the doorframe.

I cross my arms over my chest and give him a bored stare. “I was busy.”

“When I call, you answer. I told you on the first day that this job is every second of every day.”

“What did you need?” I fight my smile when he struggles to come up with an answer.

“I’ve sorted it now,” he grumbles.

“I guess you didn’t need me after all. Please excuse me; I’m about to go to bed.” I walk past him to go into the bathroom, but he grabs my arm, stopping me. “Let go.”

“Sav.” He doesn’t say anything else, but his eyes give away his worry.

I refuse to give in. If he wants to say something, he needs to speak up.

“I was worried,” he admits after two minutes of silence.

Raising my brow at him, I say, “Be careful, Huxley; I might start thinking you care about me.”

My words cause him to release my arm as if they electrocuted him. He takes a step back. “We work together. You can’t keep avoiding me or being pissed at me.”

“Have you stopped looking?”

His empty stare gives me my answer.

“Then I’m still pissed.”

“What are you so afraid of?”

The tension is so thick it makes it hard to breathe, or maybe that is because I have to give an honest answer to somebody. I’m so used to brushing my real emotions off that I want to run when facing them. But Huxley isn’t giving me that option. I can see the determination in his eyes.

“What if he’s happy in life? What if he lives in a suburban house with the love of his life and three children? What if he got a happily ever after while me and my mum struggled? What do I say to that, Hux? How do I stand in front of the man that brought me into this world through *rape*? He won’t want to know me because I wasn’t supposed to exist. My mum never wanted me. I’ve known that my whole life, and it isn’t easy. Imagine how you would feel if you found out that not only were you unwanted but conceived through such a despicable thing. If I don’t know him, I can pretend that maybe my father would have wanted me at some point.”

Huxley takes two slow steps until he is standing before me. He takes my face and forces me to look at him. “A man like him doesn’t deserve to want or know you. But he deserves to know what he missed out on. I want him to look at you and realise that a *beautiful* thing came out of the ugly thing he did. I want him to drown in guilt.”

I place my hands over his. “I’m not a revengeful person. Seeing him will only hurt me and my mum.”

He looks defeated. “Then let me continue my search. Even if it means you only get to know what makes up the rest of your DNA.”

I walk away from him and take a seat on the bed. “No. If I know you know where he is, it won’t stop playing on my mind. Please let it go.”

Huxley goes silent as my plea settles between us. He stares at the ground with a deep thought written over his face. He looks at me with a rare smile. “Let’s place a bet. If I win, I get to keep searching. If you win, I’ll give you whatever you want.”

This is a dangerous game, but whatever it is, I know I can try and beat him. He underestimates how competitive I am.

“*Anything* I want?” I ask.

“*Anything.*”

If there is one thing Huxley loves, it’s his car. All his pride and joy is in that stupid car. I don’t need it, but I know he will never agree to it.

“I want your car. *Permanently.*”

“Done,” he agrees within seconds.

My surprise leaves me speechless until I remember I don't know what game we're playing. “We have the terms. What's the game?”

He shrugs his suit jacket off, unbuttons his cuffs and pops the top button of his shirt. His lazy grin gives me my answer before his words do. “What else, sweetheart? We're going to fuck this anger away, and whoever comes first, loses.”

From his trouser pocket, he takes out a red foiled condom and holds it up between two fingers. He watches me with a challenging look before tossing it onto the bed.

My organs turn to liquid as he paces over to me with a wild look in his eyes. “What are you angry about?”

He straddles me on the bed and brings his face right before mine. “When I call, you answer. I don't care if you are dying; you answer me.”

With a smirk, I say, “Yes, *sir.*”

His lips crash against mine with hunger. The kiss says what he is afraid to – *he's missed me as much as I've missed him.* His tongue pushes past my lips and massages my own. His hands are on my face, then in my hair, and soon roaming all over my body. When he gropes my breasts, I moan and feel his body shudder.

Through the kiss, I unbutton his shirt and throw it to the floor. As I try to unbuckle his belt, he climbs off me. His lips

are swollen, and his eyes are drunk with lust.

“Strip for me,” he orders.

“What if I told you there was nothing underneath my t-shirt?” I slowly spread my legs enough to tease him. “What if I told you I was about to fuck myself to sleep?”

He closes his eyes and groans. When he looks at me again, there is a darkness in his eyes. “Who were you going to be thinking about?”

You. Only you. I don’t tell him I would have imagined his thick cock spreading me open or his name would rest on my lips.

“Christian,” I lie.

“Is that right?” His eyes look murderous, and I don’t know if he wants to kill me or the easily forgotten Christian. He undoes his belt and pulls his trousers and boxers down in one swift movement. “What do you imagine him doing to you?”

I can’t form words as his hands work their way up my legs. They push the hem of my t-shirt up until my bare body is on display. He quickly pulls it over my head before pushing me onto my back, exposed to him.

“Is he playing with your nipples before sucking them raw?”

He doesn’t let me answer because he pulls one nipple into his mouth while the other is pinched and rolled between his index finger and thumb. The feeling vibrates through all my nerves, including *there*. He switches over, making sure both get the same amount of attention.

I can feel my arousal between my legs. I need to regain control, or else I'll lose this bet.

“Ray.”

He looks up at me with an amused smile. “*Ray*, huh?” He blows on my sensitive, wet nipples. “Tell me, sweetheart. What do you imagine him doing next? Does he run his tongue down your body, teasing that sweet cunt? Does he lick your pussy just enough to get you worked up but not quite giving you what you want?”

Instead of pushing him away as planned, my fingers grip his hair and force him closer to where I *need* relief. He chuckles against my thighs but finally pays attention to my clit.

When he does, I almost fall apart but hold myself together. He is feverish with his oral assault today. I buck my hips to meet his tongue. My eyes close as I lose myself to the pleasure.

“Come on, sweetheart. Give me what I want.”

Snap out of it!

I unwrap my legs and push myself away from him. My body hates me for it after coming so close to a much-needed orgasm. I take a few deep breaths to recollect myself.

His eyes are alive. Mine are dead.

“My turn.”

“No,” he snaps. “You haven’t earned my cock in your mouth. Not when you’ve been moaning someone else’s name with

that pretty mouth of yours.”

I crawl to the end of the bed and grab his shaft. There is a small bead of pre-cum leaking out. I rub it around his head while giving him a pleading look.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

One hand massages his balls while the other continues to tease the head. “Like what?”

The teasing tone makes him snap.

He pushes me back onto the bed and spreads my legs as wide as they go. He grabs the condom and rolls it over his hard cock. In one hard thrust, he is deep inside me. My gasp is caught in my throat as he fills me.

Huxley doesn’t give me a second to catch my breath because his movements are ferocious and angry. His anger is felt in his thrusts. He finds a rhythm that tingles pleasure in every pore of my body. I glimpse us in the mirror; I eagle-spread for him and him owning my body.

His hands are on my hips as he pounds into me. He doesn’t seem close, but I am on the brink of winning an orgasm but losing the bet.

“It’s always you I think about,” I moan. “Ever since I fucking met you, I fucked myself to images of you fucking me exactly like this.”

I hate admitting this, but I know it’s working when his breathing gets faster and his movements harder.

“Naked and alone. I spread my legs and imagine you fucking me with your tongue. I imagine you teasing me with your cock. When I play with my clit, I imagine it’s the head of your dick teasing me before you push in and take what belongs to you.”

“Fuck. Stop.”

I can feel him throbbing, but I’m closer than he is.

I grab his arms as he does everything to make me fall into oblivion.

“It belongs to you, Hux. My pussy belongs to you. Whenever. Wherever. It’s never anyone else’s name. All I moan is *Huxley*. All I want is you. So take me. Own me. I’m yours.”

A loud groan falls from his lips as he loses the battle and spills into the condom. But his thrusts don’t stop, and when his thumb brushes back and forth on my clit, I finally find my release.

He collapses on top of me as we try to catch our breath. He doesn’t lift his head from the crook of my neck. We lay in silence for a long time. I wonder if he fell asleep, but I feel small kisses peppered on my neck.

Huxley wraps his arms around me and drags me further up the bed. He pulls the condom off, ties it and gets up to discard it.

I wrap the covers around my body and lay down with a sated smile. I watch as he gathers his clothes. But to my surprise, he

doesn't get dressed. He carefully lays them on the armchair and climbs into bed next to me.

"I'm too tired to drive. Don't worry. I'll be gone before you wake up."

I want to tell him that he doesn't have to sneak out in the morning. I want to experience waking up next to him. But I don't because that will risk Xavier seeing him.

"When will you transfer the car to my name?"

"Consider it handled. Go to sleep, sweetheart."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I turn off my bedside lamp and roll over so my back is to him. I want to wrap my arms around him, but it feels too intimate.

More intimate than having sex?

I try to sleep, but I'm too aware of his large body next to mine. I close my eyes, and even my breathing, but sleep still evades me.

After a long while, when he thinks I've fallen asleep, I feel his arms wrap around my body. I've missed this type of intimacy that makes you feel safe and at home.

His lips press against my temple. "I missed you," he murmurs against my skin.

The soft pads on his fingers run up and down my back. They trail along my arms until he takes my hand in his. His fingers thread through mine, and he gently squeezes to not wake me.

“What have I done?” he whispers to himself. “I’ve let the snake bite me.”

I HIT SEND ON the text to Huxley to let him know I'm on my way to the office. The man has such little patience. Technically, my workday doesn't start for another twenty minutes, but he has bombarded me with messages. From the tone of them, I know today is going to be tiresome.

My mood sours even further when I see Elliot on the pavement with flowers. He waves at me, and it takes all my willpower not to run him over.

I roll my window down. "What do you want?"

He takes my stopping as a chance to climb into the passenger seat.

I should have run him over.

"Happy Valentine's Day." He tries to hand me the flowers while I'm driving. When I don't move to claim them, he places them on his lap. "You look good."

The first trimester is finally coming to an end. The morning sickness is fading out, but in return, the itchy nipples and

insatiable sex drive have entered. If I was attracted to Huxley before, the past week, my sex drive has been on steroids.

“How the fuck did you find where I live?”

That should have been the *first* question out of my mouth.

When I glance at him from the corner of my eye, he has a sheepish look, warning me his answer will piss me off even further.

“I followed you home the other day.”

The driver behind me beeps his horn at my sudden braking. It takes me five seconds to pull myself together and stop being a hazard on the road.

“What the fuck? Are you kidding me?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“By being a creepy stalker?” My screech is too loud for this car, but anger and a sense of violation consume me.

“I worry about you. Mia said she barely ever sees you anymore.”

“I text Mia every other day. I can’t see her because I’m busy working.” I remind myself that I don’t need to explain anything to him. “Why won’t you leave me alone?”

“You’re a lot of things, but naïve is not one of them,” he snaps. “Open your fucking eyes, Sav! This rich CEO turns up at your workplace every day for months and suddenly asks you to be his surrogate? What are the chances of that?”

“Highly likely, seeing as his office is a two-minute walk from the coffee shop.”

His disappointed stare pierces through my skin. “Did you ever wonder why *you*? People go through an agency.”

I wait until I stop at a red light to answer him. “He did go through an agency and couldn’t find a suitable person. We were friends, and he threw me a lifeline that also benefitted him.”

“I’m sure he’s reaping the benefits,” he mutters.

I huff in annoyance at his jealousy but don’t dignify him with a response.

Because you know he’s right?

“Are you in love with him? It’s the only explanation for your ignorance.”

My outburst of laughter startles him, which only makes me laugh harder. “No, I’m not in love with Xavier.”

There is no denying the mutual attraction between us, but *love*? No. Xavier might be the only person who makes me feel seen. He might be the only person who asks me how I am and cares about the answer. Maybe sometimes I find an excuse to stop by his office or head into the house just to see him. He might be the only person who gives Huxley a run for his money for how much time they spend in my head. ... But *love*? No.

“The drugs are making you paranoid.”

He clicks his tongue and shakes his head. “Look at you with the clothes he bought, driving the car he bought, going to work in the building he owns. It’s pathetic you can’t see him trying to control your life. We both know nothing comes for free. You need to ask which part of yourself you’ll have to sell to pay him what you owe.”

With those harsh words hanging in the air, he exits my car before I enter the car park. An unsettling feeling comes down on me as I head into the office. It’s hard to know if it is from Elliot’s words or the slow realisation that Xavier consumes as much of me as Huxley does.

I force the thoughts out of my head. “Good morning, sunshine!” I say with fake enthusiasm.

“You’re late.”

I roll my eyes. “Barely.” I settle into my desk and check my emails. When I see the agenda for the board meeting, I peer across at Huxley. “Do I really have to attend the board meeting again? It’s so boring.”

“You’re there to take notes for me.”

“Why can’t you do that yourself?”

“Because I like to spend my time looking at you.”

I chuckle at his surprisingly playful response. “It’s a shame I can’t say the same about you.”

Huxley doesn’t respond back. He chooses to stare at me with a slight smile. He looks lost in thought, but he shares them with me before I can pry. “I found him.”

My hands freeze over my keyboard as I absorb his words. I work through my emotions, but there is only one – fear. I can handle anger but don't know what to do with fear. Whenever I've felt fear before, I faked my way through it. I put on a brave face and feigned power.

“Where?”

“Cardiff.”

My eyes avoid Huxley and stay glued to the window behind him. “You lost the bet. You were supposed to stop.”

“I was so close. I couldn't give up.”

“We had a deal!”

“I wasn't going to tell you.”

I laugh through my fear. “But you did anyway,” I point out.

“So you know that the option is always there. If you're ever ready... I'm here.”

I have the choice of flipping out or pretending that I don't care because I *shouldn't*. I shouldn't want to know his name or what he looks like. I shouldn't care if we share similar features or likes. I shouldn't feel like meeting him, even once, will give me a sense of closure on a chapter of my life I never got the chance to write.

But the sad reality is that I *do* care.

I don't know if Huxley can read the conflict on my face, but he walks over and kneels in front of me. “You don't have to make any decision today. Whatever you decide, I'll respect it.”

“Do I look like him?” My voice is weak and pathetic, and I hate myself for it. “When my mum looks at me, does she see him?”

He strokes my face with a tenderness I haven’t had from him before. “When *anyone* looks at you, the rest of the world fades away. They can only focus on how golden your eyes are when the light hits them. Or how your lips are the perfect shape. When I look at you, everything else in the world that I thought was beautiful or perfect doesn’t hold a candle to you.”



“What are you doing?”

Even upside down, Xavier looks amused at my odd posture. I lift my head and sit upright. He is out of his workwear and in jeans and a sweater.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” I say instead of answering. I don’t know how to explain that I was thinking about my absent father and whether I should meet him.

“You forgot to lock your door.”

I smile at him. “It’s a good thing you’re not a serial killer. Did you need something?” I wince when I realise how rude that sounds, but I don’t feel like company tonight.

“What are you craving?” When I look at him confused, he elaborates. “You said you used to go out in the middle of the night to satisfy your cravings.”

He shouldn't be doing these small things for me. But I also shouldn't love that he does it.

Even though I know this, I stand up and pull my boots on. "Bagels."

He nods and holds the front door open. He watches over me as I remember to lock it this time. He climbs into the driver's seat of my car, leaving me on the passenger side.

He follows the GPS, and I feel giddy as we drive towards my old home. The walls are painted with graffiti, and people line the streets, talking and laughing like the sun won't rise in a few hours. As expected, the bagel place is full of people.

Like a true gentleman, Xavier takes my order and leaves me alone in the car while he picks up the food. When he returns, I practically snatch one of the bagels from him and take a bite.

Xavier chuckles at my response but copies when he takes a bite. "This is probably the best bagel I've ever had."

"Told you," I say with a mouthful.

Reluctantly placing his bagel down, he puts the car into drive and takes off.

I don't ask where he is going; instead, I watch the world that was once mine blur past. That deep longing resonates in me, and I suppress the emotions. After another thirty minutes, he parks the car – leaving us with a view of London beneath us.

Even with sunrise approaching in a few hours, the zooming of car lights continues. Building lights are far and few, but the streets remain awake.

Xavier unbuckles his seatbelt, and I do the same. He turns so his back is against the door and facing me. “Who were the flowers from? Ray?”

My eyes dart to the flowers tossed onto the backseat instead of the bin. I scoff in amusement at the idea of Huxley buying roses. We spent the entire day together, and he didn’t even acknowledge that it was Valentine’s Day.

“No. It was my stupid ex. He won’t leave me alone.”

“The one that keeps turning up at XR Securities?”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t worry, he won’t be back again.”

“Want me to handle it?”

I squint as I observe him. Huxley uses the same phrase, and I wonder what *handling it* means in their world.

“Are you going to have him murdered?”

Xavier’s laugh sounds like a perfect melody. “Is that what you think I do?”

“Not just you. Your entire company.”

“Because all businessmen are psychopaths?” He uses my words against me. “I was talking about giving a verbal warning and putting him on security’s radar.”

I wave off his concerns. “He’s harmless; annoying, but harmless.” Not wanting to discuss Elliot, I quiz him. “What did you do for Valentine?”

He starts on his second bagel before answering. “We had dinner at a restaurant she wanted to try.”

“It can’t have been that good from how you’re munching through these bagels,” I tease.

“Or maybe it’s because I have better company.”

My smile falters. “You can’t say things like that.”

“What? The truth? We spend all day, every day, living one lie to another that speaking some truth is intolerable. Maybe I’m tired of living a lie.”

His statement is too heavy for me to bear with all the other things on my mind.

“People lie to hide what they really feel. Most of the time, that’s the best thing to do.”

Like how I want to meet my father but know it will kill my mum inside.

“People lie to hide their ugliness,” he argues. “I’m in no business to hide who I am with you. The world will never know me, but I want you to. The good, the bad and the ugly.”

Xavier doesn’t shy away from being vulnerable with me. He speaks freely, and it’s refreshing.

“Does Mr Rivers have an ugly side?”

“Don’t we all?”

“Tell me something ugly about you.”

“Promise you won’t run?”

I offer a reassuring smile. “I’ve got your baby inside me, and you are a glorified stalker. Where would I run to?”

He smiles at my joke before it turns into a frown. His eyebrows pull together as he stares at the dashboard. I want to reach across and rub the crease between his brows away. His eyes have a tortured look, warning me that he's reliving something traumatic.

“I was the one that caught my mum cheating. I overheard her on the phone with her lover. She sounded so... happy.”

When he looks at me, I can picture a young, confused Xavier, trying to make sense of his mother sharing loving words with another man.

“At first, I thought she was speaking to my father, but then she said his name. When she saw me, her smile vanished, and she was spluttering, trying to make her thirteen-year-old son think he misheard. But I knew the truth.”

Our gazes meet – mine sympathetic and his full of sorrow.

“What did you do?”

Xavier swallows hard. “I told her to go,” he whispers. “I was angry she would risk her family for someone else. Their marriage wasn't perfect, but it was *normal*. My dad loved her, and knowing the truth would have killed him. I forced her to leave even though she promised to end the affair. She begged me, but I couldn't see past the betrayal. I said *horrible* things and called her every name under the sun. I told her she was dead to me, and if she stayed, I'd tell my dad what she did. I'd tell everyone we knew that she was a whore.”

There is no one in that story that my heart doesn't ache for. His father who was betrayed by the love of his life. His mother who made a mistake and was villainised by her son. But most of all, Xavier who was trying to protect his father from heartbreak.

“You didn't know any better. You thought you were doing the right thing. Were you wrong? Yes, but you were a kid trying to protect his father.”

“No,” he protests. “Because after she left, I sat alone for a few hours and told him anyway, but it was too late. I took her phone, so there was no way to beg her to come back. My dad ended up calling her lover and found her there. I think that is what killed us the most. I said some disgusting things, but she didn't even fight. When my dad called, she went on about how we are better off without her; this way, we can all be *happy*. Do you know what that made me realise? She wasn't happy with us. She wasn't happy with *me* in her life. From that day, I decided she was dead.”

My heart breaks in two as his sad words resonate with my feelings of being unwanted. Not many people can understand the pain of your parent not wanting you or to be in your life. It tears you apart before you can ever be whole.

I climb out of my seat and kneel on the car floor in front of him. I thread my fingers through his and give them a squeeze.

“That was a shitty thing for her to say. It doesn't matter how many hurtful things you said to her. When you're a parent, your happiness is tied to your children. She doesn't deserve

you. She did you a favour by walking away. You and your dad deserved better.”

Anguish swirls in his eyes. “I can’t escape her. I see her in every woman I’ve dated. I thought Emery was different, but she did exactly what my mother did.”

Emery’s affair must have been a punch to his gut. The woman he loved dug her nails into wounds that weren’t healed. His anger towards her makes a lot more sense now.

My knees start to ache, so I move to go back to my seat. Xavier’s arm wraps around my waist and pulls me to him so our bodies are flush against one another. My heart pounds in my chest as our eyes meet. He pulls me onto his lap, forcing me to straddle him. There is nothing sexual about the interaction, but deeply intimate.

No words are shared, but emotion fills the car until it’s hard to breathe. His fingers lightly run up and down my side, not playful but gentle. The blue flecks in his eyes are bright against the grey in the shadows of the night. I love how alive they look as he watches, studies and admires my face. He makes me feel *seen* in a world where I’m overlooked for everything except my beauty.

“That was the ugliest part of me until I met you.” His voice is low, and it pulls me further under his spell.

“What do you mean?”

The back of his fingers stroke my cheek before tucking my hair behind my ear. “The ugliest part of me is that I understand

why my mother cheated. I understand the temptation. I understand wanting someone so bad that your wedding vows are forgotten. I understand how it feels to be plagued with thoughts of someone who isn't your spouse. I understand finding happiness in someone else. I understand why she betrayed her husband of years and risked her family.”

He pulls my head closer and rests his forehead against mine.

“Xavier...”

I don't know what else to say because his raw honesty has stolen any lie I could feed him because a part of me wants him too. Despite the circumstances, I can see myself being happy with him. I could make him happy. I would appreciate him in a way that Emery doesn't. But that doesn't mean I should. If not for my integrity or out of respect for Emery, but for him because I know he will hate himself if he becomes his mother.

“I'm trying to be a good man, Savannah. But I'm tired. I'm tired of pretending. I'm tired of hiding. I'm tired of carrying this lie.”

IF THERE IS ONE thing rich people love to do, it's going to charity events to show off their humility by giving back to the poor and misfortunate. While I love that they are giving away pennies from their millions, why must it be made into a big deal? These charities host these grand parties and invite the richest and entice them with fancy food and expensive champagne to donate. Why not use the money needed for such events towards their goals?

Francesca gives me a weird look when I voice this to her. "I don't think the charity pays for this. I'm pretty sure it's the donors."

I sip on my sewage-tasting fake champagne. "You're missing the point. Regardless of who pays for it, why not put the money to use? What is the point of all this?" I ask, gesturing to the event I was forced to attend.

The hiring price for this golden globe probably cost more than the charity has ever made. The tables are lined around the edge of the room, leaving the centre cleared for a dance floor

and live orchestra. The walls are made of golden panels that look fitting for a palace. Some of the Britain's wealthiest people walk around, sipping wine and bragging about how much they donated to tonight's cause. Funnily enough, I haven't heard them mention what tonight is for. They saw tonight as a social event and signed a cheque their personal assistant put in front of them. They don't care – it is as simple as that. For some of these people, a donation is probably a tax write-off.

Francesca shrugs. "I don't know. Who cares why they donate, as long as they do."

I wouldn't be here if I had the choice. Unfortunately, I did not. Huxley demanded I attend, although I'm not sure why because he hasn't said more than two words to me, having been occupied with *Skye*.

His lack of acknowledging me or my dress peeved me off, no matter how much I deny it. Every dress I eyed yesterday made me think of him. I imagined his reaction to the colour, cut and shape with every try-on. Would he prefer my boobs or ass being the star of the show? Would he take advantage of a short dress or maybe hitch a long dress up and fuck me in it?

But he didn't even *look* my way for more than two seconds, let alone whisper all the dirty things he wanted to do to me in this emerald green dress. There was no crude remark about the waist-high double slit. He didn't ask to peek under the floor-length outfit. His eyes didn't linger on my exposed long legs. He didn't ask to see the underwear that was barely concealed

by the fabric of my dress. He didn't even acknowledge that I wore his favourite fucking colour.

"You've been staring at him for two minutes," Francesca jibes.

Her natural brunette curls hang down her back. Her fuller cheeks always have a pinch of colour, making her look youthful and innocent. The gleam in her eyes makes me roll mine.

"I was trying to kill him from here. Why force me to be here when he clearly doesn't need me to be?"

Her giggle is a soft melody. "Maybe he's trying to make you jealous?"

"I doubt that."

I search for Xavier, and it doesn't take long. I watch as he smiles with an older man. He looks comfortable here. He is graceful in the way he carries himself. Tonight, he is wearing my favourite navy suit. He shakes the hand of his acquaintance, indicating the end of the conversation.

The moment the man walks away, there is a deadly look on Xavier's face. It's almost instantaneous. His eyes lose all life in them, and his lips curl into a snarl. It only happens briefly before he smiles again at Emery, who is approaching him.

It feels as though something is crawling down my spine. I can't shake the feeling until a shadow falls over me.

"What's got your face looking sour?" Huxley asks.

I plaster on a fake smile. “I’m just wondering why you forced me to come to this.”

He offers a hand. “You don’t want to dance with me?”

I eye the empty hand sceptically. “I don’t know where that hand has been.”

His other arm stretches along the back of my chair. He leans into my face and whispers, “You know *exactly* where it has been, sweetheart.” He stands tall and smiles. “Let me see some of those stripper moves.”

“One dance, and then I’m leaving.”

He offers a gracious nod. He takes my hand and leads us to the floor, where a few people are already swaying to the orchestra. I look back to see Francesca shooting a knowing smile in my direction. I try to seem unbothered, but my smile appears without permission.

“Do you need me to lead, or do you have enough balls to?” I provoke as we stand opposite one another.

For the first time tonight, Huxley eyes me from top to toe. His irises darken as he takes me all in. “You’ve had them in your mouth, you tell me,” he fires back.

“Definitely not big enough,” I laugh.

He runs his knuckles down the length of my exposed arm before threading his fingers through mine. His arm wraps around my waist, pulling me against his body. “One wrong move, and everyone here will see that delectable pussy of yours. Better watch your step, sweetheart,” he murmurs.

“What would you do if they did?” I ask as the orchestra start playing a new song.

The soft melody allows us to continue swaying along slowly.

“What would you like me to do?”

As I stare into his hazel eyes, I know the truth. I want him to tell people I’m his. Huxley isn’t conventional, but who says that is what everyone needs? I’ve done conventional before, and look at where it left me. Not every woman wants a shining knight. Some of us want the asshole who scowls at everyone except you within your hidden moments. Some of us want the rude bastard who ruthlessly fucks our brains out but shows moments of tenderness when no one is looking.

For too long, I’ve been torn between Xavier and Huxley. They both make me feel the same in a vastly different way. I glance over at Xavier, who’s in conversation with Emery. No matter what he says, Xavier is not a viable option.

“Tell them I’m off limits,” I answer.

The beat picks up, and as it does, Huxley picks up his pace and swirls me around with the melody. He takes control as he guides me throughout the dance – spinning me away from him before pulling me close again. When the tempo slows down again, he resumes our conversation.

“We both know what this is.”

I don’t let him see the rejection I feel. I wasn’t expecting a declaration of love, but I thought he felt the same way.

“What is this then?”

He looks annoyed at my line of questioning. “Friends with benefits but less emphasis on the friends. I told you I don’t want anything more. I don’t have the time for it.”

But you have been doing more.

I’m tempted to remind him of everything he’s done for me, including finding my father, but I decide against it. I’m not going to beg for his love. I was raised to be better than that.

“I got it,” I conclude.

“We both knew what it was,” he repeats.

He is cut off when the tempo picks up again. We move in sync across the dance floor, patiently waiting for the music to slow again so we can continue. When it finally does, he finishes what he was saying.

“I don’t hate you, so that is saying something,” he smiles, not reading this situation for what it is. “But look at the position you are in. You’re pregnant.”

“With a baby that isn’t mine. This will all be over in six months.”

“I work a lot.”

“I’m your PA. I work the same hours as you.”

“But it’s different.”

He doesn’t want to say how he really feels; he doesn’t see me that way. To him, I will always be the stripper who is good for a romp in bed.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Fair enough. It’s not like I would ever date you.”

He can see through my lie. “Sav—“

I cut him off. “Why are you at this thing? You don’t seem the type.”

Talk about anything else before you cry on the dance floor.

“Skye asked me to be her plus one.” His gaze moves over to her. He gives her a panty-dropping smile that is usually reserved for me.

The pinch in my heart brings tears, but I blink them away before he turns back to me.

“She thinks we’ve got something going on,” he says under his breath.

“Why do you think that?”

He stares down at me. “Because you’re the only woman I have ever been seen with in public, and that on a dance floor.” He chuckles. “Not good for my image.”

The song slowly draws to an end, and I pull out of his embrace. “Let me not get in the way of your work. Go and make her happy.”

“Maybe I’ll stop by yours tonight?” He winks and walks away.

My heart is beating fast as I leave the dance floor and walk to the balcony to breathe fresh air.

I hate that I am hurting from his rejection. He was right in saying I knew what this was – I wanted the same thing. But how could he not feel even a little more than what we originally agreed on? I shouldn't be surprised. My mother always told me men are creatures who like to take to satisfy themselves. That is all I am to Huxley. He never once complimented *me*, only my appearance and ability to arouse him.

I swallow my feelings, take a deep breath and re-join the party.

The event drags on, and I am bored out of my mind. No matter how many times I scold myself, I peer over at Huxley. Xavier comes over and thanks Francesca for attending and her help over the night. *I didn't even get a thank you from Huxley.* Xavier offers to call her a cab, which she politely accepts and bids us goodbye. I overhear him asking to text once she is home.

He is kind. He is sweet. He wants *more*.

No. I can't go there. He is still married. Huxley's rejection doesn't change that.

"Care to join me for a dance?" he asks when he reappears.

I place my hand in his. "It would be my pleasure, Mr Rivers."

"You look beautiful tonight," he compliments when we reach the dance floor.

Huxley didn't call me beautiful.

“Thank you. You look very dashing. Are you sure you can handle dancing with me? The last time got a bit out of hand.”

Why am I reminding him of the lap dance I gave him almost a year ago? If I close my eyes, I can remember the leather from the sofa sticking to me as he pressed me into it. His soft threat of having me at his mercy liquefy my insides.

“You’re in my territory tonight, Miss Hayes,” he says, repeating the words I used that night. “Let’s see if you can show the same restraint I did. To make it fair, I evened the playing field.”

As the orchestra comes to life, I furrow my eyebrows, confused at what he means. The violins play a familiar tune, but I can’t place my finger on it.

Xavier watches me as if there is no one here but us. He holds me close, uncaring of the speculative eyes watching a married man dance intimately with a woman who is not his wife.

As the chorus plays, my mouth drops open in surprise. “This is *that* song!” I loudly whisper.

“Yes. The very one that made me want to take you in my arms and have you all to myself. Do you have any idea how hard it was to stop myself?”

“Was it my ass or boobs?” I joke.

“Your confidence. Your reassurance in yourself. You were a goddess, and I was at your mercy. I’ve been yours since I laid my eyes on you.”

My heart beats in sync with the music - slow and leading up to something bigger.

Xavier is a beautiful dancer. He is controlled and perfectly tuned with every stroke of the instruments. He expertly guides us all over the dance floor, capturing the guests' attention. It's just the two of us and the music playing – wholly lost in the feelings we have buried deep inside us.

His hands leave a burn everywhere he touches me. The pull between us is electric every time our bodies graze. He spins me away from him and back so quickly as if he can't bear to be away from me.

When the song ends, I am breathless. Not only from the dance but the adrenaline of feeling so wanted. Xavier's chest heaves up and down as we stare at one another. I want to grab and kiss him until I run out of oxygen. But I can't.

I hurriedly exit the room, up the stairs and into one of the powder rooms. Only in a place as fancy as this would they have a room with a large mirror and built-in vanity table so women can fix their makeup. I lean against the door and catch my breath.

I can't do this. I can't be a homewrecker, even if the home is already wrecked. This is wrong. I am carrying their child. I can't. I won't.

Whatever I'm feeling is exacerbated by Huxley's rejection. I close my eyes and push tonight out of my mind. I need to go home and forget all about it.

The door hits me as someone opens it. I back away to the other side of the small space. We stare at one another, trying to fight what we know is a line we can't cross.

“Leave,” I order, but my voice betrays me. It comes out weak and pathetic. “You're married.”

He steps into the room and shuts the door. “Fuck it.” He locks the door. “You are worth every sin.” He takes three long strides until he is standing in front of me. “Let me burn in hell if it means getting to experience heaven in your arms.”

The world as I know it dissipates into nothing I know. All I know is Xavier's lips are on mine. They move with speed and passion I have never had the pleasure of experiencing. His hands roam over my body as he gives into his temptation. They skim over my arms, down my torso before settling on my ass. He pushes me against the wall and pulls away, only to layer my neck with kisses.

My hands push off his jacket and feel his biceps through his shirt. I try to unbuckle his pants, but he pulls away from me. I think clarity washes over him for a moment, but the hunger in his eyes tells me another story.

“That dress has been driving me wild all fucking night. You've been teasing me.” His finger strokes the very top of my thighs where the slit begins. “If you moved ever so slightly, the world would have seen it all.”

I ask the same question I did to Huxley. “What would you have done if they did?”

“Built the technology to wipe their memory. I would have fucking killed them all because,” his fingers slip into my thong and spread me open, “this is all mine now.” He eases one finger in. “It’s only for me,” he whispers against my lips.

He adds another digit and moans when I clench around them. His movements are a stark difference from the kiss. This is slow and torturous.

I don’t want to break the intense stare, but my eyes close from the pleasure of his fingers curling inside.

“Look at me,” he orders. “I want to see you fall apart.”

So, I let him. I maintain our gaze as he fastens his pace and turns my body into lava. I use his body to hold me upright as I lose myself to my deepest desires. My knees feel weak when he steps back, so I use the counter to stop myself from falling to the ground.

Silence settles between us. The slow hum of burning desire cackles. His features are set into a deep thought as he studies me. His hands are clenched, and his shoulders tense.

I should end it here and walk out. We’ve stepped our toe over the line, but if we stay here any longer, we’ll be so far past the line we won’t be able to see it anymore. It’ll be buried in secrets and lies.

Xavier makes up his mind. He walks up to me, grabs my face and kisses me. With every brush of our bodies, my clarity fades away.

It's all hands and lips. It's fast and rushed, as if we are scared the bubble will burst any moment. Xavier lifts me onto the counter, pushes my dress up and removes my thong. He undoes his buckle and pulls his trousers down to his knees.

Without time for precautions, he thrusts in and fulfils our wants. There is no slow love-making, only a burst of sexual hunger. We *need* this. The ache for Xavier has been building since that first lap dance, and he is finally soothing it.

"You're so perfect," he moans. "You fit so perfectly around my cock." He caresses my nipples through my dress, and I feel it deep inside me. His hand glides up to my throat and presses lightly against it. It only adds to the intensity of it all. He presses down with enough force to make me gasp.

"Come for me." His voice is full of authority, and I want nothing more than to please him.

I meet his thrusts and draw him in deeper by wrapping my legs around his waist. When I come, he groans from the grip around his shaft.

He doesn't let me recover because he flips me over. He lifts one knee onto the counter, giving him better access. With one hand, he holds my dress in place, and the other presses me into the cold counter. As he pounds into me, I know this is for his pleasure.

"Look at how sexy you look, Miss Hayes," he grunts. "Look at how wild you look being fucked by me."

I lift my gaze and almost orgasm over the sight. Xavier's usually perfect hair is in array. The strands point in all directions. His ordinarily solemn features are alive and burning with lust for me. His pressed white shirt is creased from my hold on them. He catches my stare in the mirror, and we continue to fuck like that until I feel the first throb.

He doesn't tell me he is about to come. Instead, he says, "You're going to take it all like a good girl."

With three sharp thrusts, he spills inside me. I clench my walls to keep it all inside. His moans are music to my ears as I drain him of every sinful drop.

When he pulls out, I whimper from the sudden loss. He spreads me open with his fingers before caressing the area. When he flicks his thumb over my clit, I lose control, and some of his arousal drips out. He catches it with his fingers.

"Turn around."

I slowly face him.

"Open your mouth."

I give him a shy smile. I slowly part my mouth.

He places his two fingers in my mouth. "Suck them clean."

I wrap my lips around them and suck as if it's his cock. I stare at him and find pleasure in knowing I have so much control over him. With his fingers clean, I release them from my mouth. I grab the panties he tossed to the side and shove them into his trouser pockets.

“I hope you were satisfied with my service, Mr Rivers.”

MY LEG WON'T STOP shaking, no matter how hard I try. My fingers feel tight from cracking them every few minutes. I check how long it is until we arrive, but it still says thirty-two minutes.

“You need to relax.”

Huxley looks like he rolled out of bed and threw on the first T-shirt and pair of jeans he found.

On the other hand, I put in more effort with my makeup today than any other day. After trying on six outfits, I settled on jeans and a jumper to hide my slight bump.

“I'm trying” I snap at him.

He sighs at my bite. “We can turn the car around and go back home. You don't have to do this.”

“Yes, I do.”

The information in the file didn't satisfy my quench for answers. My father's name is Carlos Diaz. His Mexican

heritage explains the caramel tones of my skin. He turned fifty this year. His birthday was the seventh of February. He's divorced twice and has a son he never sees. He works as a plumber and barely has enough money to get him by. The money he does have goes on liquor at a local bar.

When I first read over his file, I thought that was enough, but I wondered what his voice sounded like. Does he have a welcoming face, or does my resting bitch face come from him? What is his liquor of choice? Was it this lifestyle that cost him his marriage and child? Does he like talking to strangers, or does he drink in the corner alone?

I told myself it didn't matter, but my mum's diagnosis has deepened my desire to belong somewhere. I might lose the one-half of me I know. Does it make me a terrible person for wanting to at least meet the other half?

The thoughts kept me awake until I called Huxley two nights ago and told him I wanted a road trip to Cardiff. He was surprised but agreed. There was no need to come up with a lie for Xavier because he's avoided me like the plague since the night we eviscerated the moral line between us.

Almost as if he can read my mind, Huxley brings up the event. "Are we okay? You've been off with me since the charity event."

I shouldn't feel guilty towards Huxley because he made it clear where we stand. Regardless, it fills me, and I cover it by getting defensive. "You think I'm crying because you basically said you only see me as a fuck?"

“That isn’t what I said,” he grits out.

I can’t help but snort in derision. “Please enlighten me with what you said, Mr. I-Don’t-Have-Time-For-More. At least have the balls to come out and say it directly. I’m sick and tired of you saying something and then doing the opposite. You want me, and then you don’t. You fuck me, then avoid me.”

Those words aren’t reserved for him but are blowing up inside me. After all Xavier said about wanting more, he screwed me and disappeared. He won’t look at me when we’re in the same room. I don’t exist to him anymore. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. I’m even more disappointed in myself for believing him.

“Don’t give me that bullshit! *You* were the one that said it first.”

I stare at Huxley in confusion. “When did I say that?”

His eyes meet mine, and I’m thrown off by the anger in them. “At that stupid fucking Christmas lunch, right before you were practically begging that loser to fuck you. You said we would never get to the family meeting stage.”

“*You* said that!” I shout at him. “*You* were the one that almost jumped out the window when I *joked* about meeting your sister.”

“No, Savannah! I didn’t!” He takes two breaths to calm himself down, but it doesn’t work because his knuckles are white from gripping his steering wheel too tight. When he

speaks, his voice is slightly lower. “I said we weren’t at that stage *yet*. You then said you don’t plan on *ever* being there. So, don’t sit in my fucking car and say I’m using you when you fucked me off first.”

Memories of Huxley snapping at me come rushing back. I’d wondered what switched his mood. I didn’t realise I hurt his *feelings*.

“It’s not your car anymore,” I mumble. “I won that bet, and I’m still waiting for my name on the car.”

“You’ll get it.” His eyebrows remain pulled together with tension. His jaw clenches, but his eyes don’t waver from the road ahead. “Forget about this for today. You have bigger fish to fry.”

A part of me that is grateful I can avoid the conversation because I’m good at running. But the other part wants him to tell me how he really feels. Xavier was a mistake, but Huxley could be a reality.



The bar is dark and crowded. Every table is surrounded by people laughing and talking over drinks. A group of drunk men sling curses at each other over a game of darts. I look around, hoping to recognise a face from the photos.

“Your face is a dead giveaway. Relax,” Huxley mutters. He lowers his baseball cap to cover more of his face.

I can't stop darting my gaze around the bar, scanning every face. *Are these people his friends?* Huxley takes my hand in his and pulls us to the two empty seats at the bar.

The bartender walks over with a big grin as she eyes my company. "Welcome to the Lion's Inn. I'm Katie. What can I get for you, handsome?"

Huxley doesn't look at her but keeps his head down and peers at me. "Order what you want. I'm driving back."

"Just a coke, please."

As she walks away, Huxley gives me a pointed look. "You look like you're going to shit yourself. You need a drink to calm yourself."

I shoot him a blank stare, waiting for common sense to appear. When it doesn't, I place my hand on my stomach. "Are you forgetting something?"

He grimaces. "Let me fuck the stress out of you. Work every one of your limbs until they're forced to relax."

Knowing he would follow through with that, I roll my eyes. "No." I look around again. "Are you sure he comes here?"

Katie returns with my Coke and asks if we would like anything else. Huxley brushes her away and grabs my thigh.

"Act natural. Don't start the conversation. Let him come to you."

I don't turn to look at him until he is two feet away from me. His hair is starting to grey, which coincides with the wrinkles

around his eyes. My tall stature almost matches his, but he still has a few inches on me. I wonder if he was larger before because his slight build makes it hard to believe he had the strength to pin my mum down. His sparse facial hair is unkept and scruffy. His tan coat and shoes are both marked with dirt. *He's a mess.*

Watching him flirt with Katie, I realise I no longer want to do this. Not because I'm scared, but because he's not worth it. From observing him for only a few minutes, I know this stranger will never be able to give me the closure or answers I'm seeking.

I grab Huxley's hand to tell him to get me out of here, but I'm a second too late because a sleazy grin is directed at me.

"You like what you see?" He blatantly eyes me up and down, making me feel sick.

"Watch yourself," Huxley threatens behind me.

My father's amber eyes flicker to Huxley with a menace, but it dissipates when he realises he would never win against the six-foot-three muscular man. He throws his hands up in surrender and lets out a gruff laugh. "Your woman was staring at me. Might want to put her on a leash."

My hands ball into a fist, ready to punch him, but Huxley's light touch on my waist stops me. Putting on a smile, I say, "Sorry, you just looked so familiar. Do I know you?"

His beady eyes roam over me before he shrugs. "Can't remember fuck all these days. You from around here?"

“Just stopping by.”

Katie hands him his drink, but he doesn't move from the bar. He takes a step towards me. “You look like someone I used to know.”

My throat feels tight at the thought of him remembering my mum. Does he still get off on what he did? Does he lay awake and reminisce about pinning her down and forcing himself on her?

“Who's that?”

He lets out another laugh. “It's all history. You have a good night.”

He walks towards a group of three men who cheer as he joins them. The three men look about the same age as him. They pat him on the back and settle into a private conversation.

Do they know that their friend is a rapist? If they did, would they still be friends with him?

“Stop staring.”

I turn around and take small sips of my Coke. Something is nagging the back of my head. How does a man like him have friends? Putting aside the rape, he's a dirty, deadbeat drunk. *How can you be friends with someone like that and be okay with it? Unless...*

“They're still friends,” I whisper to myself.

That doesn't stop Huxley from hearing me. “Who?”

“It was *all* of them. They’re still friends. Still drinking together. Probably still going around raping women together. How else could they tolerate him?” I look over my shoulder again, but a bald white man catches my stare this time. He doesn’t smile at me, and neither I at him.

Let them look at my face and remember what they did to my mother.

He stands up from the table and walks over to the bar where we’re sat. “I haven’t seen a pretty thing like you here in a long time,” he drawls.

“We’re not from here,” Huxley answers.

Finding my voice and courage, I square my shoulders. “Can I help you?”

“You know my friend back there?” He points behind us at my father, but I don’t look back.

“Nope.”

“He said you do.”

“And he said I remind him of someone he once knew.” I smile at him. “Do you know who that may be?”

The bald man tries to hide the panic, but it flashes in his eyes briefly. He tries to feign indifference, but it fails. “The man is a drunk.”

“Has he always been a drunk?”

“What’s your name?”

As a warning, Huxley digs his nails into my thigh, but I'm not stupid enough to give my real name.

"Fiona. Do I get to know yours?"

"My mates call me Jay."

The conversation is interrupted when Carlos walks back over. "I'm going to drop dead before you get the next round."

The two friends share a look before Jay smiles at us. "Just making friends with the out-of-towners. This is Fi."

Tears brim in my eyes at my mother's nickname. Maybe it wasn't intentional, but I know they know who I am from the suspecting looks on their faces.

I blink my tears away. "Don't call me that," I snap.

My father steps between me and Jay. "Sorry. Force of habit. The woman you remind us of, she was known as Fi."

I arch my brows. "You all knew her?" Neither of them answer. "Was she from around here?"

"No."

"So, how did *all* of you know the same woman from another city?"

The smirk on their faces makes my stomach curl. "It's hard to forget the first woman we fought over. The brother bond almost broke." Jay slaps my father's back. "Turns out she was feisty and wanted all of us."

Every fibre of my being *burns*. Anger. Rage. Sadness. Tears brim in my eyes, but I *refuse* to let them see it.

I arch my brow. “Sounds like a crime to me.”

Carlos narrows his eyes. “What are you trying to say?”

Jay grabs Carlos by the arm to divert his stare from my face to his. He shakes his head as if to say *don't entertain this anymore*. And like the spineless piece of shit he is, he listens.

“That’s enough talking for me.”

I point at Jay. “Is he the leader? He says jump, and you all follow? Who makes the decisions in your little group? Or do you take turns? Or maybe you’re all into the same thing, so it doesn’t matter.” I stand up. “Or maybe you don’t care so long as you run your little club together.”

Huxley grabs my hand, stopping me from getting in his face.

Carlos almost looks *scared* while Jay bares his teeth at me.

“This is a scary place – you never know what might jump out behind the bushes. You should be careful, *Fiona*. Did your mother not warn you about bad men?”

If there wasn’t life inside of me I needed to protect, I would gouge his throat out with my bare hands. He has no right to ever mention my mother. None of them do. They might have gotten away with it, but my DNA proves what they did.

I shrug Huxley’s hold off me and step up to Carlos. I pin him down with a stare and smile. “DNA is a funny little thing – most people don’t think about it. But to a jury? It’s the nail in the coffin.” I look past him to Jay. “To answer your question, yes. My mother told me all about what happens here.”

I take two steps away from them before backtracking. I narrow my eyes and drop my smile. I take one last look at the man who is half of me, but I feel nothing. No longing, anger or sadness.

With a wicked grin, I ask, "Why do you think I came?"

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING me?” I groan when I see Elliot leaning against my car. “I’m going to call the police.”

Unfortunately, he climbs into the passenger seat before I can open my door. He waits for me to buckle myself in before he speaks. “Listen. Just hear me out.” He pauses. “I have proof.”

“Of what?”

“Of how crazy this man is!”

Xavier is many things, including a selfish bastard for avoiding me after screwing me, but I wouldn’t call him crazy. Knowing the only way out of this conversation is to let him ramble, I let him continue.

“I tried to look for some family or friends of his, but there was no one. Not a single person. His dad died a few years ago, and I couldn’t find his mum.”

I remember Xavier telling me his mum took her maiden name when she filed for divorce. I share this with Elliot; however, it doesn’t take a knock on his confidence.

“What about friends? How does someone like him not have friends?”

“He has Huxley.” When I stop at a red light, I give him a pointed stare. “Not having a group of friends isn’t a red flag. My only friend is Mia. Yours is Jordan. What’s your point there?”

“He’s a loner, Sav. I couldn’t find any other friends from school, college or university.”

“You’re going to have to do better than this.”

Elliot pinches the bridge of his nose. “What about a girlfriend?”

“I’m five minutes from my house and have dinner plans. Either make your point without the dramatics or get out.”

He unlocks his phone and shows me a picture of a blonde woman no older than her mid-twenties. “Her name is Caitlyn. They went to university together and graduated the same year. I found her social media accounts. She lives in the States; moved right after they broke up.”

A breath I didn’t realise I was holding is released. Part of me was scared he would say she was missing or dead. “What’s your point?”

Elliot punches my dashboard in frustration. “The *only* woman he dates moves abroad after the breakup? That can’t be a coincidence. What did he do that made her move to another country?”

There could be a million reasons why she moved, or it could just be a coincidence.

Elliot takes my silence as a chance to continue fuelling me with doubts. “He owns a security company, right? Maybe he would stalk and harass her.”

I shake my head. “No. Xavier’s company was barely anything back then. He had only just started it. He didn’t have the means to stalk them.” Feeling more confident, I sit taller. “It’s just a coincidence.”

As I pull up outside my gate, Elliot takes my hand. His thumb brushes over my knuckles before giving my hand a squeeze. “You’re thinking with your heart, not your head. You’re smarter than this, Sav. *Look* at what is right in front of you. Think about everything. You have no reason to trust me; I know that. I’ve let you down time and time again. But, *please*, trust me, Sav.”

He kisses my cheek before exiting my car, leaving me wondering if I’ve let my emotions cloud my judgement with Xavier.



As I read the numberplate on Huxley’s, now my Audi, my laughter erupts.

BLG 2HUX

“Belongs to Hux?” I laugh. “I think you’re missing a letter there, sunshine.”

He leans against the car. “I had to be creative.” He hands the keys to me. “It’s yours now.” His hands close over mine as I grab the keys from him. “It’s *you* that belongs to me. Not the car,” he mutters.

I lift my eyes to the house behind me at the hidden camera, watching our every move. Huxley gets the hint and takes a step back.

“It was great doing business with you. Next time, I’ll have to bet on your house.”

He blesses me with my favourite playful smile. “Just ask, and I’ll give you a key.”

“Savannah,” Xavier calls from behind, “I have some forms Dr. Roe needs you to sign.”

I don’t look at him, instead rolling my eyes at Huxley.

“I’m going to wash up,” he says, excusing himself. He walks past the two of us and into the house.

“Savannah?”

It’s been three weeks since we slept together; this is the first time he has spoken to me. Not wanting to create a scene, I turn around and follow him up to his office. The short walk is silent and tense.

He holds the door open for me before closing it behind us. Xavier leans against the door and watches as I awkwardly

stand in the middle of the room. “I’ve missed you,” he says. His voice is low and filled with a pang of sadness.

“You’re the one that’s been avoiding me.” I raise my eyebrow at him. “You made a mistake. It won’t happen again, and you don’t have to worry about me telling your wife.”

My heart beats in rhythm with his steps. He stands before me and places two fingers under my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Don’t ever call it a mistake again,” he growls.

I can’t help but laugh. “What would you call it then?”

His fingers come up to my face and lightly stroke my cheeks. His movements are soft and slow. His face has tenderness as he studies mine as though I may disappear.

He leans in closer so his lips brush against mine when he speaks. In a low whisper, he continues. “I have no control around you, and that scares me. It’s not just sex. I crave you in every way. I miss you even when you’re right there. I want every fibre in our beings to be intertwined until we are one. I love you, Savannah.”

I turn my head away when he tries to kiss me. “Stop.”

“I love you,” he whispers again.

“No.”

“I love you.”

The emotions in his eyes scare me because they’re so raw and honest. Nobody has ever looked at me like that before.

“Kiss me,” he begs.

I don't have time to protest because his lips claim mine, and my resolve breaks. Unlike the first time, this kiss is slow. His lips are gentle, and he doesn't fight for dominance. His hands thread through my hair while mine rest on his chest, feeling his erratic heartbeat.

The tinkle of Emery's laugh travels upstairs from the kitchen, where she sits with Huxley. The sound feels like a bucket of ice-cold water being thrown over me.

I snap out of the spell and push him away. "Stop! You don't get to do that. You're married! And I..."

I also have feelings for Huxley.

"You what?"

Like a fish, my mouth opens and closes, unable to finish what I started.

"You what, Savannah?"

"I can't do this to Emery." I push past him and head for the door. My hand is on the handle when he speaks.

"I'm leaving her."

I slowly turn around. "What?"

He shrugs. "This marriage was over long before we happened. I can't lie to myself anymore. I don't love her. I haven't for a long time." He straightens his cuffs and walks past me. "I'm ready to sacrifice the queen. I don't want to hide behind her anymore. Your turn to make the next move." With those heavy words, he leaves me standing in his office alone.

I take a moment to absorb everything that just happened. Huxley gave me his car. Xavier said he *loves* me. He's going to leave his wife. Emery has no idea that I betrayed her. And now I have to sit around a table with all three and pretend nothing is happening.

Emery points me to the seat opposite her and, by no coincidence on her part, next to Huxley.

"Would you like me to plate your food?" I joke with Huxley.

He grins at me. "Go ahead. You do such a good job of it at the office."

"I spit in your food."

The gleam in his eyes is sinful. "Probably what makes it taste so good."

Emery clears her throat with a playful smile, reminding me we aren't alone. "You have such a lovely new car, Savannah! What will you do with the one you bought?"

My eyes flicker to Xavier, who looks at his wife. "Probably sell it."

The heavy stare can be felt from my right, where Xavier sits at the head of the table.

Emery tops her glass of wine before Xavier snatches the bottle. Her smile turns to ice.

"You've had enough." The sharp ring to his words leaves a sheet of tension at the table. The couple stare at each other until Emery looks away.

“How is business?” she asks.

Xavier’s demeanour relaxes. “Doing well. Ray discovered a new talent – charming the women to sign with us.”

His words grate on my nerves, but Huxley laughs. “Not a new discovery, my friend.” His hand rests on my bare thigh, forcing me to clench them shut.

“Hux is Xavier’s company whore,” I throw in.

Emery laughs but shakes her head at our playfulness. “I’m sure he is a good man.”

His hand creeps up my thigh before slipping under the hem of my dress. His index finger runs along the edge of my underwear. With the straightest face, he nods at Emery. “I’m an honourable man. I would never treat a woman with such blatant disrespect.” As he says that, his finger pushes past the final barrier and slips into my folds.

I yelp in response, earning me some questioning looks. I pull my lips together and close my eyes. When I open them, all eyes are still on me. “Sorry. I felt a shiver.”

Under the table, Huxley strokes my clit no matter how hard I try to cut off access. He looks unbothered by the ordeal, fully participating in the ongoing conversation. Me, on the other hand? My insides are turning to liquid, and the moan I’m holding back is about to rupture.

Just before I can give in, Huxley removes his finger. I stare at him in disbelief, and he stares back with a straight face. He sticks his finger in the mashed potato before licking it clean.

His lips curl into a devilish grin that makes my heart burst. With bright eyes and teeth on display, he looks like the picture of gorgeous.

“Delicious,” he compliments, and I find myself smiling and unable to look away. He looks at our company for the night. “Pardon my terrible table manners.”

Emery carries the conversation, but I find it hard to focus when Xavier’s glare burns through me to my soul. I use all my willpower to make sense of the words coming out of Emery’s mouth, but my brain has melted from the intensity of his stare.

Giving in to my urges, I quickly glance at him. I expect sadness, but jealousy and rage overshadow all else. His jaw twitches the longer he stares at me, and it *hurts*. It aches me that Huxley doesn’t have the same depth of feelings for me as Xavier. It pains me that Xavier is married, and Huxley won’t commit to more. It breaks my heart that neither man can give me what I want.

A tight grip braces my thigh, and I subtly push Xavier’s hold off me. But it’s back within seconds. Without attracting any attention, I shove it off again. From the corner of my eye, I see Xavier’s jaw twitch.

His chest heaves, and he grabs my hand under the table. I snatch them from his hold, which brings his fingers back to my thighs.

He can’t do this. He can’t put his hands on me after ignoring me for three weeks - no matter what excuse he gave.

His fingers trail my clenched thighs.

“Hux!” I snap, shooting daggers at Xavier.

“What?” Huxley says, startled.

Only then do I realise why three different sets of emotions look at me. Huxley’s confusion, Emery’s amusement and Xavier’s pure rage.

My eyes flicker away from Xavier, unable to face his wrath. “Never mind. I thought I forgot to do something at the office...”

Needing to change the subject, I point at Huxley. “What was he like at university?” I ask Xavier.

He clears his throat. “Studious. No time for messing around. I knew he was the right person to be my COO. He’s the only person I trusted enough to not disappoint me.”

The two men share a look of mutual respect. Guilt eats at me, knowing I’m lying to both of them.

“He was hardly much more fun,” Huxley remarks.

“You didn’t have a girlfriend?” I ask Huxley.

“Never.”

I stare at Huxley in shock. How does a person go thirty-two years without being in a relationship?

“Are you a virgin?” I whisper, earning a giggle from Emery.

Huxley’s brows arch as he gives me a blank stare.

“Or maybe nothing is hanging between your legs. Is it a little party wiener?”

His eyes darken, and his lips curl into a fiendish grin. “Need I remind you of the professional boundaries we set?”

I lean in closer. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” I laugh. Before he can respond, I turn to Xavier. “How about you? Sleep your way through the entire campus?”

“No.” He smiles, but a tornado of rage is swirling in his eyes. “I’ve never been one to sleep around because when I have something, I don’t like to share.” His words have a clear warning, but I ignore it like a rebel asking for danger.

“You’d call yourself loyal then? Trustworthy? Honest?”

Turning his head to face me, he says, “Yes. Do you not agree?”

Of the four liars at the table, I don’t know who the biggest liar is.

“I don’t know, Mr Rivers. I’m still figuring that one out.”

He turns his head to his wife. “How about you? What do you think of me?”

Before she can respond, I cut in. “Be careful how you answer Emery. Life is not a game of chess. He may be the king, but it’s not your job to save him.”

THE THIRD TEXT FROM Huxley has me wiping my tears away. I blink at my reflection in the interior mirror and clear my throat. But when I close my eyes and envision my mum sitting through another chemotherapy session, my tears begin again. I lean back in my seat and give myself two more minutes to cry.

Every session brings a deeper wave of heartache. She's starting to wither away and becoming frail. With no one around to comfort me, my hands rest on my belly, hoping the baby will give me the strength to get through this.

Another text comes through, and I pull myself out of my pity party and the car. When I enter the conference room ten minutes late, all eyes are on me, including Xavier's deadly ones.

"You're late, Miss Hayes."

I casually stroll past him and to my seat next to Huxley. "What's your point?" I ask, rolling my eyes at him.

“This is a board meeting. You were expected to be here more than ten minutes ago.” His voice holds authority and captures the entire room.

Huxley warns me with his eyes not to argue back. I reluctantly keep my mouth shut. He stares at me with furrowed brows as he takes in my blotchy cheeks and bloodshot eyes.

“What happened?”

I shake my head to let him know I don’t want to talk about it.

Huxley surprises me by taking my hand in his under the table. His fingers thread through mine, and he squeezes tight.

I lean in closer and whisper, “Thank you.”

He gives me a rare, genuine smile. “Whoever made you cry can get their ass kicked later,” he whispers back.

My heart clenches at the determination in his eyes. “What if I deserved it?”

The light through the windows brings out the rich amber tones in his eyes. “I don’t care.”

I can’t help but smile. “You’d really assault someone for me?”

His lazy grin spreads heat across my chest. “I’d kill someone for you, sweetheart.”

Xavier slams his palms down on the table. “Am I interrupting your conversation, Miss Hayes?”

I cross one leg over my knee. “Kind of.”

His eye twitches as he stares at me, saying nothing.

My eye roll is reflexive. “What is the big deal? Are you so inept at your job that you need me to run your meeting for you?”

His eyes deepen to a stormy blue. “Your insolence knows no bounds. You were not only late to work but a board meeting. You came in with a bad attitude and then have the nerve to sit in *my* meeting and call me inept?”

He knows where I was, yet he’s talking to me like this? I don’t have to fucking take this shit from him.

I let go of Huxley’s hand and stand up. I collect my bag and walk to the door.

“Where are you going? Sit back down!” he shouts.

I shake my head to myself. “No.”

“Sav—“

Huxley is cut off by Xavier. “I will handle this, Ray. If you walk out that door, there will be consequences.”

I open the door. “Fucking fire me then.”



“Want to grab some lunch?” I ask Huxley when he walks into the office an hour later.

“Miss Hayes, meet me in my office.” The bastard walks off before I can protest.

“I’m not getting involved,” Huxley says. “Just go and apologise.”

“What for?”

“You embarrassed the CEO in front of the board. Go and play nice,” he comes closer, “And I’ll reward you later.”

“Where are you going?” I ask as he grabs his phone and leaves his office.

He gives me a sheepish look. “He asked everyone to clear the floor. Even Francesca.”

Ready to face his unfiltered anger, I knock on Xavier’s door and wait for him to call me in. When I enter, he is aggressively tapping the keyboard behind his desk. He doesn’t acknowledge me, so I slide into the seat opposite him.

“Stand,” he barks.

I jump at his order and awkwardly stand next to the chair. “What do you want, Xavier?”

He slams the laptop closed and walks around until he is standing in front of me. His long legs are clad with a deep navy suit. His feet are adorned with the shoes he only wears to board meetings. As he folds his arms over his chest, the fabric from the jacket hugs his muscles. The finishing touch to the godly man is the matching tie that hangs around his neck.

“My name is Xavier Rivers, and I am the CEO of XR Securities. I built this company from my bedroom into the multi-billion-pound company it is now worth. I worked every day and night, recruited and trained the best in the country to

make this company what it is.” He takes a step closer. “My name is Xavier Rivers, and *I* make the orders. When I speak, people listen. When I ask a question, I expect an answer. When I stand before you, I demand respect.” He steps closer. “Is that clear?” he shouts.

I don’t flinch at the boom of his voice. Standing before me isn’t the Xavier I know. He isn’t sweet or gentle. He is a CEO.

“I can’t respect a man who promised a dream then used me like every man that paid for a private dance. You made me feel cheap.”

He looks taken aback by my response. I hate the way he seems more sad than angry. “You’re the one that hasn’t given me an answer.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “I won’t make that decision for you! I won’t *ask* you to leave her!”

“At least tell me you want me! Tell me I’m not going fucking crazy. Is this in my head? Because I don’t understand *anything*. You remind me I’m married, but what about you and Ray?”

A lump forms in my throat. “What about us?”

“The flirting. The looks. The teasing.” He steps towards me with a killer look in his eyes. “If you’ve fucked him...” He doesn’t finish his threat.

Wanting to know the consequences, I ask, “What would you do?”

“Are you in love with him?”

I don't know.

“What are we doing, Xavier?” I run my hands through my hair in frustration.

He pulls his tie loose and pulls at the ends of his hair. “Look at me, Savannah! I can't do anything right! I can't fucking eat or sleep or chair my own fucking board meeting without you invading every fucking thought. I hate how much control you have over me. I should have ripped you to shreds in there, but the thought of hurting you *kills me*. I would have fired them on the spot if it were anyone else.”

I narrow my eyes. “Do it. Fire me. Let me go.”

In two large steps, he is standing toe-to-toe with me. His hands snake up both sides of my face, forcing me to look at him. “Tell me you don't feel something between us. Tell me you don't want more.”

I put as much confidence in the lie as I can. “I don't want more.”

“Liar,” he whispers. He kisses the corner of my lips. “I can feel your body changing. Your breaths are deep and slower. Your heartbeat is erratic. You're clenching your thighs.” He kisses just under my earlobe. “Your muscles are relaxing because you feel safe with me. You know I would protect you.”

His soft kisses weaken my defence because no matter how much I deny the emotional pull, I can't deny the physical. His lips hover over the pulse point on my neck before pulling the

skin into his mouth and sucking. My eyes close at the pleasure of the sting before pushing him away.

Our eyes meet, and electricity hums in the space between us. I can feel the gap closing despite knowing I need to walk out of here. I look back at the door, only a few steps away, and hesitate.

Nothing good will come from this.

“Get on your knees, Savannah.”

The order leaves no room for negotiation or refusal. It’s the same authoritative tone he uses in meetings while barking orders at his subordinates.

“Don’t make me ask again,” he threatens when I don’t move.

With no protection from others seeing us through the glass, I comply and kneel before him. His eyes darken with lust, and he unbuckles his belt.

“Learn to control that mouth of yours, Miss Hayes.”

I roll my eyes at him.

He grabs my jaw and squeezes. “What did I tell you about eye rolling?” He releases my jaw to let me answer.

“You don’t tolerate them.”

“Your poor attitude today and the repeated eye rolls have taken away your orgasm privilege.” He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip as he stares directly into my eyes. “I always knew I would be a CEO because I enjoy the power and

control. I make orders, and you bend over for them, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” I tease.

“Open your mouth.” Xavier pulls his cock out and strokes the length of it. The sight makes the pool in my panties deeper. He rubs the head against my bottom lip before pushing it into my mouth.

“Suck.”

The temptation to bite down and injure him dissipates as I start slow. I keep as much of his shaft in my mouth but only run my tongue along the underside. Xavier tries to thrust, but I put my hands on his thigh, stopping him. I open my mouth wider and swallow as much of his length as possible. Just as he hits the back of my throat, his throaty groan echoes in the room.

His hands thread through my hair before grabbing a fistful and guiding my head. My eyes water as he pushes past my limit and makes me gag. He holds me in place and relishes being down my throat. I slap his thigh, and he pulls back and lets me breathe again.

The pad of his thumb collects the saliva dribbling down my chin and forces it back into my mouth. His thumb rubs my lips again as he mutters, “Such a pretty mouth.”

A light trail of saliva follows his hand down to my throat. The gentle pressure he adds doesn’t match the fire in his eyes.

“What’s my name?”

My face scrunches in confusion. *Is this his idea of dirty talk?*

“Xavier?”

He hums in agreement. His grip tightens around my throat. “Repeat it.”

Kneeling before him, I say, “Xavier Rivers.”

His lips twist into a snarl. “So *why*,” he chokes me harder, “did you call me *Hux*?” He spits the name at me.

I gulp at the reminder. I had hoped he had forgotten it when he never mentioned it after the dinner. “Accident,” I wince.

He stares down at me. “Do you think of him when I touch you?”

“No.”

He lets go to kneel before me. “No other man’s name is to be uttered from your lips. Understood?” He stands up when I nod. “Open your mouth.”

Against every fibre of my being, I do as he says because while I hate how much I want to please him, another part of me finds this side of him sexy. He’s a devastatingly beautiful monster.

He is ruthless with his thrusts when he pushes back into my mouth. One hand rests at the back of my head while the other grabs my throat. I am entirely at his mercy as he fucks my throat with everything in him.

“Are you wishing I was fucking your pussy like this?” He forces his entire length down my throat, cutting off my oxygen supply. Unlike before, this time, it is only for a few seconds. He pulls out and slaps his cock against my lips. “Fucking hell. You look so sexy like this. On your knees for me, saliva coating your pouty lips and your pussy wet and aching for me. Look at me.”

I peer at him with the best look of innocence I can muster.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

Yes!

My clit is throbbing from being so aroused but deprived of any stimulation. The temptation to fuck my fingers gets stronger the longer I try to ignore it.

Xavier chuckles. “I can see you begging for it with your eyes.” He kneels. “You deserve punishment for your behaviour today.”

I smile at him. “I’ll just have Huxley fuck me in his office after this.” My smile turns smug at his raging jealousy.

He stands up. “I’ll murder him if he touches you.” He fists my hair and yanks it back. “Open that fucking mouth again and make me come.”

Never being one to disappoint, I go to town on his cock. I swirl my tongue around the opening, making him hiss.

“Don’t tease me, Savannah.”

I kiss the head before taking him down my throat again. I take as much as I can while my hands work the rest.

“Nobody will ever have you again. This mouth, your pussy, your body, *everything* belongs to me.” His grip on my hair gets tighter. “You look so sexy on your knees for me. Sucking me dry in my office where anybody can see who you belong to.”

I look up at him with wide, naive eyes. The thrill of potentially being caught adds to the intensity of the situation and makes my pussy ache even more. The thought of him spreading me wide over his desk is almost enough to make me combust.

“Fuck. It’s coming. *Don’t* swallow.” Xavier takes over and thrusts until he begins to throb.

The first spurt of cum makes me gag as it shoots to the back of my throat. Ropes of his cum spill into my mouth, and I wince at the salty taste. I don’t swallow any of it. Only when every drop is out does he slowly pull out.

My gag reflexes are about to kick in as I hold all his cum in my mouth.

“Open your mouth.”

I tilt my head back and show him the mouthful of his arousal I’m holding.

He smirks at me. “Such a good girl.” He admires the view for a few more seconds. “Now swallow.”

Having a better idea as a *fuck you* for making this all about himself, I close my mouth and offer a half grin. Before I lose

my confidence, I look down at his shoes and spit his cum on them. It takes everything in me not to laugh at the confusion followed by outrage on his face.

I stand up and smile. “Next time you want to use my body for your satisfaction, make sure there’s something in it for me too. See you at home, Mr. CEO.”

A MILLION QUESTIONS FLURRY through my mind as I take the lift to the top floor. Who would kill him? Is it even murder? Maybe they got unlucky with the batch they bought. Even though I'm not shedding tears for the serial rapists, I need to know if Huxley had something to do with it. I would be naïve to ignore the coincidence of them dropping dead only a month after I met them.

I barge into the office and drop my bag onto my desk before storming over to Huxley's and interrupting whatever conversation he and Xavier were having.

"You're late," he points out.

I smile at him. "Apologies. I forgot to ask the two officers to sign me a late note."

"Officers?" Xavier asks, his brows pulling together. "Where were you?"

"The police station," I bite out.

"Why?"

I stare at Huxley, wanting to take in his reaction to the news.
“My father and his friends were murdered.”

There is evident surprise on his face before it morphs into apathy. He looks like he couldn't care less, even if he tried. When I don't look away from him, he sighs. “Are you expecting me to be sad about it?”

“Did you do it?”

This time, there's a much bigger reaction. For a moment, he looks disheartened before he looks angry. “You think I murdered four men?”

“It can't be a coincidence, Hux!”

“Well, it is. I don't go around murdering people. Is that the man you think I am?”

“How would I know? I barely know you!”

This time, the sadness lingers, and he doesn't hide it. He stares at me as my words weigh heavier on his chest than the news of murder. He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth as he nods. “If after a *year* of knowing me, you think I'm capable of murder, then you don't know me. If I wanted to murder the man and his little rapist club, I would have done so when I found him. I wouldn't have told you he existed and taken you to him.”

“You what?” Xavier booms, reminding me of his presence.

Maybe I should have waited until we were alone.

“What the hell did you do?” The question is directed at Huxley, but he doesn’t flinch under the deadly stare.

“I drove her to Cardiff to meet her father.”

A string of curses emits from Xavier before he stands up and presses on the back of the chair. “How stupid are you? You took a *pregnant* woman to meet with a man you *knew* was a rapist. What if something happened to her?”

I feel guilty that Huxley is facing the brunt of his anger, considering I was the one who asked to go. The need to defend him is too overwhelming. “It was my idea. I practically begged him.”

His stormy eyes turn to me. “I can’t even count how many clauses you broke in your contract! I don’t care if you threatened to jump off a bridge!” He points at Huxley. “You should have known better! How stupid are the pair of you? Why didn’t you tell me?” His question is directed to me.

I peer at Huxley before addressing Xavier again. “We weren’t exactly on speaking terms,” I answer vaguely.

He punches the chair. “I don’t care, Savannah! You come to *me* before you put your life in danger.” His eyes soften a degree. “What if something happened to you? What would I have done? How would I...” He swallows his panic down. “How would I tell Emery that our baby... you... *everything*. How would I continue living knowing I lost everything I’ve spent my life waiting for?”

As vain as it sounds, I know he isn't talking about the baby. He's talking about *me*. I can see it on his face and body. His fingers flex as if he wants to touch me, ensuring I'm still here.

"I'm sorry."

Huxley clears his throat. "Is this done with now? Can we go back to our meeting?"

I shoot him an incredulous look. "No! Someone told the cops that I confronted him at the bar that day. What if I'm being framed?"

Xavier wheels my chair over and gestures for me to sit. He retakes his seat and nods at me. "Tell me what they said."

I recap everything, starting with the phone call I received in the morning being asked to go to the station. Xavier asks for an excruciating amount of detail. He then wants the same about my encounter with Carlos and Jay.

"I'll handle it," Huxley says at the end.

"No," Xavier barks with a thunderous look. "You've done enough. Hand me the file you had on him."

I nod. "How are you going to find who did it?"

"I am Xavier Rivers."

"What does that mean? What are you going to do?"

He stands up. "It's handled, Savannah," he snaps.



As if my day hasn't been long enough, Elliot is waiting for me at the gates. I walk over to him. "What are you doing here?"

His eyes dart around him as if waiting for someone to jump out. "Cam is looking for you," he whispers. Elliot looks rough. It's clear he hasn't been sleeping or eating properly. "He knows it was you who gave me the money."

"How?" I hiss.

His lip trembles. "I told him. He had a knife to my throat. He wants another twenty."

I want to be angry at him, but it's hard when fear has him in a chokehold. I wrap my arms around him. "He can't get to me here. Don't worry about me."

Elliot hugs me tighter and kisses the top of my head. "I'm so sorry, Sav."

I pull out of his embrace. "Nothing will happen to us. I'll sort it." He tries to protest, but I cut him off when Xavier appears on the other side of the gate. "Leave it with me, okay? If Cam contacts you, tell him he'll have his money in two weeks. That's when I get my next payment."

It's not that I want to give away my money, but Cam follows through on his threats. I may be safe in this fortress, but I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to Elliot.

"I love you, Sav." He looks at Xavier lingering by my front door.

“Keep a low profile. Get yourself to Jordan’s and always stay with someone.”

He gives me one last hug and walks away. I wait until he disappears before joining Xavier. “What are you doing here?” I ask for the second time in five minutes.

Xavier’s suit attire has been replaced by a t-shirt and jogging bottoms. His hair is damp, and his eyes are gloomy. “I needed to see you were okay.”

I pull the door open and let us in. I stare out into the garden and wonder where Emery is. Does she know he came to see me?

I quickly change out of his view before joining him in the bedroom. “Can I get you something to drink?” I offer.

Xavier sits at the foot of the bed with his head down. It feels peculiar having him in my bedroom. He’s oddly silent, which leaves me feeling anxious.

“Xavier?” I call. “Why are you here?”

“What if something happened to you?” When he looks at me, he looks scared. “What if I lost you?”

I lean against the bookshelf with my arms crossed. “Hux was with me. Don’t you trust him?”

“Not with your life.” Xavier looks unsure and worried for the first time since I’ve met him. There is no trace of arrogance or confidence. “I need you, Savannah. I know I shouldn’t, but I do.”

My heart softens at his sad demeanour. “I’m here. I’m okay.” I take slow steps until I am standing in front of him. My fingers weave through his damp hair and down the side of his face until I hold it in my hands. I lock eyes with him. “I’m *here*, Xavier.”

His arms wrap around my waist, and his head rests on the bump. We stay like that as minutes tick by – nothing but silence and the fire that burns between us.

“Tell me you love me,” he says.

“I can’t.”

He sighs against me. He pulls back only to push my t-shirt above my bump. My black lacy thong isn’t what holds his attention. Xavier only admires my growing belly as his palms it.

“You look so perfect being pregnant with my baby.”

I almost remind him that it’s Emery’s baby too, but I let him have his moment.

Xavier stands before pulling the t-shirt over my head, leaving me in nothing but my thong. His fingertips barely touch my skin as they travel down from my neck, between the valley of my breasts to my waist. He kneels before me and places a light kiss on my stomach.

“How beautiful is the miracle of life? What starts as a small seed grows in the depth of your body. Warm and safe, feeding off everything that flows in your blood. Nine months of calling your body home before you perform a miracle and pushing life

out of *here*." As he says that, his fingers trail over my thong and stop directly between my legs.

An involuntary roll of arousal flows through me as he looks up at me. He looks divine, kneeling before me.

"I don't like to think about the pushing part." My attempt to burst the erotic bubble fails.

"Your pussy deserves to be worshipped."

The thin fabric does little to stop me from feeling the sensation of his thumb brushing over my clit. When I don't move, he takes it as permission to hook his thumbs into the waistband and pull them down my legs. Xavier tosses them to the side. He doesn't break our stare as he licks his lips.

There's an ache that I want him to soothe, no matter how wrong it is. I part my legs, letting him know I want this.

His smile lasts a moment before he leans forward and parts my folds with his tongue. His tongue swirls around my clit before pulling it into his mouth and lightly sucking.

My hands grip his hair to stop me from buckling under the pleasure. I part my legs and straddle his face. I grind against his mouth until I feel that familiar sensation of an orgasm.

"Keep going," I moan. "Fuck, that feels so good."

Xavier gives me what I want as his tongue darts into my opening. His arms snake around my thighs to hold me in place. He fucks me with his tongue until I'm holding onto the bed, unable to keep upright. The moan that leaves his lips vibrates against my clit and erupts in my every pore.

I can barely catch my breath as I come down from my high. I step away from him and fall back on my bed.

Xavier stands in front of me with a lazy grin. His lips are wet with my arousal. His hair is dishevelled. “Who said I was done?”

I cover my eyes with my arm. “Pregnancy makes everything feel so intense.”

“Look at me, Savannah.”

I lower my arm to my side and abide by his request. He doesn't say or do anything. He watches me with a look of contentment. It's unfair that one person could be the entire package – intelligent, rich *and* handsome.

“Take your clothes off, Mr Rivers.”

“What would you like, Miss Hayes?” he asks, pulling his t-shirt over his head.

I part my legs. “Worship me.”

His jogging bottoms are kicked to the side. “I want to love you.”

Sitting up, I pull his boxers down. “Women want to be fucked.”

He climbs onto the bed and gently pushes me down. “Let me do both.”

I can't look away from the wave of emotions swirling in his blue eyes. There is nothing but raw vulnerability in them. Even when he pushes into me, I can't stop feeding off

everything he is feeling. My heart feels as complete as my centre. Even when his entire length is in me, he doesn't move. We stay stationary as every part of us, physically and emotionally, is combined.

Xavier rests his hands on either side of my face. He leans forward until his lips brush against mine. "I love you." He doesn't allow me to say anything before he starts with steady thrusts.

There is no rush this time. There is no anger fuelling his movements. Each thrust is slow and meaningful. He takes his time to feather my skin with kisses. His tongue swirls around my sensitive nipples.

"Xavier," I moan.

"You fit around me like our bodies were made for each other." He pulls back and watches where our bodies meet.

"Faster," I groan out.

He shakes his head. "Not yet." He continues to tease me with achingly slow thrusts. When I try to meet his movements, he tuts and pulls out.

I pull him onto the bed and quickly move to straddle him. "My turn."

Xavier leans back on his elbows as I lower myself onto his length.

My eyes roll to the back of my head as I sit with his shaft filling me. I ride him with a much faster pace than he did me.

His moans only encourage me to move faster. He pulls my nipple into his mouth and sucks *hard*.

Xavier pulls me onto him so my chest presses against his. His arms hold my torso in a tight vice as he takes over. His hips lift off the bed as he fucks me senseless.

“Tell me how it feels,” he begs.

My head rests in the crook of his shoulder. “Don’t stop,” I plead. “I’m going to come.”

His teeth come down onto my shoulder as I come on his cock. My hips grind against him as I ride out the orgasm.

“That’s my girl. Come on my cock. Fuck.” His groan is heaven to my senses.

His thrusts are sharp as he forces his cum deep inside me. I feel his cock throb as he fills me. His groans continue until I lift myself off him.

Xavier doesn’t let me go far as he wraps his arms around me and holds me close to his naked body. “I wanted more than that,” he laughs.

I pull on his coarse facial hair. “That was enough for me.”

“Your pussy feels too good.”

My head falls back as I laugh. “Or you have no stamina.”

We lay in the cocoon we hide from the world in. Xavier holds me tight in his embrace. I don’t let myself worry about the repercussions, allowing myself to, once again, live in the delusion that everything will work its way out.

After an extended, comfortable silence, Xavier breaks it. “My dad would have loved you,” he says. “You are everything he wanted me to find.”

I trace his lips. “Is that right?”

He hums under his breath. “I never had much in common with my dad. His passion was making diamonds, and I never quite understood it. It was just a rock.”

My arms wrap around his neck. “Sounds like something changed your mind.”

Xavier tucks my hair behind my ear. “I helped him make one. It was amazing seeing nothing turn into something so beautiful. I got to watch my dad completely in his element. He knew exactly what to do. He talked me through every step, and I learnt to appreciate his craft.”

My smile is genuine. It’s clear how much he loved his dad. “Not enough to follow in his footsteps?”

He smiles too. “No, but I’ve kept a few pieces I made with him. Maybe one day I’ll show you.”

I snuggle against him and close my eyes. “I can’t wait.”

“Savannah?” he calls.

I look at him.

“No more lies,” he promises.

I RUN MY HANDS over the red ruched dress and eye my reflection. The fabric does an excellent job of concealing my growing belly. On the other hand, the draped collar accentuates my fuller breasts. My black hair has been styled into loose Hollywood waves. I'm applying lipstick when there is a knock at my door. My red lips pull into a satisfied smile at my reflection.

Emery stands on the other side of the door when I pull it open. Her gasp boosts my confidence. "Ray is going to be eating out of your hands tonight."

I chuckle as I lead her into my home. "I doubt it. He's been a misery since hearing about his birthday party." I pop my studs in. "Thank you for organising it."

She takes a seat on the armchair. "It's no trouble at all. Let's not tell him it was me," she winks. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. How are you?"

Something in how she looks at me makes it feel like she can see through me. Her doe eyes squint as she has a mental conversation with herself.

“Emery?”

“Has something happened in the office?” she asks. “Xavier has been different recently.”

My heart feels like it’s lodged in my throat. Guilt eats at me, knowing she’s sat in the room where her husband and I have betrayed her. This small home has been the setting for our tryst the past month. Sometimes, it’s in the morning when she thinks we’ve left for work. Other times, he’s snuck in during the middle of the night. On the days when we crave one another, we wait until Emery is out with her friends before he comes over.

It’s been stressful making sure Huxley and Xavier don’t run into one another. When I’m with Huxley, it feels right, but it still feels like a betrayal to Xavier, and vice versa. A large part of me knows what I’m doing is wrong, but are they any different from me? Both claim it’s more than sex, but neither are willing to step up. *No one in this mess is clean.* Not even Emery, who I can’t bear to face.

I can’t think of anything to say. I turn away and pretend I’m looking for my heels. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind. It’s probably just stress.” Her footsteps stop right behind me. She hands me the shoes. “Before you accept his love, make sure you know who he is.”

“Is there something I should know?” I ask.

She takes my hand in hers and squeezes. Sadness etches itself onto her face. “A bad choice today is tomorrow’s regret.”

The door opening puts a halt to the conversation. Xavier looks between us with confusion. “What are you doing?”

Emery blinks away her tears and smiles. “Nothing. I was just checking on her.”

A heaviness settles on my chest. I can’t look away from Emery. Usually, it would be her beauty and elegant cream dress, but right now, it’s the unsettlement from her warning. *What does she know that I don’t?*

“Thank you. I’ll be out in just a minute.”

She gives my hand one last squeeze before she lets go. “I need to tend to the guests.” She walks past her husband without giving him a second glance.

When the front door closes, and her footsteps fade away, Xavier steps further into the room. “You look beautiful.”

Normally, I would make the most of our time alone, but seeing Emery in this room, asking questions with tears in her eyes, makes me want to run as far away from him as I can.

“You should go and greet your guests.” I take a seat on the bed and fasten my heels.

Xavier kneels before me and takes over. “Did she say something?”

“I need to get out there before Huxley gets here.” I stand up and try to leave. When his fingers grip my wrist, I close my eyes and will these feelings away. “Let go.”

“You said nothing was going on between you. Then you throw him a party?”

I peel his fingers off me and face him. “It was Emery’s idea.”

“You could have said no,” he argues.

I let out an incredulous laugh. “And explain that how? Sorry Emery, I don’t want to throw him a party because your husband, who I’m screwing by the way, will get jealous. Does that sound like a good enough excuse?”

He straightens the cuffs of his shirt and nods. “I’m going to tell her.”

I roll my eyes and walk away. “Whatever you say.” I leave him alone in my bedroom and use the short walk to the house to take deep breaths. I’m done letting him call the shots. Nausea fills me every time I have to look at Emery. His promises of ending his marriage are false ones. I won’t sit around to let him have his cake and eat it anymore.

My anger has taken a backseat by the time I’ve reached the house, even if I still feel anxious. Emery is already mingling with the guests with a glass of red wine in her hand.

“I never pegged you as the type to throw your boyfriend a party,” Francesca teases.

I’m very aware of Xavier standing behind me. He doesn’t make his presence known until he walks past me without

saying anything.

I shoot her a pointed look. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Such a shame because he’s so *nice* to look at.” She tilts her head and stares at Huxley as he walks in with three people behind him.

His black shirt is moulded to his body. He teases every woman in the room, leaving the top two shirt buttons undone. My eyes rake down his body to his black suit pants, and shoes.

“A beige suit with a black base? Brave,” Francesca says.

She’s right. Not many men could pull off the contrasting colours. But Huxley does. His hair is pulled into his signature bun. I stay on my side of the room and watch as he accepts the birthday wishes with a stony expression. He introduces the people behind him, who are more excited to be here than him. It doesn’t take a genius to know they’re his family.

His mum hasn’t stopped smiling since she walked in. Her blonde hair and green eyes weren’t inherited by Huxley but were by his sister. Hadley watches her brother in amusement. Every time he grumbles something, it earns him a snicker from her. She flips her middle finger at him when he shoots her a blank stare. His dad gives her a warning look to behave, but she ignores it. She’s nothing like Huxley – in fact, they are starkly different. A hand comes down on his shoulder. When I look at his dad, it’s clear who Huxley got his looks from. From the amber eyes to the tall build, Huxley is a replica of his father.

“Are you going to keep staring at them, or will you speak to them?”

I smile at Francesca. “All good things come with time.”

The truth is I’m worried they won’t like me. They seem like a picturesque family: two parents in love, the handsome, talented son and the gorgeous, loveable younger daughter. Huxley told me he’s close to his family. What if they look at me and know I don’t deserve a place with them?

“That time is now because they’re coming over.” She stands taller and smiles at them. “Happy birthday, Ray.”

He nods at her. “Thank you.”

She looks at them and then at me. With a grin, she excuses herself.

My heart is racing as four sets of eyes analyse my face. Huxley’s is the most piercing one.

“All this, and you don’t wish me a happy birthday?”

I roll my eyes. “All this, and you don’t fall to your knees thanking me?”

He arches his brow at me. “Do you like having men fall at your feet?”

A throat being cleared behind him bursts the bubble I always find myself in around him. “Show some respect,” his dad warns.

“Savannah, these are my parents and my irritating sister.”

“It’s so nice to meet you!” His mum pulls me into a hug.
“You did a wonderful job with this party.”

I give her my best smile. “I had a lot of help, Mrs Ray.”

She shakes her head. “Call me Isabella.”

“I’m Hadley, and you’re *hot!*”

“Thank you. I’ve heard so much about you,” I half-lie.
Huxley has mentioned her once or twice.

“Liar,” he exposes.

Hadley snorts with derision. “I’m glad because you would only tell lies about me. Did he tell you he’s the favourite? Because that’s a lie.”

“Please excuse their childish banter. Malcolm,” he says, offering a handshake.

I take his hand and introduce myself again. “I’m so glad you could make it. Please help yourself to refreshments.”

“All your practice at the office is paying off.”

“Has he always been so annoying?” I ask Hadley.

“Yes! Finally, someone who doesn’t worship the ground he walks on,” Hadley screams. “If you need help getting rid of the body, call me.”

Huxley scoffs at us. “As if you could lift my body.”

I shrug my shoulders. “Who said anything about lifting? I’d take an axe and hack away.”

Hadley lifts her hand for a high-five. My hand meets hers with a laugh.

“I hate you guys. I thought it was my birthday?” The childlike pout is so unlike Huxley. His family clearly brings out a softer side to him. His eyes have a playful gleam, and he stands taller. He’s *happy*.

I step forward and wrap my arms around his neck. I don’t pay attention to all the eyes on us. Huxley reciprocates the hug by settling his hands on my waist. His sigh of bliss is felt in my heart. I place a soft kiss on his cheek.

“Happy birthday, sunshine.” I wipe away the red lipstick that stains his skin.

In front of all the guests, Huxley gets down to the floor and kneels in front of me. With a wide grin, he says, “Thank you for throwing a spectacular birthday party, sweetheart.”

My chuckle is echoed by his family and the other guests. “Stand up. You’re embarrassing me.” Under my makeup, my cheeks flush with heat. I look around the room with a shake of my head. My smile fades as Xavier leans against the wall with a hurt look. I divert my gaze away from him.

I had nothing to worry about because Huxley’s family are welcoming. They share stories of Huxley as a child, and my heart warms at them. Huxley doesn’t enjoy story time as much as I do, which makes me smile more. It’s easy to see how much he loves his family. When he thinks the world isn’t watching, I see the small smile that graces his lips as his

parents talk. His eyes soften when Hadley throws her head back with laughter.

Huxley and I drift closer as time passes until his suit brushes against my bare arm. I look up at him while he looks at me with a smile. I look away, but a few moments later, his arm loosely rests on my waist. The touch ignites something in me, but it isn't the fire of arousal I'm used to. This is something much more profound.

"Don't they make a lovely couple?" Emery says as she joins the circle.

His mum has a knowing smile. "I would say perfect." She looks past Emery at Xavier, who is walking over. "As perfect as you and your husband."

Like the perfect gentleman, Xavier wraps his arms around Emery tight. He places a kiss on the side of her head. "Thank you."

"We heard you're having a baby," Malcolm gushes.

Xavier's piercing blue eyes land on me, but Emery answers. "All thanks to Savannah!"

"What a selfless thing!" his mum adds.

Hadley takes a sip of her champagne with a shake of her head. "I'm sorry, but I wouldn't push a baby out of my lady parts for nobody except myself."

Huxley narrows his eyes. "Not a worry for you because no man will ever get close enough."

Hadley scoffs at him. “Just because you don’t have sex doesn’t mean every man is the same. Tell me, Sav, is it his choice, or does he repel women?”

I laugh at his annoyance. “I thought he was gay?”

All three women splutter on their drinks.

He glowers down at me. “Gay? Maybe I need to put a baby in you,” he mutters. Not quietly enough because everyone hears. They all bear a smirk except the man opposite me.

“She already has a baby in her,” Xavier remarks.

“Maybe after this one,” Emery jokes.

“I’d love to build the nursery.” Malcolm shared his passion for carpentry. He built most of the furniture in his house.

Huxley drops his arm. “When are we cutting the cake?”

It’s clear he doesn’t want to continue the conversation, and it upsets me. It just reaffirms he doesn’t want a future with me. This is all just fun and games for him.

I keep my smile intact. “I need a bathroom break, and then we can cut the cake.” When I step back, Huxley starts to close the gap but stops. “Or you can go ahead and cut the cake without me.” I turn on my heels and walk out of the house, across the garden to the guest house. I open the door and slump onto my bed.

I count to ten, and when that doesn’t work, I take deep breaths. Nothing helps ease the rejection that stings in my blood. Tears brim in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I

won't cry for any man. The urge to kick off my heels and change into my pyjamas is strong. I pick up my phone to let Emery know I'm not feeling well, but my front door opening stops me.

“Did you make it to the bathroom?” Xavier asks.

I sit up. “Yeah. I needed a moment to rest. Have they cut the cake?”

“They're waiting for you.”

I stand up and dust off my dress. “Let's go.”

Xavier blocks the way. He closes the gap between us and takes my face in his hands. “I've waited all night for a moment alone with you.”

I hold his wrists. “We shouldn't be having moments alone.”

He pushes my hair back and brushes his thumb over my earrings. “You deserve to be bejewelled in real diamonds. Ones that have a chance at comparing to how beautiful you are. Diamonds that have the same shine your eyes do. Stones that reflect as much light as you.”

“They're waiting.”

He lets go only to dip into his inside suit pocket. “I came earlier to lend this to you. It's the first diamond I made with my dad.” He hands me a small green velvet box.

I open it to reveal a dainty gold chain with a single diamond hanging. There's beauty in the simplicity of it. My fingers run over the jewellery. “It's beautiful.”

“It doesn’t compare to you.” He removes the necklace from the box and asks me to turn around. His fingers are gentle as he wraps it around my neck and clasps it shut. He turns me around and admires the small rock. “Perfect.”

“Thank you.”

“Nobody has ever worn it.”

I lean forward and place a soft kiss on his neck, just under his ear. “Let’s go.” I wipe away the lipstick and walk ahead of him.

It’s unjust I’m hurt by Huxley rejecting me when I’m accepting gifts from Xavier. But if Huxley gave me *some* indication of a future, I would choose him. There’s no denying my feelings for Xavier, but when at a crossroad, you choose the path that has fewer hurdles. Xavier and I have tarnished the future with karma by the choices we’ve made in the past. There’s only so long we can run from the truth.

The truth is like a mirror; every lie, big or small, leaves a crack. We hide from the truth because it’s easier to live in a lie. But life has a funny way of forcing you to look in the mirror. When that time comes for Xavier and me, will we recognise who we’ve become? Will we finally see how every fracture of our lies is mirrored in the hearts of those we hurt?

Xavier stays a few steps behind me all the way to the house. He lingers in the garden for a few extra minutes when I enter. I join the crowd in singing *Happy Birthday*. Huxley stands at the front, surrounded by his family, with a blank expression. When he spots me, there is a softness before it disappears.

Hadley calls my name before dragging me to the front with them. I'm squished between her and Huxley. I don't have the courage to look at him, afraid to see the rejection in his eyes again.

But as always, Huxley surprises me by wrapping his arm around me and pulling me closer. He crouches slightly until his lips are at my ears. "One day."

Two words. One promise. *A million butterflies.*

"Let's get a nice family shot of you all to replace the old one in his office," I say.

"You're family now," Isabella says.

I look at Huxley. "Maybe one day." As I walk away, my fingers touch the stone that rests on my chest. No matter how right things feel with Xavier, it will never *be* right. Even if he leaves Emery, the start of our story will catch up with us. You can't expect good to come from something tainted from the beginning.

I stand at the front to listen and laugh as Huxley gives a speech he was forced into. That feeling of unease creeps into me again. I look around the room to see whose stare is burning into me, but everyone is focused on the birthday boy.

I jump when Emery suddenly appears next to me. "You scared me!" I chuckle.

She doesn't laugh. She doesn't even look at me. Staring straight ahead, she asks, "How long have you been fucking my husband?"

SHE KNOWS. SHE KNOWS. *She fucking knows.*

I stared at her in shock and spluttered out a denial. She didn't argue with me. She glanced at me and walked away. If I felt anxious before, it was nothing compared to now. I have dry-heaved over my toilet three times already. I watched her every move as the party continued, but she didn't make a scene. Emery enjoyed the party as if she hadn't accused me of sleeping with her husband.

Is it still an accusation if she is right?

I wanted to get Xavier alone to let him know, but she never left his side. She threaded her arm through his and paraded their marriage like the fucking show it is. She then encouraged him to take Huxley and his father out for drinks.

That could only mean one thing: *she was going to kill me.*

The moment that thought enters my brain, my bedroom lights shut off. I rush to the switch and flick it on and off but to no avail. I try all the light switches, but none of them work.

“Shit!” My voice cracks. I try and find my phone, but I can’t.

“Let’s go,” Emery says from outside.

As much as I don’t want to, I know the only way out of this is to speak to her. She wouldn’t hurt me, at least not with her baby inside me.

Even in the dark, I can see the surprise on her face at my compliance. She doesn’t wait for me as she walks back to the house. The night brings a chilly breeze. Or maybe that’s the coldness seeping from her. Either way, I should have changed out of this red dress. If she does try to hurt me, how will she know when to stop when the colour of my blood will camouflage into this dress?

We walk up the three flights of stairs until hidden in her private room. The sound of the lock turning stops my heart beating.

“What are you going to do?”

She turns her phone flashlight on, and the shadows cast an evil look on her face. She holds her finger up to silence me as she answers a call. “Hello.”

In the silence, Xavier’s question can be heard clearly. “Why did you use the breaker and turn off the electricity?”

“What do you mean?” She inspects her nails.

“What are you doing?” he snaps. “Turn it back on.”

“I don’t need the lights.” She stares at my dress. “I see *red*.”

Silence. The only sound piercing through it is the pounding of my heart.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he warns. “I’m coming home.”

“To me or *her*?”

“Emery.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

I want to tell him to get here as fast as he can, but fear of the consequences keeps me quiet.

“Where is she? Did you hurt her?”

“Come home to me, and she won’t be hurt. You go to *her* first... well, let’s just say the gas switch is still on, and I’m sure I can find a match somewhere.”

“Stay there.”

She hangs up.

“Why did you turn the electricity off?” I ask.

She rounds me and takes a seat at the table. She uses her foot to push the other chair out. “Take a seat.”

I pluck all the courage I can find. I’ve fought monsters far worse than the emotionally broken woman before me. She might be a crazy alcoholic, but I can kick her ass – four months pregnant or not. I stare her down. “Why did you turn the lights off?” I grit out.

“It takes the backup generator ten minutes to kick in.”

Even with no way to confirm, I'm sure it's been ten minutes. Yet her phone torch is the only source of light we have. I look at the door to see if light seeps through the cracks, but nothing.

She's not talking about the lights.

"The cameras." It's not a question.

She hums under her breath. "Take a seat, Savannah. We've got some catching up to do."

This is the part where I must face the mirror. So, I do. I tell Emery everything from when I worked at EspresSoul and the friendship that built, to the start of the affair.

"I wasn't trying to hurt you and never set out to ruin your family."

"But you just couldn't stop yourself." Her statement isn't one of sarcasm – it's one of understanding. "You can't walk away from a love like his."

"I'm sorry. I know it doesn't make this any better, but I am. I told him nothing else would happen until he filed for divorce."

Her shrill laugh catches me off guard. "*Divorce?* Xavier will never file for divorce."

She's delusional. He doesn't love her, and she knows it. She doesn't even love him.

"He will."

"For you?" The grin on her face is a tell-tale she finds the idea humorous.

I sit taller. “For *him*. He doesn’t love you.” As harsh as it is, she needs to hear it.

Her calculating eyes roam down my body. “Were you ever my friend? Did you help me design the nursery thinking it would be *you* putting my baby to bed?”

“No! Nothing was going on between us then. I *am* your friend.” The statement feels ironic, considering the tale I just told her.

“Friends don’t fuck each other’s husbands.”

“You’ve cheated on him too,” I snap. As guilty as I feel, she doesn’t get to sit on her high horse. She riddled the marriage with her affairs.

Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “I don’t care about his infidelity. It’s *you* I have a problem with. I welcomed you into my home. I trusted you to bring my family to life. I chose you to carry my baby. I shared dinners with you. I shared my heartache with you. And you used all that to fuck my husband.”

I lean forward and narrow my eyes. “*Xavier* welcomed me into his home. *Xavier* shared his heartache with me. *Xavier chose me.*”

“Let’s see if he does.”

The pounding at the door is loud and makes me jump. “Open the door, Emery! Let me explain,” Xavier begs.

She clears her throat. “Go away!” Her shout drips with hurt and anger, but her face is blank.

She's putting on a show for him.

“It isn't what you think,” he pleads. “Just open the door and let me explain.”

Emery gives me a knowing smirk. “I don't want to hear it! Go crawling back to her.”

Xavier doesn't accept defeat. What he says next stills my heart. “It was a mistake. It only happened once, and I hated myself for it. I lost myself in the moment. Please let me in.”

I try to reason that he's only trying to pacify her. But if he planned on leaving her, why is he denying it?

She stands up and walks to the door. “I don't believe you. I saw the way you looked at her.”

There is a thud on the other side. His voice seems closer, as though he's right up against it. “Like what? It was nothing but a quick fix. It was pent-up frustration from us. It was a mistake – one I'll spend the rest of my life making up to you. Open the door. Let me face the hurt I've caused you.”

That's twice he called me a *mistake*. How is telling me he loved me a mistake? Every look, every touch, every kiss... everything was a mistake?

When I look at Emery, I see the ice in her eyes has melted a little. I don't realise *why* until my teardrop falls onto my chest. *I'm crying.*

Her still eyes don't move from me as she says, “Leave me alone. Go away.”

He sounds close to tears. “*Please*. I’m sorry. I fucked up, I know. Let me make it right.”

Her steps are blurry as she comes towards me. “Leave Xavier. You’re hurting me.”

“She means nothing to me. She’s just a girl who took my order. She got into my head, and I forgot who I was.”

Emery kneels on the ground and takes my hand in hers. “He’s not worth it,” she whispers.

Why is she showing me sympathy when I don’t deserve it?

This shouldn’t hurt like it is. I was at the crossroads and chose Huxley. *So, why am I crying? Why does it feel like someone has stripped me raw and set my heart on fire?*

“I love him,” I cry quietly.

Never once had I imagined my admission being to Emery. I never thought I’d voice my feelings to anyone but *him*.

“She made me become the same as my mother. I hate her as much as I hate myself.”

Emery covers my mouth to stop my cry from spilling out. She shakes her head. “Don’t give him the satisfaction of your tears.” She turns back to the door. “Please go.”

I pull my lips together to stop the loud cries begging to be released. I dig my nails into my palm to distract me from the assault on my heart. Only a few hours ago, he told me he loved me, and I believed him.

“Let me make this right. What do you want me to do? I’ll go over there now and kick her out. I’ll tell her it was a mistake. I’ll make her leave the city if that’s what you want.”

He used me. He never meant anything he said to me. The betrayal comes second to the heartbreak I’m feeling.

“Stop talking,” she warns.

His pathetic begging doesn’t stop. “It was nothing special. She doesn’t come close to you.”

I stand to open the door and make him face me. I want to confront him in front of her so he can’t deny all the lies he told me.

Emery grabs my arm to stop me. “I’m *begging* you. Please leave.”

He pounds on the door again. “Why would I want her? She’s nothing compared to you. I was desperate, and she was easy. I love you.”

Those three words break me in ways I thought a man never could. My knees buckle under the weight of heartache, and I fall to the ground.

Emery falls with me. She wraps her arms around me. “You’re breaking my heart,” her voice cracks. “Go.”

Only in this moment I realise she’s not asking him to leave for her, but for *me*. She doesn’t want him to hurt me more than he already has.

Silence follows her request until we hear his footsteps slowly fade away. She kneels on the ground before me. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I wipe my tears. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I was naïve and stupid.”

“Men only enjoy the chase. Once they’ve shot their prey, they leave it for the elements to eliminate the destruction they caused. Or worse, they take it home and parade it around as if it is something to be proud of. But they never think about anything but themselves.”

I push the pain aside. I’m used to being angry. I’m *good* at being angry. I clear my throat. “I’m not something to parade around. I’m not a fucking damsel in distress. I’m packing my shit and getting out of here. I’ll deliver the baby to term. For *you*.” I wrap my arms around her. “I don’t deserve your kindness.”

Emery pulls back from the hug and shoots me an incredulous look. “He’s not going to let you go. Men like him may not know how to love, but they know how to keep.”

I shake my head. “I’ve forgiven him too many times. I’m getting out of here no matter the consequences.”

She nods before standing up. “Be careful what you wish for.” She unlocks the door but hesitates before opening it. She stares at me for a few moments before speaking. “Shall I offer you the advice I wish someone had given me?”

I look up at her. “What’s that?”

Her eyes look lifeless, and her lips settle into a straight line.
“Run while you can.”

I THROW MY PHONE onto my bed when Elliot's voicemail plays again. I sigh at the empty room and rub my belly. Why did I accept his offer? No amount of money is worth this nightmare.

You did this to yourself, my conscience reminds me.

She's right. I knew getting involved with Xavier was a bad idea. I knew nothing good could have come from it. Last night was proof of that. His words echo in my head. I cover my ears, hoping it would cut off the ongoing loop.

I'm done. I'm packing my shit up and getting the hell out of this crazy house. I wonder what happened after I snuck out. Did he continue to beg for her forgiveness? Did she forgive him? Did he kiss her? Did she fall into his arms?

I shake my head. It's not my problem. All I need to do is find out what happens from here. How do I deliver this baby without having him in my life?

The tiny diamond feels heavy on my chest after last night's events. I want to yank it off my neck and toss it at him. *Fuck him and his stupid diamonds.*

Climbing out of bed, I work my way through my list of chores. By the time I have finished mopping, sweat coats my forehead. *I should leave the mess for him to clean.*

Think of the devil, and he shall appear. Xavier lets himself into my home and watches me with amusement. I almost reach forward and slap the smile off his face. Instead, I put away my cleaning supplies and head into my bedroom to pack.

Xavier casually crosses his arms and leans against the frame. "I think this is the first time I've seen you clean," he jokes.

I don't pay him any attention. I straighten my sheets and fluff the pillows.

"Savannah?"

He thinks he can walk in here and continue as if nothing happened. I would laugh at his audacity if I wasn't so pissed off.

"Fuck off, Xavier." I peer up at him to see the confusion on his face.

"I know last night was tough, but it's been handled."

There's that fucking word again; *handled*. What does that mean? Lying through his teeth? Disrespecting me?

"Good for you. If you'd please excuse me, I have somewhere to be." That's a lie, but I don't want to be

anywhere near him.

He reaches out to touch me, but I skim away. He's a fantastic liar because his hurt expression looks believable. *Or maybe I'm just a naïve fool.*

“Why are you angry at me? What did I do?”

He doesn't know I heard every derogatory thing he said about me. I thought Emery would have laughed in his face at playing him, but I guess not.

He blocks the doorway when I try to leave. “I handled Emery. We're back on track.”

The daggers I'm shooting at him aren't enough to satisfy my rage. My arm swings forward until a loud *slap* resonates in the space. My palm stings from the assault. As he turns his face, an imprint of my hand mars it. His face is a picture of rage. His lips snarl, and his eyes narrow into slits. He opens his mouth, but I cut him off.

“It was a mistake, right? You were desperate, and I was easy? It meant nothing. You're going to run me out of the city?” I look at him in disgust. “Let me save you the trouble. *I'm leaving.* Seeing as you have a working key, lock the door on your way out.” I shake his hold off me when he grabs my arm.

“Savannah!” he shouts after me. “Savannah!”

“Fuck off!” I don't know where I'm going, but I need to escape him. I will either cry, which I refuse to do in front of him, or kill him.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me! Savannah!” His footsteps are heavy as he runs after me. “Come back here! Savannah!”

I turn around. “What?” I scream. “Isn’t that your speciality? Making your girlfriends move to a different country? You sociopathic bastard!”

He takes advantage of me stopping, and closes the gap. “I had to say something to appease her. I was scared she was going to hurt you.”

I push him away from me. “*You* hurt me. Just leave me the fuck alone!”

Everything about him reeks of despair. He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth as if trying to stop his cries. “Please come back inside and let me explain.”

I shake my head. “No. No more feeding me bullshit.” My chest feels tight. I try to pull oxygen into my lungs, but being around him makes it hard to breathe. “You could have left me alone. Maybe I didn’t have money, but I was content. I didn’t care to dream about love or family.” I harshly wipe away my tears. “You came along and built a dream only to smash it to pieces. You put yourself centre in my life, and now I have no one.”

Xavier pulls at his hair. “I meant *everything* I said.”

The urge to hurt him is strong, and I know *exactly* where to hit. I stand taller. “We’re done. Huxley is waiting for me.”

His hands clench into fists as his jaw tightens. Anger swirls with the blue in his eyes. “You go to him, and I will destroy *everything*.”

“Go ahead,” I goad. I turn around and walk towards the Audi.

“You’re tied to me!” he shouts. He strolls towards me with a look of conviction. “We have a contract in place.”

I laugh at him. “*You* broke the contract when you fucked me. Or will the law let it slide because it was a *mistake*?”

Xavier isn’t laughing. “You’re still carrying my baby.”

“You’re right. But I’m done carrying your lies.” I open the door and get in, locking the door behind me.

It doesn’t stop him from slamming down on the bonnet. “Get out right now, Savannah! I’ll smash it to pieces. That is not a lie.”

I roll the window down and smile. “Don’t give me a reason to run you over with my car because I won’t hesitate.”

“This is not your car,” he snaps. “Your car is over there!”

I turn the engine on. “Five seconds,” I warn.

Xavier stares down at the ground. I watch as his chest heaves up and down. *Once. Twice. Thrice.* He looks me dead in the eyes.

“Elliot.”

With a single word, my blood runs cold.

“What did you do?”

He looks at me with expectation. “Get out of the car, and I’ll tell you,” he bargains.

He wouldn’t hurt Elliot to blackmail me, would he? No. That’s crazy.

“What. Did. You. Do?”

He doesn’t flinch under my cold stare. He turns on his heels and heads back to the guesthouse.

I let out the scream that has been locked in me since yesterday. I punch the steering wheel, but nothing alleviates the anxiety in the pit of my stomach. With angry reluctance, I turn the engine off and storm into the house.

“If you hurt him...” The words don’t come to me. The thought of Elliot being hurt because of me makes me feel sick. The hairs on my skin stand alert as I wait for Xavier to explain.

He looks upset again. “*Hurt* him? I handled him.”

I back away from him. “What does that mean?” I blink rapidly to force my tears away.

“I sorted the problem for him. I gave him the money he needed.” He pauses. “In exchange, he agreed to never contact you again.”

I should feel elated that he isn’t lying somewhere with broken bones and bruises, but I feel nothing but anger. He had no right to get involved and make such a demand. If I wanted Elliot out of my life, I would have made it happen.

I storm up to him, but before I can slap him again, he grabs my arm to stop me. I snatch my arm out of his hold.

“Who do you think you are? You had no right!” I shout.

The baffled look on his face is almost comical. “He’s been a nuisance since I met you! You should be thanking me.”

“For what, Xavier? For making decisions for me? Or should I thank you for using me? Or should I thank you for turning my life upside down?”

He steps towards me. “I’m tired of you blaming all this on me. You knew I was married!”

“And you promised me you were leaving her!”

“I am!” he screams louder than me. He runs his hand through his hair. “I told you I am handling it.”

I scoff at him. “The same way you told me you were handling my father’s case? It’s been weeks, and the great Xavier Rivers has done fuck all.”

He pulls a folded letter from his pocket and throws it at me. “I got rid of *this* problem. I paid off his debts and sent him on his way to live out his dream of Bali in a fucking hut! I gave him enough money to do whatever he wants, but from what you’ve told me, he’ll probably blow it on gambling. The agreement was so he never brings trouble to your door again!”

Time slows down. The world stops moving. All my brain can focus on is that Elliot is in a different country. Elliot’s words about Caitlyn moving abroad blares in my head. This can’t be a coincidence; it’s a *pattern*.

My throat tightens, and tears well in my eyes. “What did you do?” I accuse. “Where is Elliot?”

His lip curls into a snarl. “Are you serious?”

“People around you always end up abroad. Why is that? Did you send Caitlyn packing the way you promised Emery you’d do to me? Or did they see through your bullshit and run to another country to escape you?” I back away from him. “Oh my God! Elliot was right. You *are* crazy.”

I don’t know where I’m going – I’ll knock at Huxley’s door if I have to. I’ll tell him everything if it means I can get away from Xavier. I grab the first bag I find and shove everything around me into it.

Xavier snatches the bag and tosses it behind him. “Stop running!”

“You think I’ll wait here for you to *handle* me? No! Move out of my way before I call the cops.”

“Savannah!” He pushes me against the wall and pins me there. Grabbing my jaw, he forces me to look at him. “You are overreacting. He has happily gone off to an island to live his dream. He didn’t hesitate to choose money over you. He didn’t even fight for you. He grabbed the money with both hands and *ran*.”

I push him off me and walk to the other side of the room. I stare out the window and try to think logically. Anyone in Elliot’s position would take free money to get them out of a

life-threatening situation. He has always spoken about Bali, so maybe it is true.

I turn around. “Show me proof.”

He gathers the papers he tossed at me and calmly hands them over.

I grab it and inspect the contents. It’s a contract signed by Elliot stating that in exchange for taking the money, he won’t contact me or anyone associated with me – including mutual friends. Contact includes phone calls, emails, texts, letters, or social media. His bold signature at the bottom serves as a reminder he willingly signed.

Next, he hands over his phone. It’s unlocked and displays an email confirming a plane ticket for Elliot Hunter to Bali.

“Consider this proof of life,” he grumbles.

He shows a series of pictures of Elliot entering the airport with a smile and luggage in tow. “Is that enough proof he isn’t dead in a basement somewhere?”

I stand my ground. “I want to talk to him.”

He shakes his head. “That breaks the contract.”

I shove him back. “I don’t care. I want to talk to him the second he lands.”

Xavier removes his jacket and places it on my bed. He takes a seat next to it. “I have no way to contact him. He destroyed his sim card and reset his phone.”

I wipe under my eyes, getting rid of the tears that brim there. I laugh at his foolproof plan. “You did a good job of ensuring no one can make sure he’s alive.”

He crosses his ankle over his knee. He rolls his shoulders and clicks his tongue. “You know what? I am done with you accusing me of murder. All I have done is try to help you, but you see me as a bad man. Maybe because your father was the devil, every man must be the same. I may be a cheat. And yes, I have lied, but I am not your father. I am not a rapist.” He stands. “And I most certainly am not a fucking murderer!” he screams.

“How can I trust you? Have you said anything true?”

He reaches out to hold my hand. He pulls me closer until I am standing between his legs. He places my hand against his cheek and nuzzles it. “I meant it when I said I love you.”

Pulling my hand back, I say, “I think that was the biggest lie. I haven’t had many people to rely on, so I’ve always had to trust my gut instinct. With you, I ignored it every step of the way. But I’m done, and my gut tells me to get out of here.”

Xavier nods his head. He stands up and puts his suit jacket back on. He pulls out a second letter from the inside pocket. “Here’s proof I’m filing for divorce.” He rips it up and throws it in the air. “But you don’t care because your *gut* is feeding you delusions.” He walks to the door, but I get in front of him.

“I’m not delusional. You’re psycho. How did you even know what Elliot said to me? You weren’t anywhere near us.”

He shrugs. “The cameras that watch outside your gate.”

Cameras. How did I not think about cameras outside my gate? That means... He knows about every time Huxley has been here.

The arrogant smile on his face irks me. “Want to call me a liar again? I haven’t fucked anyone else except you. Can you say the same thing? Or will you say he spent the night, and nothing happened?”

I take the easy option out. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

He laughs at me. “You might need to recalibrate your gut instinct. You think *I’m* the murderer? You think *I’m* the one to be scared of?” He leans in close. “You’ve laid in bed with a murderer, but it wasn’t me.”

I try to gauge his emotions, but his mask is plastered on. He can’t be suggesting what I think he is. Huxley isn’t dangerous. He doesn’t have people running to a different country because of him. He doesn’t have cameras watching his wife.

“You’re lying.”

“I did lie – when you asked me if I found out anything about your father’s case.”

I already know what he will say, but I ask anyway. “Who?”

The suspense is immobilising as he watches me with amusement. He straightens his cuffs and pushes his hair back.

“Ray murdered your father.”

PART TWO:

Xavier

MY NECK ARCHES TO the right to stretch the tightness that rests in the crook. There is a satisfying crack that comes with the release of tension which has been building since that fucking party. As if there weren't a magnitude of problems on my plate, my wife had to find the only proof of my infidelity.

The problem isn't me. It's *her*. I regret catching sight of her through the window that dreary autumn morning. I don't care for coffee, but my feet propelled me into that unattractive store. I'm certain it was not only I who stepped foot in that store for her.

I enjoyed watching her black hair sway back and forth. Her long legs carried her with a grace I'd never seen before. She puts world-famous models to shame. Her siren eyes housed the most hypnotising brown orbs I've ever seen. The way her lips lifted every time I walked in was my motivation to get out of bed. Initially, she wouldn't talk much, but that was okay because I liked watching her interact with her noisy colleague. I admired her from afar until she warmed up to me.

Our conversations were short, and she wouldn't share much. One night, I played the good husband and asked Emery why she no longer talked to me. It was fate that I asked such a question because it helped me further my relationship with my golden-eyed obsession. She said: *why would I talk to someone I barely know anymore?* I then knew what I had to do.

As we made small talk the following day, I casually let it slip that my marriage was going through a rough patch. I could practically see her defences lower, but not enough. Every day after, I shared more about my struggles with fertility. She lapped it up and eventually shared something about herself – an ex-boyfriend who owed her money. I remember thinking I would make all her problems disappear.

No matter how many coffees I bought, how big of a tip I left, or the subtle flirting, she didn't let me into her life. The solution? Offer her an in to *my* life she couldn't refuse.

And it worked.

She was difficult to manage at first, but eventually she learnt. I knew she was a smart girl – my background checks on her were proof of that. Excellent grades from school to university. Her credit score was poor, but I already knew that. She spent a large sum of money on alcohol and takeout, but I could change those terrible habits. She was as healthy as they came. That's when I had the brilliant idea.

I married Emery for three reasons.

One: she had no family to intervene in our lives. No one cared for her, which meant she would crave my affection;

therefore, she was much more malleable than most. I learnt from my previous mistakes.

Two: with two girlfriends who had vanished, I needed a security blanket from scrutiny. I needed to portray the image of a man who had stability. Marriage was my ultimate self-sacrifice.

Three, and most importantly: she was unable to have children. The day after she caught my eye, I ran my checks on her, and her infertility lit up my eyes. Of course, I couldn't tell her I knew, but it was perfect. I didn't care to have a whiny, snotty baby ruining my life. My lonely wife begged for a baby, and to shut her up, I told her we could try, knowing her dream would never come true.

I thought she was a nutcase to try for something she knew wasn't possible, but I commemorate her for upholding the act until she no longer could. It was only when she suggested alternatives I discovered her ploy. She wanted me to spend *my* money to give her the baby no man could. Little did I know that would be my saviour.

Savannah was much easier to convince than I thought. I guess money can make anything happen. I was willing to pay whatever to get her in my clutches. I thought it would be bliss once she signed, but she proved to be difficult. A murder was committed outside of her building, and instead of fearing for her life, she fucked her pathetic ex. Why did I bother paying for that murder to happen? *Waste of my fucking money.* I needed her to move out of her own volition, so when that

didn't work, I bought the fucking building and kicked out all the tenants. Any property she looked at, I did whatever I had to do to ensure she was an unsuccessful candidate.

I thought assigning her to Ray would be the most effective solution. I could keep tabs on her, and Ray would never be interested in her. In fourteen years, I've never heard him speak about a woman. Truthfully, I thought he was gay. As a safe measure, I warned him that she was off limits. The man didn't ask any questions, having dismissed her as a potential suitor based on nothing except that he doesn't care for a woman by his side or in his bed. He was a fool to think he could deny a vixen like her. I'll hold back my judgment because he hadn't met her yet – he didn't know *what* he was dismissing.

You can imagine my surprise when I saw him leave the property an *hour* after dropping her home from the tenth-anniversary party. Nobody can imagine the rage and jealousy I felt as I watched the footage of her seducing him, sucking his cock and letting him fuck her. I hate myself for having so many different angles of the betrayal. Regardless, I watched it from all six cameras in her room.

I spent months watching her in her small space. I enjoyed watching her make breakfast, attempt to clean up, shower, talk on the phone, pleasure herself, sleep, *everything*. I couldn't focus on anything except her. I knew I had to make a move quickly when she fucked Ray for the second time. She dared to answer my call and lie through her teeth while he was devouring her. With my phone to my ear, I watched her fuck

him from my laptop. Such a filthy girl. But that was okay because I would cleanse her. She would become mine.

My clever girl gave me another problem because she saw the camera. I watched in anticipation as she leaned in closer. If I knew her well, which I do, I was expecting her to storm to the house. Luckily, she gave me the night to rewrite code and pull parts of the truth from an otherwise fictional story. Emery did ask me to build the guesthouse, but the cameras were installed as it was built. She never locked herself in there.

I wasn't lying when I told Savannah the coding that showed the date the cameras were turned off was built into the system. I omitted the part where I *own* the security company and have the power, accessibility, and knowledge to override the coding used. I renamed the cameras on my system and waited for her to fall into my bear trap. It worked well for me because I could sell the *Emery is crazy* story and clear my name; two birds with one stone, as they say.

I played the long game because sometimes you must make sacrifices in chess. I didn't plan on fucking her at that charity gala. I wanted her to fall in love with me first. She and Ray were only lust, but me and her? We were more than a rough roll around in the sheets. But I couldn't stop myself. She was practically begging me for it. It was a regret the moment it was over. It felt amazing, but she would pull away because of the guilt, and I needed to devise a better plan. Returned the days of watching her through my cameras.

Things were going well. Ray was still fucking her, but that would be over soon. She then brought another problem to me – her father. I should have murdered Ray right there and then, but what would she think of me? I'd have no chance, so I promised to find whoever killed the bastard and his friends. I'd kill whoever it was just for her safety and happiness.

I wish I had a picture of my face when I learnt that person was Ray. I wouldn't murder him – that would raise too many suspicions. But that was my chance to get him out of her life. Problem solved, and the chess game continues.

But then another fucking obstacle – red fucking lipstick. I would have regained control over Emery had Savannah not admitted to everything. My girl made a stupid move but hadn't played chess before. It's my job to teach her. Emery pulled a smart move by shutting off the electricity. If I had done my due diligence, I would have checked the guesthouse and known Savannah wasn't there. Had I seen through Emery's empty threat, I wouldn't have said those awful, untrue things that hurt Savannah. Now I must handle Emery *and* Savannah being angry with me.

If that wasn't enough, I have *this* problem. Yet another problem because of her. The car was the perfect gift for Savannah. She craved freedom, and I could track wherever she went. I knew he had to go when I listened to the audio of them in the car. While she defended me against his accusations, he was too close to the truth.

Elliot only reaffirmed my decision when he risked her life with these scumbags. Had I given them everything they asked for, they'd be back. *He'd be back for more.* She's given him enough, and no matter how many times she asked him to leave, he came back. This was the only solution.

She's giving me more hassle than happiness right now. I know part of it is my problem; I keep saving her from the world, but I can't control it. I want her to be happy, and I want her to be mine in every way that matters.

My suit jacket does little to protect me from the cold draft. I sigh into the empty room as I contemplate how to handle this. *This is what happens when I can't control myself.* Savannah has taken all my control and common sense. *But he had to go.*

I take a few steps forward and crouch down. I click my tongue as I stare at her ex-boyfriend's lifeless body. I tilt my head and sigh once again.

“What to do with you?”

MY REFLECTION LOOKS AS relaxed as I feel. The steam from the hot shower cleared my thoughts. While I haven't figured out what to do with Mr Hunter's body yet, it's somewhere it won't be found, and that is all I have time for tonight.

Emery is sulking in her room, and I usually would try to placate her, but my favourite obsession asked Ray to come over. I would rather sell my company than miss her tearing into him. Unlike me, he isn't strong enough to withstand such a blow.

In the safe confines of my home office, I lean into my seat and prepare for the showdown. As I pull the feed up, Savannah is pacing around her room. Even through a lens, she looks ethereal. Like a hypnotised fool, I watch closely as she rubs her belly. Never did I think pregnancy could be beautiful and sexy. I expected to be repulsed by her growing body, but I should have known nothing about her could be hideous. Like a moth to the flame. I can't look away from her glow. She is the

flame because I'm burning *for* her and will burn *because* of her.

Minutes tick by, but I don't get bored. She's my favourite pastime. My blood turned green with jealousy the first time her hand slipped between her legs and she moaned Ray's name. I almost ran across the land and banged my fists on her door so she would stop. It's okay though, because she *dreamt* about me. She whispered my name so quietly I thought I was going crazy. I replayed it *seven* times before my smile broke out. I wish I knew what she was dreaming about.

I can't dwell on it for long because Ray finally appears. The joy on his face is about to be ripped off. I wonder if she would dare to slap him as she did me. It took all my strength to turn that rage into desperation. Nobody dared to hit me before – not even my father after I destroyed his life.

“You killed my father,” she accuses.

His features don't move an inch. One thing I learned quickly about Ray is he has an iron-clad poker face. I've never seen him show emotion except pride when he excels at his job. Even now, accused of such a foul thing, he stares blankly. He walks to her bed and sits on it in a familiar move.

“Xavier?” he asks.

“Does it matter?”

His shrug is nonchalant, making me smile. His attitude is going to push her over the edge. “I guess not.”

She stands in the middle of the room, quiet and calculating. *The explosion is coming any moment now.*

“You don’t deny it?”

He kicks his shoes off and removes his suit jacket. “Does it matter what I say? I don’t feel bad, and I won’t apologise for it.”

My eye twitches in anticipation of her anger. She was ready to rip my throat out when I removed her pathetic ex from her life. Why isn’t she screaming at him? Why is she *crying* instead? She covers her mouth as she cries, and he watches. If that were me, I would dry every tear falling. Ray is kicked back, watching her fall apart.

“You were supposed to be the good one,” she cries. “I thought you had a clean heart.”

Very good. Let your hatred for him grow.

“Nobody has a clean heart, sweetheart. They were bad people, and I did an equally bad thing to make the world a slightly better place. Don’t expect me to feign guilt because I slept the best I have in a long time that night, knowing they were taking their last breath.”

“We could have reported them! There were so many options except murder!”

Something comes over her. Her eyebrows pull together. She stares at him in disbelief.

“Is that why you kept your head down? You made sure nobody could identify your face. Hux—“

His standing up forces her to stop talking. He towers over her but doesn't touch her. "There was no other option. Let this go."

If there is one thing I know about her, she doesn't like it when someone tells her what to do. As expected, Savannah's face contorts to rage and her fists ball. "Let it go? Are you fucking kidding me? You murdered him."

"He died from a toxic batch of heroin."

"That *you* probably sold him."

"No."

"Then *you* paid someone to sell it. Regardless, it was *you*."

"No, actually. It was *you*."

Silence descends on her bedroom and my office. I lean in closer as if it will propel him to explain himself. There is no way this coward would pin it on her.

When she doesn't respond, he continues. "I had no intention of having them killed until *you* got in their face and made threats. You practically told them who you were. I've been in this business long enough to know they weren't letting it go. They planned to dispose of you because you are the only proof of what they were." He steps to her, making me want to break his legs. "I did it to protect *you*, so how about a thank you?"

She backs away from him, fingers trembling. "You could have protected me without committing murder." Her cries are back. "How am I supposed to look at you the same way? You

are responsible for taking four lives, Hux. Maybe more, how would I know?"

His shoulders square. He holds the anger she *should* be feeling. "And what about the lives they took? Instead of putting those women out of their misery, they left them with a lifetime of pain. Those women have to remember what happened every time they close their eyes."

"We aren't God! We don't get to choose who lives and dies. We aren't mercenaries of death!"

Ray doesn't back down. His voice raises in decibel. "*I am,*" he declares. "They destroyed lives and carried on living. They raped your mum. They are the reason you have been alone! They are the reason you've had to fight on your own! Who was protecting you?"

He wavers. Ray looks around the room in conflict with his thoughts. He continues. "I monitored their movements after that day. She was their first." He swallows hard. "They called you a rookie mistake. They were reassured because they never made the mistake of forgetting a condom after your mum."

Savannah backs away until she slides down the wall. Her head falls into her hands as she cries. I patiently wait for her to kick him out. But she doesn't say a word.

Ray's voice is calmer now. "I told you that you are the only person I would kill for."

She lifts her head. "I didn't think you meant it literally!"

“Well, I did!” he shouts, finally showing some emotion. “I never say anything I don’t mean. Words aren’t meaningless things. They aren’t just a different combination of the alphabet to me! When I say I would die for you, I mean it! When I say I would kill for you, I mean it.” His voice drops low enough that I have to put my audio up to the highest. “And when I say I love you, I mean it. It’s not just letters or words to me, sweetheart.”

My silence matches hers. Like twin flames, we stare at him in surprise, but mine is drenched in rage and *betrayal*. Ray has always been my most trusted, but one woman changed everything. I wonder if he would still love her if he knew she was fucking me as well? I wouldn’t degrade our relationship to such a pesky word, but maybe if I accidentally let it slip and phrased it as such to him, it would take care of the problem. He wouldn’t want her knowing she was in love with *me*.

“Come on. Say something. Reject him,” I mutter.

“Love?” she gasps.

Any vulnerability showcased in his declaration ceases to exist. His eyes are narrowed, and his lips are set in a straight line. “I said it, didn’t I?”

I pick a different camera to watch as she moves to the corner of the room and settles into the armchair.

“This is too complicated,” she groans. “There’s too much going on, and I need a moment to breathe.”

Ray nods at her. “There was no one before you, and I don’t believe there will be anyone after.”

The faint smile on her face feels like a knife to my chest. “I’ve heard that one before, sunshine.”

Her pet name for him makes me bite down on my cheek before I scream or throw my laptop out the window.

“I said it for the first time that night when I realised you were magnificent. I said it again tonight when I realised I am *madly* in love with you. I’ll say it next when we stand in front of our family and commit to death do us part.” He kneels in front of her. “I’m willing to make the sacrifices. You don’t have to fight on your own. Let me slay the dragons.” He leans forward and kisses her cheek. “You just have to trust me.”

This is worse than I could have imagined. *Love? Marriage?* How much have I missed while I’ve been busy cleaning all the mess she’s made for me? I’m losing my touch, and soon enough, I’ll lose her.

That can’t happen.

I need to give her everything she’s demanding.

If that doesn’t work, at least Mr. Hunter will have some company.

I POUR MYSELF ANOTHER coffee only to glimpse at Savannah from this angle. She has avoided me since the Elliot debacle, but I have used the opportunity to try and win Emery back. It would seem the two women have a pact to ignore me. The situation is slipping out of my grasp. I need to get my head back in the game before I make another stupid move.

The pawn I sacrificed remains in one piece in the cold room. I took him off the board, but now I don't know how to dispose of him. I hide my smile behind my mug as I recall the relief in his eyes when I offered to take care of his debts. Little did he know the solution was to remove his existence from Earth. I would feel guilty for my actions, but he didn't fight for Savannah, thus proving my reasoning. He signed the agreement with little hesitation.

He thought he had me figured out — assuming I paid my ex-girlfriend to leave the country. If only he knew they had a better fate than what awaited him. At least the world can still appreciate their beauty, but him? He's hidden in an

underground cold room. I could leave him there, but that is lazy work. An easy solution would be to frame Cameron and his goons. But a dead Elliot would have Savannah shooting me accusatory daggers and screaming murderer in my direction.

I can't stop myself from peering over again. Her lips part as she laughs with Ray. I approach the door to get a better look at what's happening. She steps to the side as he wheels a new chair behind her desk. My eyes narrow when she hugs him.

He got her father murdered, and she has forgiven him. I said some untrue things, and she refuses to look in my direction. The board is in his favour, and I must do something before I lose her.

I need to sort this problem out. Now.

Grabbing my phone and wallet, I exit the building and join the crowd of bodies swarming the street. The walk to EspresSoul is short and familiar. The new gentleman behind the till is less welcoming than Savannah. His lazy eyes lift to mine as he takes my order.

Mia Woods – Savannah's best friend – watches me from the corner of her eye as she makes my drink. I offer a smile, to which she raises her eyebrow at me. I take two steps to the right and call her name.

“What do you want?”

“I need your help with something.”

Her hand goes to her hip. “Because you fucked up big time?”

Just fucking peachy. Savannah blabbed to her as well. This is why I need her to only drive the BMW. She didn't call her from her home, meaning she called her from the car Ray gave her. I need to figure out a way to bug that car or give it back.

“I know you hate me as much as she does, but it had to be done.”

She hands me my to-go cup. “You fucked up. She cared for Elliot. No matter how bad things got between them, he was her safe space, and you took that away.”

I rim the cup with my thumb. “I know. I thought I was helping.”

Her green eyes are trained on me. You learn to read people when you don't know who you can trust. Mia cares for Savannah and wants her to be happy. “Have you told her you're sorry?”

‘Yes’ is on my tongue until I realise I haven't. Such a simple word, one my own mother pleaded when I caught her infidelity.

When I don't say anything, Mia shakes her head. “Men. You are so stupid,” she mumbles. “Tell her you're sorry. She's stubborn. It'll be hard work to earn her trust back.”

I thank her and walk out with a newfound confidence.



Emery sits on the bed, staring down at the ground. Today, she graces me with her presence instead of drinking her day away in her little room. I would infiltrate that room if she left the house long enough.

She doesn't acknowledge me until I emerge from the closet sans tie and jacket. "Whatever you said to your mistress worked. She asked me if she could stay until after the baby was born." Her dark eyes meet mine.

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

She smiles in a deranged way. "Probably not as much as you." She holds her hand up. "Don't give me a headache whining about how it was a mistake."

"Emery—"

She interrupts me. "Maybe I should fuck Ray? That should make it even. She fucked my husband, so it gives me a free pass to fuck her boyfriend, right?"

The lump of jealousy in my throat makes it hard to swallow. "Shut up," I warn.

She laughs *at* me. "That hurt, didn't it?" She tilts her head. "Not the part where your wife threatens to fuck your best friend. But the thought of *her* having a boyfriend that isn't you. He must be good in bed if she won't give him up for you. Who do you think she enjoys more?"

I take a slow step towards her. "If I were you, I'd choose my next few words carefully."

“I’ve never known Ray to sleep with anyone. What’s so special about her?” She has the nerve to smile at me. “Is it because, like you said, she’s easy? Tell me, my dear husband, is it tight enough to satisfy you? Or has she fucked so many men she’ll barely feel the baby coming out?”

My self-control dissipates as I lunge for her. My hands go to her throat, squeezing enough to scare her. “You’re just jealous she can get me hard.” I apply a little more pressure to her neck. “When was the last time I fucked you?”

Her fingers snake up my arm before closing over my hand. Like a psychopath, she tightens my grip on her neck and closes her eyes. “I bet you miss this,” she whispers.

Pushing her away from me, I say, “Not once.”

She pretends my rejection doesn’t affect her, but I see it. Her shoulders sag no matter how hard she puffs her chest out. Her eyes strain to keep her tears at bay. She bites her lip to stop the quiver.

Like a true lady, she straightens her posture and crosses one leg over the other. She clears her throat and smiles at me again. “Shall I tell you how I knew it was more than a quickie at a party?”

“How?”

I can usually persuade Emery of anything, but she hasn’t let this go. History has demonstrated even when she knows she’s in the right, she gives in to me because this life I have given her isn’t worth losing. *Except this.*

“It wasn’t that the two of you disappeared. It wasn’t even the lipstick. It was this.”

She pulls out a small diamond that sits comfortably on a thin chain. It’s the necklace I lent to Savannah. After all the chaos that ensued, I never got it back.

“Where did you get that?”

“She left it on the kitchen island.” Emery rests the diamond in the palm of her hand and stares at it. “It’s funny. You’ve never let me wear this in the six years I’ve known you. You’ve bought me diamonds upon diamonds, but this one was always out of reach. Do you remember that day when I was clearing out the closet and opened the box?” She fakes a shiver. “I thought you would behead me from how angry you were. So, you can imagine my surprise when I saw this little diamond resting on her skin. *That’s* where you fucked up, Xavier.”

I can only focus on snatching it out of her hand, but she can’t know she has me by the balls. I shrug and lean against the wall. “It’s a necklace.”

“It’s a *choice*. Let me keep the necklace or give her up. You can’t have both.”

She’s bluffing.

“You’re going to accept a divorce if I give you a worthless diamond?” My laugh comes out patronising.

She stands. “Money is not worth as much as you think.”

“Divorce is not an option,” I say, hoping to sweeten her.

It doesn't work. Her cold eyes don't waver. "Who said anything about a divorce? You'll never leave me," she scoffs. "Fuck whoever you want. The diamond is mine."

I drop the nice guy act and let her see the devil that lives inside me. "Give it back. Or this time, I might actually behead you," I sneer.

Emery doesn't look scared. She looks *amused*. She dangles it in front of me before I snatch it. "You gave away your biggest weakness today, and it's not her," she whispers. "Till death do us part – that's what we promised. It doesn't matter what we do or who we become – it's *till death do us part*." She barges past me.

I clench the necklace in a tight fist. "Be careful what you wish for," I call out without turning around, "because that can be arranged."

MAY 2005

Rhys's sheepish look and the loud arguing from the room next door were my cue to leave. This wasn't the first time they argued while I'd been around their house after school to play video games. Last time, I heard his dad throw something at his mum, and I didn't want to face the awkwardness again.

I tiptoed down the stairs, not wanting to rudely interrupt the string of derogatory words he was calling her. With a wave to my friend, I began the short walk home. A few weeks ago, I'd have needed to call one of my parents, but I was given a key to the house. According to my dad, I was a responsible man. A grin broke out on my face as I planned to spend my free time playing video games and eating junk.

The dream was short-lived when I saw the white car that belonged to my mum parked in the driveway. She wasn't supposed to be home yet. She had repeatedly told us she had to

work late. She reiterated the instructions to heat up the casserole five times before writing it down anyway.

My key turned almost silently in the lock before I slowly pushed it open. Her soft voice travelled down the stairs. Her laugh matched the girls in my school as they giggled with their crushes. I had never heard her laugh with my dad like that before. Curiosity got the better of me as I crept up the stairs.

Her giggle made me nauseous. "Henry! You are so dirty." Pause. "I'm just leaving now. I forgot my glasses. You know I can't drive in the dark."

My body became immobile. My dad's name was Elijah, not Henry. I tried to convince myself that I misunderstood because it didn't make sense for her to betray her husband. He was a good husband and an even better father. He doted on us like his life depended on it. Anything we wanted, he made happen.

What reason did she have to betray the greatest man to walk Earth?

Unable to tolerate her laughter and flirting, I let my presence be known. She cut the line and turned to me with a smile, but the panic in her eyes rang loud. I couldn't hear anything over the blood rushing to my ears and blurring my vision.

"Darling! What are you doing home so early?"

"Rhys's parents were fighting again." I should have asked why she was there but I couldn't bear to hear her lies.

Her bottom lip jutted out. "His poor mum." She hooked her bag over her shoulder. "I forgot my glasses, but I'm leaving now. Are you going to be okay until your dad gets back?"

She didn't deserve to mention him.

"Can't Henry wait until my dad gets back?" My expression was blank. There was no direct accusation, but the tone expressed it all.

Her gulp screamed her guilt. "He's my colleague."

She thought I was stupid. "Why do you need to know if your colleague has condoms? I know what you use those for. I've had sex ed in school, and I'm not fucking stupid!"

"Xavier Rivers! You do not swear in this house!"

I threw my bag to the floor. "But you get to act like a slag and fuck someone else?"

In a swift move, her hand swung back before her palm met my cheek. The area burned, but not as much as my rage. She was the one cheating, but I got slapped. My cold fingers brushed over my cheek, where it still stung. She looked at me with no remorse.

"I hate you," I spat at her. "You don't deserve Dad. I hope you burn in hell!"

The tears in her eyes did little to put out the fire of rage in me. If anything, they were the gasoline, fuelling it further.

"I'm sorry. I got angry. Please don't tell your father."

The corner of my mouth twitched. "I won't tell him you slapped me. But I will tell him his wife is a whore." Rhys's dad always called his mum that when they argued. It was usually the word that made her burst into tears or call him something ugly back.

I raced down the stairs before she could slap me again. I needed to get out of here. If I stayed there, I might say something worse.

She followed behind me with futile begs not to expose her disgusting affair. She pushed past me and blocked the front door. "You don't know what he's like! He will get angry and hurt me!"

Her tears looked real, but I knew she was a liar. She'd been lying to us for God knows how long.

"He has never hurt you!" I defended.

"You don't know what he's capable of! You have one side of him – the good side, and I have the ugly side that hurts me. I didn't mean to cheat, but Henry saw me crying at work one day and was there for me."

"Liar!" I screamed.

My dad was not abusive. He loved her almost as much as he loved me. He did everything to protect us. Every day, he promised to never let anything come between us.

"I can show you the scars. If you tell him, he will probably kill me."

Unable to listen to any more slander about him, I walked through the house to get to the garage. She followed me, still pleading to see reason and lie for her.

I'm not a liar like her.

I had almost opened the garage door when she snatched the key and threw it across the room. She grabbed me by my shoulders and shook me. Her eyes were as wide as saucers and filled with panic.

"Don't do this. Don't tell him."

"He deserves to know. You owe him the truth. How can you stay married knowing you betrayed him?"

She let me go. Her lips stopped quivering as a cold look I had never seen on her came about. "He never wanted you. He ordered me to abort you the day we found out we were pregnant. He said you were a mistake."

My heart clenched at her hurtful words. "You're lying."

She backed away from me. "No. It's the truth. I'm the reason you're still here. When I refused to listen, he kicked me in the stomach. He said you would ruin us. Maybe he was right." The single tear streaked down her cheeks.

"He loves me."

"He loves that he can use you to control me. He swore that he would turn my son against me the day you were born. He promised that you would become my weakness. He threatened to end your life if I ever stepped out of line. Even when you were just a baby."

My hands balled into fists. “Shut up. You’re lying.”

“When you were a baby, you had colic. You wouldn’t settle unless I cradled you. One night, I didn’t cook dinner. He came home, ran the bath and threatened to drown you all because he was hungry, and it was my fault.”

“Stop it!” My throat tightened as tears threatened to spill over.

“When you were three, he let you run loose in a park. You got lost. It took me twenty minutes to find you. That was my punishment because I couldn’t find his wallet.”

I swallowed hard. My brain conjured up vague false memories of me crying in the park for my parents.

“You’re a liar! He loves me.”

“He doesn’t! He doesn’t know how to love! He hates you and everything you represent. Are you going to choose a man like that over your mother? I love you. He doesn’t. He doesn’t love us. He wanted to get rid of you. He hates that you exist. He tried to kill you so many times! He—“

Silence.

My heart pounded in my ears as my shaky hands dropped the shovel. The loud clang against the cement echoed as I tried to comprehend what I had done.

I dropped to the floor. I watched in a daze as the blood poured from her head. The grey flooring was dirtied by the life seeping out of her. Her lifeless eyes were wide and filled with the fear and surprise she felt in the final moments of her life.

Despite her mouth being stuck open, the garage rested in silence with no more lies.

I didn't move. I sat in the peaceful silence, waiting for the guilt to come.

Time ticked by. I don't know how long I sat there until I heard his voice.

"Liz? You home? I saw your car on the drive."

His footsteps faded away as he walked through the house. I hoped he didn't come into the garage to see that I killed the love of his life.

By then, I knew I would say it was self-defence. In movies, people get away with murder by claiming self-defence.

But it wasn't self-defence. She made no threat to my life. Her hands weren't on me. I killed her in rage.

And I didn't feel guilty about it.

My guilt came from the heartache I was about to cause my dad.

"Elizabeth? Where are you?"

His footsteps came to a halt at the entrance of the garage. I didn't have the courage to look at him and see the anger and disappointment in his eyes.

"What did you do? What did you do?"

I watched in disgust as he let out a cry of pain. She didn't deserve his sadness or grief. She didn't deserve me. She didn't deserve him.

“She was having an affair. She said she was going to tell everyone you hurt her. She was going to tell everyone you tried to kill me as a baby.”

Tears ran down his face as his body shook with cries. He repeated the same question again and again: what did you do? His head rested on her chest as he cried.

I didn't cry.

I didn't move an inch.

I watched my dad mourn for the love of his life.

I let him grieve.

This wasn't a man who abused his wife. An abuser doesn't cry like a weak, pathetic mess.

“She was going to ruin you. I did this to protect you.”

He crawled over to me and wrapped his arms around me. “I know, son. But it's my job to protect you.”

I looked at him when he pulled back. “Shall I call the police? Hand myself in?”

“No! I'll lose you too. They won't believe that you did this. They'll pin it on me.”

“We can't leave her here.”

He wiped his tears. “I know. Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to bring my car into the garage. We'll load her in and take her to your grandfather's incinerator. Then we'll go to my workshop. We'll press her ashes into a diamond.” He began to cry again. “That way, she can always be with us. You

made a mistake, but you don't deserve to have your life taken away from you."

"People are going to ask questions."

"Fuck," he mumbled. His eyes darted around the room as he came up with a solution. "We'll say she left the country."

The plan had too many flaws, but I either followed through or went to prison. I trusted my dad. He always promised to protect me.

He stroked her face before kissing her cheek. "I always said it was till death do us part."



May 2024

Now that it's back where it belongs, I lightly stroke the diamond. I still remember feeling sweat trickle down my forehead as we lugged her body into the incinerator. As punishment, my dad made me scrape her ashes out. It was the first time I was allowed to touch the machines and tools in his workshop.

We worked side-by-side as he taught me how to turn ashes into a diamond. The memories should come with unease, but I'm fond of them. It brought me and my father closer. He would have thrown me to the wolves if he hated me, like she said.

But he loved me harder. He took me under his wing and nurtured me through the paranoia. It felt like everyone was watching me. No matter how many years ticked by or how much he reassured me, the feeling of security never came.

Until I created *XR Securities*. The company started as security for us, but for every level of protection I secured, I craved more. I wanted an impenetrable fortress around me and my dad. I wanted to know everyone's move and be five steps ahead of them. So, I built and turned my need into a business that left me in control. One that shut down any questions about me, my father, my mother, Sara and Caitlyn. I made it so every board was in my control. That was my craft – my part to protect us.

For my dad, it always came down to the diamonds. Pressing ashes into diamonds takes months, and he guided me through it. When it was done, I was amazed at how beautiful a diamond is. He said it was my responsibility to keep her safe. It was a reminder of what I had done and who I became. Life was never the same afterwards, but it wasn't all bad either. My dad always reminded me of the consequences of losing something. If you lose your temper, ugly things happen. If I lost this necklace, the truth would come out.

This necklace is proof I murdered my mother in cold-blooded rage.

This necklace is why my life is in tatters now.

“Looks like you ruined my life once again, Mother,” I say to the inanimate object.

I close the box and put it into my safe.

Till death do us part.

My father was wrong.

Emery was wrong.

Because no God or death can come between me and Savannah.

I'll make sure of it.

THE HUM OF THE car dies as she turns the engine off. I ignore the irritation of seeing her climb out of his car. Making a scene about that will render my apology futile. I'm going to apologise; she will forgive me, and then we can pick up where we left off.

Her huff of annoyance lets me know she has seen me. She shifts her weight as she scrambles through her bag for her keys. One thing I will have to teach her is how to be organised. She steps over me like a bug she doesn't want to crush and lets herself in.

I pick myself up from the step and follow her inside. She didn't slam the door or lock it, which is practically an open invitation. She drops her bag on the floor and immediately falls back onto her bed.

"I hate this pregnancy almost as much as I hate you," she grumbles.

“Emery said you’re going to stay until the birth. I’m glad to hear it.”

She leans up on her elbows only to shoot daggers at me. “Only so you won’t know where I move to.”

The chuckle comes out. “I’m a glorified stalker, remember?”

When she uttered those words to me the first time, I let out a real laugh. It was ironic.

Her eyes narrowed. “I want to add a clause to my agreement. After the birth, you or your wife can’t ever contact me again.”

I walk into the room and lean against the bookshelf. I make sure I don’t block the camera because I want to watch this back later. *The anticipated reunion.*

“I can’t promise that. I can’t live without you.”

She sits up and puts distance between us. With her back against the headboard, she inspects the sadness on my face. “Learn. You excel in everything else.”

“I’m sorry,” I plead. “I really thought I was doing you a favour when I paid him to leave. If you want him back, I’ll bring him back.”

That will be impossible unless she wants a dead Elliot, but I need her to trust me again.

“I just want to know he’s okay. I want to hear his voice.”

Dammit! She still thinks I murdered him.

“Okay. Let me try and find him in Bali. It might take some time.”

“Fine. But that doesn’t change anything between us. Me and you are done.”

Needing to feel her warmth, I sit on the bed close to her. “Tell me what you want, Savannah. I’ll give you anything.”

Finally, she gives me something different to anger. She looks sad. I can work with sad. Anger gives me nothing but snarky responses or silence. When she allows herself to be sad, she opens up and shares the deepest parts of herself.

“There’s nothing you can give me. You’re married, and I won’t be the side piece anymore. I had to look Emery in the eyes and be her friend and confidant while I was screwing you on the side. I was the one who told her you’d never cheat, and it was *me* that turned you into one. That isn’t the life I want to live.”

I hoped to hold onto this card a little longer, but it’s the only way to assuage her guilt. I take out my phone and load up the cropped footage from a few days ago when Emery traded my affair for a necklace.

Savannah watches in confusion and then... *disgust*. “She wants the necklace in exchange for a divorce?”

“I guess so. That is how little this marriage means to her. She wants this baby. Nothing else.”

Her guards are down, but she’s still hesitating. “You’d still be married.”

I was afraid it would come to this. Divorce was never an option. A divorce would put me under scrutiny. I don’t need

anyone asking questions about why my marriage fell apart. It would be hard to control Emery outside of this home.

But if I must go through this, then I will.

Only for her.

“What about Ray? Have you ended things with him?”

She can't look me in the eyes. I gave her the bullet and even loaded the gun. All she had to do was pull the trigger. But he got under her skin before she could.

“The day you file and tell Emery, I'll end things with him.”

I offer my hand. “We have an agreement.”

She slides her hand in mine. “I believe we do, Mr Rivers.”



I've never hated anyone as much as I hate the doctor who has all of Savannah's attention. It's been five *whole* days since our agreement, and she hasn't given me an ounce of her attention. She no longer avoids me but doesn't talk to me either. But right now, she laughs at whatever he says while he finishes her physical examination.

The sonographer patiently waits as Savannah lays on the table. “Are we looking to find out the gender today?”

Emery is practically hopping around the room in excitement. “No. We want to keep it a surprise.” She wraps her arm around my waist, but I make no move to return the gesture.

Both women gasp as the heartbeat comes through the speakers. I don't care about it. If Savannah is healthy, the baby could fall out tomorrow, and it would make no difference to me.

In fact, the earlier this baby comes out, the better. It's my bargaining chip with Emery. The baby to herself, and in return, I have her silence. We divorce amicably and go our separate, *silent* ways.

When the appointment wraps up, I give Savannah my copy of the scan as I have done the last two times. She gives me a grateful smile and slides it into her bag.

"How about the three of us go for some lunch? I'm sure you have some time to spare."

"I have work," I grunt.

Savannah looks relieved at my rejection. "And Hux is waiting for me."

Emery raises her eyebrow as she eyes us. "You fucked each other. The least you owe me is a lunch after our wonderful morning."

When Savannah gives in, I follow the women to the local diner, refusing to leave them alone. Awkwardness descends on the table. Savannah looks everywhere but at us while Emery fixates on her.

Her focus snaps to me. "Does anyone have any ideas for names? I like Theo for a boy."

Savannah realises this for what it is — a power play —and rolls her eyes. “It’s not my baby. The name is your choice.”

Emery grabs her hand over the table. “Don’t be silly! The baby is *inside* you, and now that my husband knows what that feels like, I’m sure you’ll be around for the rest of our lives. You’re step-mummy.”

I lean my elbows on the table, clasping my hands together. I rest my chin on my hands as I watch this takedown.

Savannah snatches her hands out from under Emery’s. “Don’t *ever* talk to me like that again. I fucked up, but I apologised. You might want to find it in you to forgive. It seems you’re forgetting you cheated *multiple* times just to get his attention. And don’t forget that *I* am the one who has the power. Not only in your marriage but your life. As you said, the baby is inside me. If you push me over the edge, I might forget that I’m pregnant and decide to knock back a few shots.”

Emery recoils her hands and looks at me. I silently shrug at her. “How about Elijah? After your daddy, Xavier?”

I don’t dignify her with a response. Instead, I study Savannah as she stares out the window, turned away from us. Her lips are set into a frown, and her eyes are downcast.

If only I could read her mind because she’s shut me out again.

“How about Elizabeth?” Emery draws.

My eyes flit over to her. “No.”

The bitch smiles at my snappy reaction. “What’s wrong with Elizabeth? That was your mother’s name.”

Savannah eyes me at the statement. She takes pity on me at the mention of my mother. After the half-truth I told her, she knows it’s a sensitive topic.

“I said no. I’m taking my food to go. I have a meeting.” I need to get out of here before I snap her fucking neck.

“I’m not hungry. I have my car, and Hux keeps texting me.”

“Maybe our daughter will love diamonds as much as your mother.”

I stop looking for a waiter and look at my wife. The devil dances in her eyes as she gets me where she wants me. The statement seems innocent enough, but the glint in her eyes tells me she’s got another game going on.

“I hope she’ll be as beautiful as your mother.” She turns to Savannah. “I saw a picture of her once. She was stunning! Her eyes were so bright. Almost like a *diamond*.” She tilts her head as she looks back at me. “Isn’t that right, Xavier?”

My nails dig into my skin under the table while I maintain a blank expression. “She was a cheat.”

“So are the three of us.” She turns to Savannah. “His father was a diamond maker. Did he tell you that?”

Savannah feigns boredom, but I can tell she’s uncomfortable. “Yes.”

Emery sighs. “It’s such a shame. He was a talented man. Was brilliant at his job. If only he could have kept his wife happy. Maybe his life would have amounted to more than just diamonds. Can diamonds really replace a wife or mother?”

I tolerate a lot of her bullshit, but not her blaming my father for what happened. He was a good man. He loved her. He loved me. He protected me.

I no longer need protection because no one is as powerful as me. Emery is never going to be my shield. I thought she was the queen to my king, guarding me from being knocked off the board. But she has only ever been a fucking problem. Her alcoholism, her clinginess and now the knowing glint in her eyes. Her only plan is to make my life a living hell, but I’m done.

I throw a few bills onto the table and slide out of the booth. I stare down at Emery. “I want a divorce.”

Not willing to test my patience any longer, I walk out of that shitty diner and get into my car.

Fuck the scrutiny.

Fuck the immaculate game plan I had.

Which fool said you should admit defeat once you lose the queen in a chess game? The king is still the fucking king. He will conquer. He will rule. He doesn’t need the queen to save him.

It’s time to sacrifice the fucking queen.

OUR LAWYER READS OVER the divorce terms while I zone out, and Emery sits with her arms crossed. She thought I was making an empty threat when I announced the divorce nearly two weeks ago. She laughed in my face when I told her about our appointment today, thinking I wouldn't go through with it.

“These are the same agreements you both signed in the prenup. Mr Rivers has offered to give you more than you're entitled to as you helped him build the company.”

My wife scoffs. “I don't want it. I want sole custody of my child, and that's it.”

The middle-aged man looks at me for a response.

I turn towards Emery, who remains sitting forward. “Take it as a gesture of goodwill.”

“Goodwill? You're not trying to buy my silence?”

I take a deep breath. “We both sign the NDA. Neither of us can discuss what happened in our marriage or divorce

proceedings. It's protection for both of us."

Emery stands up and punches the back of her chair. "I don't care what people have to say about me. It's only *you* that does. You're scared I'm going to tell people you fucked our surrogate."

"You fucked half of London," I fire back. I cross one leg over the other and let her overreact.

"You were the *worst* husband in history, yet I stayed quiet and followed every order. And now you're trying to leave me months before our baby arrives? Are you trying to hurt me?"

I don't care about you.

Not voicing my thoughts, I say something more appropriate. "This marriage is hurting us. Look at what we've become. Is this how you want to spend the rest of your life? Is this what you want to bring a baby into? We don't love each other."

Emery stares at me. *No*. She stares right *through* me. Her gaze pierces through my flesh right to my soul. Tears brim in her eyes as she navigates through her thoughts. "I love you, Xavier. Are you really going to do this to me? I have nothing outside of this family. You're taking away *everything*. You might as well kill me." She turns to our lawyer. "Put it in writing that if I end up dead, *he*," she points at me, "put the bullet in me."

Harold, our lawyer, cuts in as he pities the lonely woman. "Mrs Rivers, sign these papers. You have enough here to live a comfortable life. You have a baby coming. Wouldn't you

rather spend your energy on raising a happy child than fighting for a dead marriage?”

Emery wipes the few tears that managed to escape. “I want sole custody. That is the only way you make me go away silently.”

I cut Harold off before he can argue on my behalf. “Fine.”

“Mr Rivers—“

“Make the changes,” I order while staring at Emery. “Give her whatever she wants concerning the baby.”

You’d think she would bounce off the walls now that she got what she came for. She can pledge her love, but she and I both know what this marriage was to her – a free path to having her own baby.

But she cries harder. “You don’t even care to fight for your child. Why did I fool myself into believing you’d fight for me?” She doesn’t back away from my harsh stare. “Is she worth it? Is she worth killing me for?”

Yes. A thousand times, yes.

After finalising a few more changes, we head out of the office. The start of June finally brings some warm weather. The sun is high in the sky, giving me a great feeling about today.

I turn to Emery. “You can take the car home. I’m going to walk it back to the office.”

She looks surprised at the offer. “How are you going to get home?”

“I’ll figure it out. I need the walk to clear my head.”

Emery nods at me but doesn’t move. Her eyes are the tunnel to her emotions. Everything about her looks the same as the day we met – sad and longing.

When she caught me watching her fight with the wind, she graced me with an embarrassed smile. She was the first woman after Caitlyn that made me feel *something*. That conversation with her was the first time I felt something other than grief since my dad died.

When she goes to walk away, I hold her back. I lift her chin so she’s forced to look at me. “I wish it didn’t have to come to this. When I met you, I thought you were my perfect one. But too much changed. Only so long can we pretend we are happy with who we see in the mirror.”

She strokes my face. “You’re too busy looking into the future. Be careful, Xavier. The past is always just behind you.” Her warning chills the air and has bells ringing in my head. “Do you love her?”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation.

She nods as she takes a step back. “Then let her go. Nothing good comes from being loved by you. Your mother learnt that. My guess is Caitlyn learnt that.” Her sad smile is haunting. “I’ve learnt it too. Let me go,” she pleads. “I’ve never cared for money or diamonds. All I wanted was a family. Release me

from your love, and let me go.” As she turns around, the sun reflects off her tears.

She gets into the car, and I walk away.



Kian makes me further irate as he fires another excuse at me. The tops of his ears turn the same shade of pink as his face. I watch him stumble over his words, feeling flustered under my harsh glare. The fool failed to secure a contract any trainee could have done with their eyes closed. My anger towards him stems from his asking Savannah out a few weeks ago. She rejected him, but he thought he could get away with watching her ass as she walked away. My company doesn't tolerate sexual harassment.

“You're fired,” I bark while he's mid-sentence.

“Xavier—“

My eyes narrow. “Mr Rivers,” I correct him.

His pathetic gulp can be heard from my side of the desk. “Mr Rivers. Please give me another chance. I will prove to you that...”

His weak voice fades into nothingness as Savannah practically runs past my office to the elevators. She bounces from side to side while impatiently waiting for the doors to open.

I stand up, hoping to catch her, but she disappears behind the doors.

“Leave your badge on my desk. You have ten minutes to pack your stuff. Security will escort you out of the building.” I’m already out of my office before the end of my sentence. I keep my pace steady as I walk to Ray’s office. I enter without knocking.

“Where did Savannah rush off to?”

He looks up from his laptop to her desk as if only just realising she’s not there. “It’s lunchtime.”

“Do you think it’s appropriate for her to run around getting your lunch?” Annoyance seeps out of me. “She is seven months pregnant.”

Ray goes back to his laptop. “You’re the one who gave me a pregnant PA.” He looks up at me when I don’t respond. “She’s *fine*.”

Play nice.

“You’re right. I saw her rushing out and thought something was wrong.”

He stares at me, deep in thought, before speaking. “One of these days, you’re going to explain why you told her the truth about her father.”

And the elephant in the room is finally addressed.

There is no hesitation in his demand. I’ve been anticipating this conversation. I know he feels betrayed, but I had to play

that move.

I nod my head and exit his office.

The rest of my day is spent focused on work, with the occasional stolen glance at Savannah. I love it when she leans against Francesca's desk to converse. It gives me the perfect view of her. She laughs a lot in those conversations. She holds her bump as if to protect it from any potential danger. It's endearing.

It's almost 8 p.m. when we leave the office. Luckily for me, Ray asked her to stay a little later today. While it pissed me off he was making her work long hours, it meant we could drive home together. She's quiet during the drive. She sits in the passenger seat and wallows in her thoughts.

"You okay there?"

She looks over at me. "Yeah. Just tired." She hesitates. "Do you think Emery hates me?"

I hold her hand. I love how her slight fingers feel threaded through mine. Her skin is smooth and soft. I miss feeling her hands roam over my body.

"No. I think she harbours negative feelings towards herself."

She stares down at our intertwined hands. "We're only making it worse."

I bring her hand to my lips and place a kiss. "I've tried to help her. I did everything I could."

Savannah turns silent again and leans her forehead against the window. She doesn't have to express her thoughts because I can feel the accusation.

No, you didn't.

My blaring ringtone breaks the tension. With one hand on the wheel, I bring the phone to my ear. After confirming my identity, the rest of the words are a blur. The cars behind me blare their horn as I brake in the middle of the road.

Savannah sits up and repeatedly asks me what happened.

“Where?” I ask.

With the location in mind, I press down on the pedal and turn the car around, ignoring all the angry drivers around me. Savannah practically screams at me as I drive like a madman.

“Shut up!” I snap.

Her chest heaves as I ignore her and drive. Driving over the speed limit gets me there in less than fifteen minutes. I haphazardly park the car and storm into the building with Savannah on my tail.

“Where is she?” I demand.

The receptionist looks terrified under my stormy stare. “Mr Rivers?”

I slam my fists down on the counter. “Where the fuck is my wife?”

“Xavier?” Savannah cries.

I shrug her arm off me. “Take me to her.”

The woman hurries out of her seat and guides me to Emery. There is a chill that makes me shiver. We enter a narrow room with a glass panel looking into a small room. The metal table is covered by a cloth.

The doctor warns about the body's state, but I don't care. I want to see it with my own eyes.

Savannah mumbles something under her breath, but I pay her no attention. The balding doctor takes me through the door. I stand with bated breath as he pulls the covers down to reveal her face.

My eyes close. Six years of Emery flash through my mind. Every laugh, smile, tear, and scream we shared from the first day rush through me. Emery was supposed to be my checkmate. She wasn't supposed to cheat like my mother. She was supposed to protect me from speculative eyes. She was supposed to be the last one.

My knees buckle under me as I let a few tears fall. I allow myself to feel the grief and guilt for the outcome of this love story.

Behind me, I hear Savannah gasp before she lets out a scream. Her cries merge with mine until the room is filled with nothing but our howls for a dead Emery. Savannah begins to hyperventilate. She walks in reverse until her back hits the wall. She slides down to the floor, unable to take her eyes off Emery. She cradles her bump as her cries break my heart.

“Get her out of here! She's pregnant!” I shout.

The receptionist and doctor tend to her. She refuses to get up or out of the room. Her eyes don't move from Emery.

"She's dead," she gasps. She repeats those same words as she is forced back into the hallway.

All alone with Emery, I stroke her face. I kiss her cheek. "Didn't I tell you divorce was never an option? I'm sorry I didn't do it myself, but it would have raised too many suspicions," I explain.

I lightly stroke her hair. Even matted with blood, it's as soft as that first day.

"As you said, till death do us part."

ONE TAP ON MY phone has the blinds lifting themselves up and the glorious morning sun shining through. The content smile on my face is a rare one but well-earned. I slept well last night now that the board is back in my favour. My arm falls onto the empty pillow beside me. Soon, I'll wake up next to Savannah, and every morning will be as wonderful as this one.

Feeling in the mood to celebrate, I put some music on. The universe is a funny little thing as Michael Bublé's *Feeling Good* comes through the speakers. My fingers thrum along with the song's beat until I lose myself in my victory.

"What are you doing?" Savannah's horrified tone matches her expression.

I almost forgot I'm supposed to be the grieving husband. I lower the volume and sit taller, exposing my torso. "We danced to this song at our wedding," I lie.

She's lost her glow. Her eyes are red and puffy, with the skin underneath having a purplish hue. Even in the warm weather,

she wears a hoodie that stops just above her knees. Her beautiful silky hair is pulled into what can only be described as a mess. Savannah rubs her eyes as she loiters near the door.

“Please tell me yesterday was a nightmare,” she pleads.

I rub my face as a pretence of exhaustion. “I wish it were.”

She begins to cry again. “How can she be dead? She waited her whole life for this baby.”

Leaving the comfort of my bed, I walk over to her. When I try to reach for her, she pulls away from me. “Savannah...”

She looks up at me and shakes her head. “Don’t touch me.”

I let her walk past me and sit on the edge of my bed. “I wasn’t going to try anything.”

Of course, I wasn’t. A good widower would never move on less than twenty-four hours later. He waits.

“I can’t wrap my head around it, Xavier. *How* did this happen? It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“I don’t know.”

“The collision wasn’t until after five. You got back to the office by noon. That’s five *hours*. You left the lawyers, and then where did she go?”

“I don’t know.”

That part is true. My guys were tasked with watching the car and waiting for the right time to cause a crash. But Emery walked off, and they didn’t think to follow her. *Idiots. This is why I do things by myself.*

“How did the crash happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why doesn’t it make sense?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then find out!” she screams. She looks up from the ground to me. “Your *wife* is *dead*! Dead, Xavier! And you don’t seem the slightest bit bothered to find out how this happened! Considering who you are, I thought you’d be all over this! I thought you would have done whatever you could to find out who did this to her.”

I slowly walk over to her but keep a safe distance between us. “I am going to find out what happened, but there is nothing I can do right now. We need to wait for her autopsy. I can’t look for something that may not exist.”

Her stern glare doesn’t waver. “You are Xavier Rivers. You *handle* everything. You are the *best* in the world. You have the resources at your fingertips. Don’t tell me there’s nothing you can’t do.”

She walks out of the room.



Ray clinks his tumbler against mine. The gold liquid does little to calm the nagging in my brain. Savannah looked unimpressed at the autopsy findings. It turns out Emery

was *way* over the drinking limit, and she lost control of the car. At least, that's what the report and the CCTV footage show.

Her death has officially been ruled as an accident.

"I can't imagine what you're going through. I'm sorry," Ray says, breaking the silence.

I look through my glass into the garden. Savannah has been hiding in there for a week since Emery's death. She returned to hiding when we returned from the autopsy report meeting earlier today. The cameras show her lying in bed. I would have burst my way in if I didn't see her chest rising and falling.

"We were so close to completing our family. Now, I have a dead wife and a baby without a mother. How am I supposed to do this?" I turn my head so he can see the single tear strolling down my cheek.

He clicks his tongue. "It won't be easy, but you'll get through it. One day at a time."

I look back out to the garden. "I already miss her. I miss her so much I can barely breathe."

Ray has a sympathetic look etched onto his face. "I hope it gets easier. Take all the time you need. I've got the business."

He asks questions about the funeral arrangements. As she has no family, nobody is stopping me from cremating her. Her ceremony will be small and short. I won't cry because I'll have an immortal version of her. In a few months, she'll be another diamond to my collection and live forever. If I have a daughter, I'll pass the necklace on, and Emery will be with her.

I ask for a favour. “I need you to control the media around Emery and her death. Nobody can know she was driving under the influence. If anything, even so much as a tweet mentions it, shut it down. I won’t have them making a spectacle of her or her death.”

He sips his whiskey and nods. “Consider it handled.”

“Is that your code for murder?” Savannah appears in the doorway, looking even more exhausted than before.

“Sav.” Ray doesn’t say anything more, which I assume is because of my presence.

“Hux.” She walks further into the room and stands before us. “Did you kill her for *him*?”

Ray shoots her a warning look, but it doesn’t faze her. “Listen to what you’re saying.”

She pulls her bottom lip into her mouth and nods. Since we received the news, I don’t think she’s stopped crying. “You murdered my father, and he made Elliot disappear. What else am I supposed to think?”

“I didn’t murder my wife,” I defend.

“I need a drink.”

“You’re pregnant,” we say in unison.

“Emery is the one that wanted this baby. She’s dead now, so does it matter?”

I stand between her and the glass she’s reaching for. I pin her down with a stare. “That’s *my* baby in there, and I’m still

here.”

“Drop dead, Xavier.”

She hates me. She hates me more now than she did before. The realisation comes down on me like a tonne of bricks.

“Snap out of it. You don’t get to be like this. It’s my job to fall apart, not yours.”

She takes a step back. Her eyebrows pull together as her gaze trails over me, from my feet to my head. “Why haven’t you? Fallen apart, I mean.”

Ray stands up. “I’m going to leave.” He slaps my shoulder. “Let me know if you need anything.” He looks at Savannah with a sad longing but doesn’t say anything as he walks past.

She forces out a laugh. “Don’t I get a goodbye kiss?”

Ray looks between the two of us.

She turns to him. “He knows about us. Apparently, he’s always known. Xavier is really good at keeping secrets. He knows *exactly* how to play the game of chess. Always the right move at the right time. He’s an *excellent* liar.”

My fingers twitch as I restrain myself from doing something I regret. Telling her I knew was a mistake, but I lost control in the heat of the moment.

Ray’s face doesn’t hold any emotion except... *heartbreak*. Seeing her like this is hurting him. “You’re relieved from work during this difficult time.”

“Hux,” she cries.

She shouldn't be crying for him. She should be coming to me for comfort. Instead, I stand by and watch as they meet halfway like two magnets that have found each other.

Ray takes her face into his hands. "I'm still in the snake's den."

He's referred to this twice now in the confines of her bedroom. Whatever it means calms her down a fraction. Her shoulders drop, and her fists come undone. Having completed his job, he lets go of her and steps back. He nods at us and takes his leave.

I wait for the sound of tyres to disappear before breaking the silence suspended on us. "Our contract still stands."

She turns to me. "Which one? The surrogacy or the wife swap?"

"Surrogacy. You can't harm yourself or the baby. I let the Ray situation go, but this is still my house. That is still my baby. You still abide by my rules. Do you understand?"

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever."

"Why are you so angry at me?" My desperation is pathetic.

"Because you don't care! I get that you hated her, but she's *dead*. Her life was over in the blink of an eye, and it doesn't make any sense. Why aren't you doing something?"

I remain calm, knowing that raising my voice won't help. "She was drunk. The autopsy proved that."

She shakes her head. “No! She wouldn’t have been so reckless.”

“She was an alcoholic. You saw it with your own eyes.”

“She was controlling her drinking for the baby. She was trying to be better.”

I resign into my seat. “She was faced with divorce papers. To her, that was giving up everything she knew. You didn’t see her when it came to signing. She literally said she had nothing left to live for. My lawyer will attest to that.”

“So, *we* did this?”

“No. She was in a bad space and made a mistake. No one can be blamed for an accident.”

She stares past me at the wall and absentmindedly nods her head. When she looks at me, I feel like dirt beneath her shoe.

“I refuse to accept that. Maybe she was drunk. Maybe she lost control of the car. But *we* were the ones that put her behind the wheel. You tell yourself whatever you want to help you sleep at night.” She eyes me up and down. “Whatever story you’re selling yourself is clearly working. Today was the first time I’ve seen you look so well-rested. You should be falling apart. You should be drowning in the same guilt that I feel. But you’re listening to music. You’re drinking with your friend. You’re worried about the media and press. You’re sleeping like a baby. You know what they say about the guilty... only *they* can sleep peacefully after the fact.”

She doesn’t believe in my innocence.

“You have no idea what I’m feeling. Do you think I don’t feel guilty? I feel it everywhere I look inside this house. I feel it when I look at you. The last thing she asked was if I loved you, and I answered yes without hesitation! Do you think I haven’t wondered if my honesty is what pushed her over the edge? I miss her, Savannah! I hate that I hated her. I hate that when I look at you, it reminds me of how much I hurt her. I hate that you can’t stand to be in the same room as me. I hate everything about this. I can’t breathe, but I don’t have a fucking choice! My guilt has *nothing* to do with murdering her because I didn’t do it. I am done with you accusing me of murder every chance you fucking get!”

My chest heaves as we stare each other down. Something in my speech made a crack in her suspicions. I can see it in her eyes – they hold an ounce of sympathy.

“And the thing about a guilty person sleeping?” I ask.
“That’s when they’ve been caught and are in prison.”

She looks around the room. “Then maybe I’ll sleep tonight. After all, I am your prisoner.”

IT SEEMS EVERY ROOM I'm in has a constant state of sombreness since Emery's death. Before the news broke, people avoided eye contact out of fear. Now, it's out of pity. I returned to work after one month. It was as uneventful as expected. Those who plucked the courage stopped by to give their condolences, but otherwise, it was business as usual.

Since then, another month has passed. Savannah returned to work two weeks ago. Our relationship has been curt and strained. She spends her days in her bedroom or Emery's hideout. She's become a recluse, only speaking to me as and when needed. Ray stopped by to check in on her, but even he had been cast aside.

Returning to work has been good for her. She smiled for the first time with Francesca yesterday. Jealousy didn't make an appearance as I watched her eat with Ray. My patience is paying off because she's warming up to me again.

My eyes remain glued to her as she watches the screen. Dr Roe was heartbroken as we shared the news of Emery's

untimely passing. Nevertheless, she points at the screen with an enthusiasm neither of us has felt in two months.

Savannah's eyes lift to mine, and she smiles at me. "Only twenty-one days to go."

Is her excitement to meet the baby or to finally be free of me? I've got a new game plan that will have her between my arms in no time.

I squeeze her shoulder. "Thank you."

In a move that surprises me, her hand comes up and closes over mine. I give my first genuine smile, and she returns the gesture.

As we exit the clinic, Savannah turns to me. "Can we stop for some ice cream? It's so hot today."

If any individual told me I would grin like a fool at a request for ice cream, I would have ridiculed them for being an idiot. But here I am, smiling at her like she offered me the world.

I nod. "Yes. Anywhere particular?"

She thinks about it for a second. "Any ice cream truck. I want bubble gum and strawberry sauce. Oh! And a chocolate flake!"

My heart swells at her childlike excitement. "I know the perfect place." Once we're in the car, I make a call to Ray. "I need you to hold the fort at the office today."

There is a moment of silence. "Uh... okay? Was everything okay at the appointment?"

I look at Savannah, who looks golden under the bright sun. “Yes. Perfectly well. Will you be able to handle it on your own?”

“Yes. Savannah should be back soon.”

At the mention of her name, she looks my way.

“No. Savannah is going to be joining me. We will be back at the office tomorrow.” I list a few urgent matters he needs to take care of before hanging up.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“To get ice cream... from Bournemouth.”

Her mouth drops open in surprise. “I was talking about the van parked down the street from the office.”

I start the car. “We both need time and space away from the house and work. Everywhere is a reminder of the wrongs we have done. Maybe today can be the start of something new. The fresh start we owe to ourselves.”

Savannah analyses my face before nodding and settling back into her seat.



The drive was excruciatingly slow, but I didn't mind because the car was filled with the warmth and scent of Savannah. Her eyes closed shut an hour in. She looked at peace in her sleep as the crease between her brows fell away.

Her youthful excitement is back as we walk on the beach in search of ice cream. “There! Let’s go!” She takes my hand in hers as she runs towards the truck. The sun brings out the caramel tones of her skin. Her hair flies behind her. Happiness looks perfect on her.

“Slow down!” I warn.

But her long legs have a mind of their own as she races to the truck. She only slows down when she sees the long queue. Her hand goes to her chest as she wheezes.

“Pregnancy and running are not a good match,” she laughs.

I chuckle at her struggle. “Pregnancy looks radiant on you. *You* are radiant.”

The compliment goes over her head as she debates what ice cream she wants. “I think I want them all,” she concludes. She looks down the long length of the queue and pouts. “My ankles are aching.”

She won’t be able to stand for this long. I walk to the front of the queue, and she follows me curiously. I beckon the attention of the owner. “How much money do you make on a day like this?”

The man looks confused, so I repeat myself. He shrugs. “About two grand.”

I take out my wallet and hand him my card. “I’ll pay five if you close your truck and let us occupy it.”

The man looks befuddled at my offer. “You want to sit in my truck?”

I nod. “And eat as much ice cream as we want.”

Savannah’s hand wraps around my bicep. “Xavier! What the hell? We can line up like everyone else.”

“You’re not everyone else,” I answer. I look back at the man. “Five grand. Deal?”

Knowing it’s a great offer, he agrees and announces his truck is shut, earning disgruntled groans from potential customers. He lets us into his vehicle before leaving us alone.

I gesture to the van. “What can I get you first?”

She pretends to think about it. “Single wafer cone with all the sauces and *two* flakes.”

“Coming right up.”

She parks herself on one of the counters as I try to swirl the perfect peak onto her cone. I lather the top with the three available sauces before sticking two flakes in and handing it to her. She gracefully thanks me and digs in as I begin making my own. Once I have one, I sit on the counter opposite hers.

“We must look like fools. Me and my massive bump and you in your suit, eating ice cream like children.”

I chuckle at the truth in the statement. My black suit looks fit for business, but not an ice cream one. Savannah looks like she got dressed to come to the beach. The thick straps on her white dress allow her arms to catch some sunlight. The bottom of the dress flows just above her knees. Her bump sits snug beneath the fabric. I love it when she lets her hair loose instead of twisting it into a bun. It frames her face perfectly, like a gold

frame does a world-famous painting. Nothing in the world is as beautiful as Savannah; nothing on this earth and nothing no otherworldly God can offer. Savannah is the definition of heaven and pleasure.

“Thank you,” she mutters. I look up at her as she continues. “For today. For the past few weeks. Your patience. Everything.”

“Savannah—“

She stops me. “Let me finish. I’m sorry for all the things I accused you of. I know you’re not a murderer, but it felt easy to pass the blame to someone else. When you can’t make sense of something, you think of the first thing that makes sense, no matter how illogical. It wasn’t fair of me to say such horrid things, especially after Emery. I’m sorry.”

Discarding my ice cream, I walk over until I stand between her legs. “I get it. You haven’t had many people to trust, but you can trust me. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.”

Her sad smile dissipates as a teasing one takes its place. “Like pay a ridiculous fee to have ice cream?”

I tuck her hair behind her ear. “Yes. Anything for you.”

Her tongue peaks out to gather the ice cream that is melting. She doesn’t look away from my gaze as she engages in the sensual act. “What was your favourite flavour growing up?”

The sudden change in the topic makes me laugh. “Vanilla.”

This time, her melodic laugh fills the space. “I didn’t peg you as the vanilla type,” she teases.

Winking at her, I say, “My taste has adapted since then.”

“I’ve always loved strawberry.”

We stay in that position as the hours fly by, talking about the minuscule things we don’t share. Savannah shares things about herself no background check could reveal. Every minor detail amplifies how magnificent she really is.

“Why did your dad make you a chessboard, of all things?” she asks.

I finish topping her seventh ice cream cone before answering. “We used to play ever since I was a child. He said it was a game that taught discipline.”

She frowns. “He sounds like a strict man.”

“Not at all. He liked having things in order but was a free spirit.”

I enjoy the way Savannah observes me. Her curious gaze trails all over my skin, leaving a blaze behind. “Would you ever consider contacting your mum to make amends?”

The tension in my body clicks in my jaw. The last thing I need is Savannah trying to heal me from the wounds my mother left.

“No.” The single word drips with venom.

She understands to drop the subject. “Sorry.” She hops off the counter. “Let’s go and find a chessboard somewhere.”

And just like that, the tension vanishes. The glow in her cheeks and sparkle in her eyes eases my muscles.

With a smile, I ask, “Why?”

“You’re going to teach me how to play. I want to learn all your trick moves.”

I playfully tut at her as we exit. “A good player never reveals his best moves.”

Her puppy eyes do little to weaken my defence. “Why? Scared I’ll give you a taste of your medicine?”

I pull her arm so her back is pressed against me. Bowing my head so my lips are at her ears, I say, “Medicine? Baby, I play with poison.”

She pushes away with a devilish grin. “What good is a game if the stakes aren’t high?” She offers a handshake.

With my interest piqued, I shake her hand. “Winner takes all.”

“Game on.”

EMERY WOULD HAVE LOVED the nursery if she were alive to see it. Savannah adds the finishing touches while I stand back and watch. She has transformed the space into a beautiful pastel-coloured jungle. Not one of my background checks highlighted her artistic flair.

She drops her tools and lowers herself into her chair. “Okay. I think we’re done. What do you think.”

“Perfect. I’m sure the baby will love it.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “The baby won’t even know what it’s looking at.”

I round the chair until I’m looking down at her. “Did you just roll your eyes at me, Miss Hayes?”

She holds her hands up in surrender. “Apologies. Shall we assemble the furniture?”

I gently push her back. “You sit. I’ve got this.”

Grabbing her half-eaten bag of pretzels, she sits back and watches me get to work. The sunlight through the window brings a sheen of moisture to collate on my skin, forcing me to remove my t-shirt. My eyes hood over as Savannah enjoys the new view.

“Looking good, Mr Rivers.”

“Behave yourself, Miss Hayes.”

She hums under her breath. “What are your plans for this evening?”

I’m going to check how my diamond is coming along.

“I have some errands to run. Did you need something?”

She shakes her head. “No. Huxley is coming over to talk. I just wanted to make sure we were alone.”

She looks lost in her thoughts at the mention of her impending conversation. I don’t comment on it and continue putting the dresser together.

“We need to discuss what happens the day the baby is born.”

I keep my face controlled, not wanting to give away my desperation for her to stay. “The contract states that the final payment is released, and we go our separate ways.” I look at her. “It’s up to you whether that happens.”

She rubs her belly. “I think I’m going to miss her.”

I cock my brow. “Her?”

“I think it’s a girl. Would you be happy with a mini-Emery?”

I don't care for the baby anymore. The baby was only ever useful to keep Emery in line.

"I'd be happy with you." When Savannah frowns, I quickly add, "And a son or daughter. I don't have a preference."

The crease between her eyebrows doesn't fade. Nevertheless, she nods. "Can I think about it?"

I nod and turn back to the dresser. "I think it would be good for you to move into the house during these last few weeks. How would I know if your water breaks?"

Truthfully, I would know, but Savannah doesn't need to know that.

I wait for her to fight me on this, but she surprises me by nodding. "You're right. It's not like I can run across the garden while in labour. What if I'm alone in the house and you're not here?"

I circle my finger as a gesture to the room. "There are cameras everywhere. The guesthouse doesn't have cameras," I lie.

She gives some thought to my argument before agreeing. "Okay, but I want my own room."

"I'll arrange for someone to bring your things into a guest bedroom."

We fall into silence as I finish what I started. I don't like her wanting her own space. But she'll come round soon. I've got her in the house. Now, to keep her here.



The carbon extracted from the ashes is perfectly dry and ready for the organic solvent to be added. I remember the first time I did this. My dad scolded me for my lack of patience.

“How much longer do we have to wait?” I moaned.

My dad tusked at me. “You need to learn to have some patience, son. Perfect things don’t come easily. You must take your time. This is hard work which requires discipline.”

He was completely enthralled with the job of sifting through the carbon. His usually dull eyes were bright as he proved how good he was at the job.

“Are you still sad that she’s gone?”

He didn’t look at me when he answered, but he did pause. “Sometimes. I put a lot of work into your mother. When we met, she was a mess. All over the place.” He shook his head. “But I took my time with her. I taught her well.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not well enough.”

He tilted his head in my direction. “I failed as a man. It was my job to maintain her. As a man, it’s your job to create the world for a woman. You give her everything she wants.”

I looked at him in confusion. “Why?”

“Because then she doesn’t have any reason to leave.”

Ray's voice snaps me out of the past. I turn my focus to my phone, where I have the perfect view of Savannah ripping his heart out.

His face is contorted into rage and disbelief. "Where has this come from? What changed between us?"

"Everything." She looks at him with sadness. "Everything changed when you ordered the hit on my dad."

"I was ready to..." He doesn't finish the sentence. His head hangs low as he stares at the ground.

"What?" she pleads.

As silence descends on them, I stir the black liquid carefully before leaving the flotation process to complete itself.

He takes a deep breath. "We can leave all this behind us and go. I'll give it all up."

She backs away from him. "I don't want to. I don't want you." The waver in her voice doesn't meet the conviction she's going for. She should be affirmative in her decision. So why does she look like she hates herself for rejecting him?

Their back and forth continues as I tap the pure carbon powder onto a sterile sheet. Grabbing the catalyst, I carefully funnel the powder through the tiny hole before tightening the plug. It's as though I can feel my dad's hot breath as he stands behind me, analysing me as he did the first time.

"Slower, Xavier!" he scolded. "You don't want to waste any of the carbon."

I took a deep breath and steadied my hands. The powder slowly slipped into the hole. “Is this what makes the diamond?”

He hummed lowly. “The most important part. People stare at diamonds in awe, but nobody appreciates the process or the hard work. Most people would scoff at the sight of a dark powder, but me? I see potential in the roughness of it. There’s something beautiful about taking something unwanted and making it into something worthwhile.”

I stepped back as he took over.

He continued, “It’s a valuable skill.”

“What?”

“Taking something unwanted and giving it value – making it into something worthy.”

I frowned, knowing I would never have the same passion for diamonds as him. “I don’t think I will ever have an eye for diamonds.”

“Women and diamonds are no different.” He stood to his full height, towering over me. “Look for a woman the world doesn’t want and put in the hard work. Break her to fit into your mould and watch her flourish under your guidance.”

I shrugged my shoulders, unbothered about finding a woman. “What’s the point? They’re probably all like her.” I couldn’t bring myself to call her my mother anymore. She was a liar.

A look of regret shone in his eyes. "I started too late with her. You find a woman while you're young and build memories with her because those memories will tie you together. The older they are," he shook his head, "The harder it becomes. No matter how much you try to help them, they fuck you over."

With all the prep work complete, I insert it into the HP container. In only a few months, Emery will be another beautiful diamond in my collection.

Savannah's cries pull me away from the clear-up. "Let me go. I just want to go back to the start. Before this all got so complicated. Before I made all these poor decisions."

"Poor decisions," he echoes. "I didn't know you regretted us so much. But that's fine. Let's erase everything about us and go back to the start." His pain is thinly veiled by anger.

"Hux—"

"No. It's fine. I'll be your boss, and you'll be my PA. I'll see you Monday at 8 a.m. sharp, Miss Hayes."

She runs after him. "We don't have to become strangers."

He opens the door. "We already are because I don't know who this is. This isn't my Savannah. She wouldn't disregard everything we became. She wouldn't belittle us to something so insignificant. She knew this was more than sex. It was a future. It was real." He stares at her in desperation. "Something in you changed the day Emery died. I don't know what, but I wish I did. I'd do anything to bring my Savannah back because I miss her."

THE TENSION IN THE room is palpable as soon as I enter. Savannah's head is slightly bowed as she absentmindedly stares at her screen. On the other side of the room, Ray's fingers come crashing down on his keyboard. Neither speak nor look at me.

It's fair to say their recent breakup has put a wonderful end to their continuous banter. Their office is as cold as the room Elliot occupied before I burnt him to ashes. Both scenarios bring a small smile to my lips.

"Are you ready to leave?" I ask.

When she looks up at me, I see the red that rims her eyes. She clears her throat. "Yes. I just have one more thing to get done."

I check the time on my watch despite knowing it's past six-thirty. "It can wait until tomorrow. You're two weeks from your due date and have had a twelve-hour day. Log off," I order.

Her eyes flicker to Ray before coming back to mine. “It’ll only take a few minutes. I can get the tube home if you need to leave.”

“Savannah.” The single word has a warning dripping from it.

“Leave my PA alone,” Ray instructs, still looking at his laptop. “She had enough time to complete her task list before the end of play. It’s not my fault she’s slow.”

I know better than to get involved. I know losing my temper will only raise questions. So, I remain composed. “She’s due in seventeen days,” I try to reason.

His empty eyes turn to me. “If she’s unable to fulfil her job description, then I would advise she takes early maternity leave. I won’t make any sacrifices in *my* workplace.”

Savannah’s silent pleas are ignored as I step towards Ray’s desk. “Are you dissatisfied with her work?”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “More dissatisfied with the time she wastes crying after receiving constructive criticism.”

Savannah walks over with a folder before carefully placing it on his desk. “All the errors have been corrected.”

He doesn’t look at her. He flicks through the pages and nods his approval. “You’re dismissed.”

Savannah fiddles with her fingers as she hesitates. “Can I start at ten tomorrow? My mum was asking—“

“Am I your friend?”

Her mouth opens and closes a few times before saying, “What?”

His eyes narrow. “I’m not your friend. You are my PA. I am your boss. I don’t care to hear about your personal life. If you needed the morning off, you should have submitted a leave request two weeks ago.”

“That’s enough,” I bark. “I don’t know what’s happening between you, but this nonsense stops *now*. This is a workplace and not a playground for you to hash out your personal problems.”

My move is complete. The knight is off the board, but I still need to keep my new queen on my side. She needs to know *I* will protect her.

My interception gains back some of her confidence. She squares her shoulders and gives us a half-smile. “I’ll be in at ten tomorrow. I’ll make up the hours another day, or it can be docked from my pay.”

Ray doesn’t give in so easily. “Don’t bother coming in at all if you’re not here at 8 a.m. I’ve given you enough leeway, and I’m not doing it anymore.” He turns to me. “Consider this my formal notice that I wish to request a new personal assistant. The relationship between myself and Miss Hayes was a poor decision.”

The use of her own words against her makes her flinch. “Hux...” She says nothing else, but the tears brimming tell all she can’t.

This is hurting her.

“I’m letting you go, Miss Hayes.” His voice is strained as he says the one thing he doesn’t want to. “Thank you for your service.”

“Don’t do this,” she begs.

“The hours of this job are too demanding for a woman in your state. I can’t ask you to commit to something you aren’t ready for. And I won’t lower my expectations. Please enjoy your maternity leave.” He turns his attention back to his laptop, effectively dismissing us.

I hold Savannah by her elbow and guide her out of the office. She keeps herself together until we get into the car. The moment I close her door, her head falls into her hands, and she cries. The drive home continues the same way. She doesn’t speak to me even when her cries die down. She stares out her window the entire time.

I’m about to ask her what she wants for dinner when I spot the stranger loitering outside my gates.

“Is that Jordan?” Savannah asks as she perks up.

“Who’s that?”

“Elliot’s best friend.”

Oh, for fucks sake. Even dead, this man continues to bring trouble to my door.

“What’s he doing here? How does he know where I live?”

Instead of answering, Savannah jumps out of the car and walks up to him. I kill the engine and join them, not wanting to miss anything valuable.

“He’s in Bali,” Savannah says.

The stranger looks up at me as I stand beside her. “He would have called me Sav. You know us.”

I intervene. “He discarded his sim card before he left.”

He doesn’t look at me when he speaks, instead shooting his pathetic, pleading eyes at her. “He knows my number. You know this. He would call me – even if it was to gloat. I haven’t heard a peep from him in four months. That’s not like him.”

Savannah shifts her weight from one foot to another. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Jordan. He’s gone.”

“No! Something happened to him. I *know* it. Can’t you have someone investigate it?”

She looks up at me. “Can you? Just to give him peace of mind.”

I sigh. “I have a business to run. I don’t have the time to look for a man who is probably sitting in the sun.”

Jordan steps up to me. The top of his head barely comes to my shoulder, and I refrain from laughing at how ridiculous he looks.

“This was you. Elliot had you all sussed out, so you probably had him murdered. Don’t trust this man, Sav. Elliot knew all about him. He told me that he forced his ex out of the country,

and now look where he conveniently ended up. Don't trust him."

Savannah keeps one hand on her belly and uses the other to rub his shoulder. "That's not what happened. He left willingly. I saw the contract and pictures myself. It was selfish but smart."

Jordan eyes her large bump. "He's gotten into your head. You're not stupid, Sav. Wake up."

He needs to leave before he starts planting seeds of doubt in her head. I've only just gotten her to drop the murder accusations against me.

"Get off my property."

"You've got one week to give me proof of life before I report your ass to the cops."

Now it's my turn to step to him. "Don't threaten me."

"You did something to him, and I won't stop until I find him." He takes a step back. "One week. Get me anything. Video of him on the beach. A phone call." He looks at Savannah again. "A missing girlfriend and dead wife? Be careful who you're lying in bed with."

MY FATHER WAS A meticulous man. He kept concise records of every business transaction, whether it be an invoice or email. He also made sure his house was always in order. Everything had a place and was required to be returned after being used. My mother always hated that about him, which makes sense because she never understood her place in the home; she was a wife and mother but decided to be a whore instead. Nevertheless, my father's habits rubbed off on me, and I learnt to keep a record of everything, label and store it away safely should I require it in the future.

The future is now. Every conversation Savannah had with Elliot Hunter was saved to an encrypted hard drive. It's the only audio source I have at hand to splice words together to create a fake voicemail. I've managed to hold him off for an additional week. I could have easily completed this task within the week he demanded, but I wasn't about to concede to his every request. I would have dismissed it entirely had I wanted

Savannah to start doubting me again. Providing this evidence should alleviate any suspicions that may remain with her.

There's a soft knock at the door before her head appears in the opening. "Are you finished working yet? I'm bored."

Her early maternity leave has been difficult for her. She spends her days eating through everything in the kitchen, watching TV or napping in Emery's room. I regret not installing cameras in there while she still resided in the guesthouse. Unlike Emery, she doesn't spend the entire day in there or lock the door. The few times I've found her there, she was curled up on the bed asleep.

I close my laptop. "I'm done now. You should have come knocking earlier if you wanted company."

She takes a seat on the sofa and fiddles with a chess piece. "I feel bad you leave the office early to babysit me."

I frown. "It's not babysitting. I don't want you to be alone."

She puts the piece back in the wrong place. "When is this baby coming out? I'm tired of peeing every five seconds." She gives me a playful smile. "They say sex induces labour."

The thought of having her brings my cock to life, but it's too soon. Giving in to her would let her think that is all I see her for. But she's more than that.

"You're only *one* day overdue."

She shifts so her back rests against the arm of the chair. "What if I told you I wasn't wearing anything under this dress?" Her devilish smile is going to take me straight to hell.

“You’re in a naughty mood.”

Her head lolls to the side as she hums. “I decided to tidy her up before I have a doctor with his hand up my vagina. I wouldn’t want to scare him with an unruly bush.” She climbs off the sofa and prowls towards me. “It’s so sensitive. I no longer have a clear view, so I had to use my fingers to guide me.”

She pushes my laptop away before taking a seat on the edge of my desk. She places one foot on each of my thighs as she heists her dress up to her waist. Leaning back on her elbows, she gives me a perfect view of her smooth pussy.

“Why don’t you inspect to see if I missed a spot.”

Pregnancy has changed her pussy. It looks fuller and swollen. I would have to spread her open to get access to her clit. I want to run my tongue over the fresh skin and devour her. She looks delectable. *She is delectable.* My dick strains against my trousers at the sight of her spread open for me. A small bead of arousal peaks out as she pulsates at the look of hunger on my face. With Savannah, there is no need for foreplay. One look at her, and I’m ready to fuck her into another universe.

“You did a good job,” I compliment.

Her fingers trail over her slit. “It feels so good,” she whispers. “Do you want to feel?”

“No,” I lie.

The temptress teases me further by spreading her lips apart to show me exactly what I'm missing. She rubs her clit a few times before pushing two fingers into her opening. Her walls clench over the digits making my cock pulse with need. I ball my hands into fists to maintain control as I enjoy the show. When I lay in bed alone, I'll rewatch the show and give myself a much-needed release.

"I'm going to come. Fuck." With her fingers still buried inside her, she closes her legs shut. She takes a few deep breaths before she removes her fingers and stares at me. "Give me your cock, Mr Rivers."

Fuck. Such a filthy request accompanied by the formal addressing takes a massive knock on my control.

Her puppy eyes and cunning smile are an oxymoron. "Please?" The plea is only above a whisper but takes the last of my resolve.

I unzip my pants enough to pull out my hard cock. The sight makes her eyes come to life as she climbs off the desk and straddles me. She wastes no time lowering herself onto my shaft. The guttural groan almost makes me explode, but I stop myself.

Her movements are slow as she fills herself a little more every time she moves. The tight grip she has around my shaft is heavenly. Nothing has ever felt so exquisite.

I pull the straps of her dress down and pull one of her nipples into my mouth. Her breasts have almost doubled inside, and her nipples are darker and more prominent. It's sexy, and one

of these days, I'm going to fuck her tits. I will fuck every part of her body until she feels me *everywhere*. She won't remember anyone before me, and there will never be anyone *after me*. I'll make sure of it.

My hands try to guide her, but she pushes them off. She closes her eyes as she rides us both to oblivion. This is for *her*. She needed this. She needed *me*. I let her control the pace and depth because the pleasure on her face is all I need to come. She picks up her pace as she calls upon a deity neither of us believes in. Her words become incoherent groans before she collapses onto me and rides out her orgasm.

I continue to thrust as she spasms on my cock. Her scent consumes me and takes me to another world. Everything about Savannah is otherworldly.

“Did you come?” she mumbles.

I chuckle. “No.”

Her breathing is deep and sated. “Give me a second. Pregnancy makes this feel so intense, but my God, it's exhausting.”

I kiss her shoulder. “Let's get you cleaned up and some dinner in you.”

She looks at me in surprise. “But you haven't...”

I tuck her hair behind her ear. “I'll survive as long as you are content.”

“You're still hard as a rock.”

I wink at her. “I’m always hard around you.” I slowly ease myself out of her. “Shower and then food.”



Savannah tucks into her food the moment it’s placed in front of her. I enjoy watching her do simple things like eat. It reminds me that she is human – attainable.

“You don’t drink much,” she states.

Those who regularly get drunk are imbeciles. Why intoxicate yourself to the point of no self-control?

“Not really. I don’t care for alcohol.”

The few times I did get drunk, it made me paranoid. I was worried I would blurt out the truth about my mother. I saw how loose-lipped people became when drunk. Drunk words are sober thoughts, as they say.

“The second I give birth, I’m going to neck an entire bottle of vodka.”

The dreamy look in her eyes brings a laugh to my lips. “Very well. I’ll be sure to keep one on hand.”

The apprehension on her face makes me worry about what she’s about to say. “I don’t think I’m going to return to XR Securities after having the baby. Things with Hux... I think it would be best for everyone.”

Everyone except me. Having her in the office means I can keep track of her – who she speaks to, what she eats, and

where she goes. Having her somewhere else would risk her meeting someone new. *I can't have that.*

“Maybe you don't have to work at all? I can take care of you and your mother. You don't need to worry about money.”

She scoffs. “I don't think so. I don't need or want you to *take care* of me. I promised my mother to never let a man be the reason I have things in life.”

I bought you a fucking car that you gladly accepted. You live in my house rent-free. You got a job because of me.

“I respect that. Can't you and Ray put your differences aside?”

“You've never had to deal with an ex, have you?”

Her assumption couldn't be more wrong. Both women were difficult to control. I took my father's advice and found a girl who was broken, unwanted and young. We were two seventeen-year-olds who thought we were owed more than what life gave.

Sara came from a family more broken than mine: a drug-addict mother and abusive father. I took her under my wing and tried to help her. But she was an adulterous bitch who lied to my face. She was fucking three of us at the same time. Her death was purely accidental. Like my mother, she tried to deny her infidelity, but I saw through her lies. I tried to knock her unconscious but used too much force, and she dropped at my feet.

My father was disappointed that I lost control again. As we discarded her body, he lectured me about the many ways to control a woman. He said it was my responsibility to clean up the mess. Elijah Rivers was a man of his word, so he carefully watched to see what I had learnt from the incident with my mother. He only had to intervene twice, but I did him proud. Sara became *three* beautiful diamonds – one to represent the three men she played. I laid her to rest on a beautiful gold chain.

Her disappearance was easily explained. Her family didn't care much, and she was eighteen at the time of her sudden death. The police dismissed it as an adult running away from an abusive home. The same can't be said for Caitlyn.

Caitlyn was beautiful. She was loyal. She was good. But I ignored my father's advice to find an unwanted woman. Her family were the issue. They were too involved in our life. They were the reason she wouldn't move in with me because it was too fast, according to them. We were twenty and almost graduates. They put bullshit into her head, and she started to turn on me. She hated that I called her a few times a day. She learned to hate me turning up to her apartment when she wouldn't answer. She didn't like that I saw her friends as a bad influence.

I admired Caitlyn. Even at nineteen, she had big dreams and ambitions. She wanted everything life had to offer. She used that as an excuse to escape me. She wanted to move across the world without me. I couldn't have that. XR Securities wasn't at the level it is today. I wouldn't have been able to protect her

from here. My father would have been alone had I moved. So, I had to keep her here with me and in a state where she couldn't try to leave me again.

Her death was slow and intimate. My hands gripped her neck, and I squeezed until her body gave in. I was ashamed of the hard-on I had, but I didn't fuck her. I'm not a necrophile – that's fucked. My dad made me do it all alone this time, and I succeeded. Caitlyn rests with Sara as a pair of beautiful studs.

Her family accused me of murder, but I denied it. I was a twenty-three-year-old who had a bright future ahead of him. Who was listening to their accusations? Regardless, I created a social media account that I still regularly update. It isn't enough for her family, but I've built my company walls high enough that I'm protected.

That is why it was important for Emery to be *the one*. I couldn't have another woman in my life disappear. I married her and settled into a mundane life.

But as I look into Savannah's golden eyes and flushed cheeks, I know life with her won't be mundane. It's going to be everything my dad wanted for me. Savannah is tied to me forever.

"I had amicable breakups with past relationships," I answer.

"Lucky you. Dealing with an ex is the worst." She rests her elbows on the table. "Out of curiosity, what makes someone break up with you?"

I chew on my food and frown at her thinking I was the problem. “*I ended things.*”

“Why?”

I want to tell her to drop it, but it will only make her think I have something to hide. “Caitlyn wanted to move abroad for her career, and I didn’t want to hold her back. It was what she needed. Sara was cheating on me. She begged my forgiveness, but I couldn’t look past it.”

She nibbles on her bottom lip. “Can you look past it with me? I mean... technically, I cheated on you with Hux.”

“And I on you with Emery. That situation was different.” Wanting to be done with the conversation, I change the subject. “I’ll speak to Ray about taking you back as his PA post maternity leave. Your job at XR Securities remains.”

THE LOUD WAIL BRINGS a breath of relief to everyone in the room – including myself. Instead of falling back, Savannah leans forward to get a first look.

“Congratulations, Mr Rivers! You have a healthy baby girl.”

My eyes widen as the doctor holds her up. The small body is covered in a white substance. But the loud cries are anything *but* small. Her tiny features remain scrunched as she tests the strength of her lungs.

“Would you like to do the honours?” Dr. Roe asks as she hands me medical scissors.

I make the snip before they hand her to me. She’s tiny. She’s real. She’s human. *She’s here*. Her eyes are screwed shut as she continues to cry.

“Hi,” I whisper. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“Let me see her,” Savannah cries.

I carefully place the baby on her chest and watch her fall in love in real-time.

“Hi, baby. It’s me.” She strokes her cheek the way a mother does. Her tears don’t stop falling as she stares at the life she brought into the world. “I’m so glad you got here safely. I’m happy to have my organs back to myself. I hope I gave you everything you needed inside me. I hope you’re okay.”

She leans forward and nestles the top of her nose against her cheek. “I’m so sorry about your mum. If she were here... she would have cried more than anyone in this room. She would have taken you in her arms and protected you. She waited her whole life for you.” Her head falls back as she cries loudly. “She never even got to meet you. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so sorry, Emery. Forgive me, please. Forgive me. I’m sorry. I kept my promise and brought your little girl, but you’re not here. I’m sorry.”

Savannah’s cries break my heart. She carries the guilt that I should but don’t. She still blames herself.

I gesture for the midwife to take the baby as Savannah’s cries get erratic. I force her to look at me, but my words are useless. She repeats her mantra of apologies and forgiveness.

Dr. Roe steps forward. “Savannah, we need you to keep going a little bit longer. You need to push the placenta out. Can you do that? Are you ready?”

My body freezes as I watch her lose her mind. This is worse than when Emery died. The guilt riddles her mind and body. She falls against her pillows. Her screams and cries merge.

I try to hold her hand, but she shakes me off and scratches at me. “Savannah. You need to calm down. Breathe.”

“Let me go!” she screams. “She’s dead! She’s... she’s...” She begins to hyperventilate. Her hands pull at her hair as she completely breaks down.

My legs force me backwards as I watch Savannah lose her mind. No matter how much I want to, I can’t get myself to snap out of my horror.

It takes twenty minutes to coax her down and to get her to push. In the end, she’s too exhausted to look or speak to me.

At least, that’s what I convince myself.



“She’s hungry,” the nurse says as she enters the room with the baby.

Savannah sits up, and reaches for her before I can. “Do you have a bottle?”

“Has your milk come in? We can try breastfeeding if you’re feeling up to it.”

Savannah looks at me with apprehension. “I’m not the mother. Technically, I gave birth, but I’m the surrogate.”

I take a seat at the foot of the bed. “Your milk is good for the baby. I have no objection if you want to try.”

“I’m not replacing Emery,” she snaps.

Not wanting her to have another breakdown, I tread lightly. “Emery wouldn’t have breastfed either way. She would have wanted whatever was best for the baby.”

The baby lets out a cry, forcing Savannah to look down at her. “Okay,” she resigns. “Can you help me with my gown?”

“Would you like Mr Rivers to leave?”

She glances in my direction. “He can stay.”

The nurse helps untie her gown until her breasts are exposed. I watch in awe of Savannah as she carefully follows instructions. It takes ten minutes before the baby latches on and Savannah winces.

“A little discomfort is normal.”

Savannah smiles at her. “She’s looking at me.”

There is a grace about Savannah that I’ve never seen before. Her hair is pulled into a topknot. She looks exhausted. Her hospital gown is ugly and unflattering, but she still looks perfect. *She is perfect.*

I watch as our baby pulls on her nipple with content. There is nothing erotic about the view. It’s oddly serene. It’s the image of a dream I didn’t think I cared about. But now it’s all I want for the rest of my life. Me and my perfect girls. The baby may be half of Emery, but she will grow to be like Savannah.

“Do we have any names yet?”

I open my mouth to say no, but Savannah cuts in. “Emery always said this baby was God’s promise to her after all she

had been through. The happily ever after that was owed to her. Elise means God's promise in Latin." She looks up at me. When she speaks, there is no room for negotiation. "She deserves to know who her mother really is. She won't be tangled in a web of lies. She will be protected at all costs, and only a mother can do that, no matter how powerful her father is."

Her gaze drops to the baby. For a few moments, Savannah disappears from the real world. Whatever thoughts swarm her mind brings a fresh wave of tears down her cheeks. Her lips pull together. Her whisper is faint, but I can't miss it.

I'm sorry.

When she looks at me again, her tears are blinked away. Like a lioness protecting her cub, she dares me to threaten her deadly stare. Her shoulders are braced backwards, and her head held high. When she speaks, it's with strong conviction.

"She deserves to carry parts of Emery with her. *Elise*. Her name is Elise Emery Rivers."

I SLOWLY PUSH THE door open and peer into the dimly lit room. Savannah sits on the rocking chair with her eyes closed as Elise rests on her chest. They look peaceful, and I don't want to interrupt.

“Is everything okay?” she whispers before I can escape.

Entering the room, I nod. “Yeah. I was making sure you two were okay.”

“What time is it?”

“Seven. Have you spent the night here?”

She groans lightly. “Yeah. Ellie wouldn't settle.”

I'm glad the original nickname of *Emmy* has disappeared. I don't want to associate my daughter with Emery – her middle name is enough of a reminder.

“Why didn't you take her into your room?”

“I still haven't unpacked.”

I know this. It's been bothering me. I thought she would have unpacked before Elise was born, but she didn't do anything. Whenever she needed something, she would rummage through the boxes. It makes me wonder if she plans on staying. What would be the point in unpacking if she planned to leave after the birth? Neither of us have mentioned it yet. We've enjoyed the first ten days of parenthood.

Well, Savannah has. I've tried to help, but she's a natural. She doesn't leave anything for me to do. Even when she chooses to bottle feed her pumped milk, she curls up with Elise and does it herself. I think she enjoys it, and that works for me.

While I adore the tiny human, I don't know what to do with her. When she is in my arms, I realise how easy it is to hurt her. I would never harm a baby, but everything is a potential hazard to them. Savannah has developed a bond with Elise, and I'm hoping it's what convinces her to stay.

"You've spent two nights like this. You need to rest too." I grab the bassinet and carry it to my room. I place it next to the bed and call Savannah. "There. Now sleep."

She eyes the bed with suspicion. "I don't think that's a good idea."

It's hard to conceal my grin at the direction of her thoughts. "You just gave birth. I have no intentions to bed you, Miss Hayes. You can sleep here with the baby, and I'll temporarily relocate to a different room."

She visibly relaxes. “Thank you.” She puts Elise into her bassinet before climbing into the bed. Her hair splays across the pillow, and within a few minutes, her breathing evens, and she falls asleep.



Ray walks into my office with a relaxed demeanour. He offers a handshake before he sits down. “Congratulations on fatherhood.”

I take his hand in mine. “Thank you.”

“How is she?”

I give him a wide grin. “Really good. She sleeps most of the day away.”

Ray chuckles. “I’m excited to meet her.” He looks at the ground and asks, “How is Savannah?”

“Exhausted but amazing. She’s a natural at the mother thing.”

Ugly green jealousy consumes him. The corner of his lips turns upside down. “Mother? That’s a heavy title for the woman who was your surrogate. Is your contract with her not complete?”

“A baby needs a mother figure, and Emery isn’t here. Savannah wanted to stay and help.”

Ray falls silent, and his stony eyes stare past me. I can see him putting parts of a puzzle together without having all the

pieces. He taps his fingers on the desk. “Is she replacing Emery’s role in your life as well?” The accusation is loud and clear. *Am I fucking her?*

“No. We aren’t sleeping together.”

“Were you sleeping with her?”

I lean forward to assert my dominance. “No,” I snarl. “I was married, and then I was grieving for my wife. I did not betray my promise to my wife like you broke your word. Or have you forgotten that you were sleeping with her after I specifically told you not to?”

Ray raises his brow at me. “Is that why you told her I ordered the hit on her father? You wanted me out of the picture.”

Backing down, I lean into my seat. “I don’t concern myself about her personal life.”

His brown eyes come to life as he lets me see his anger. “So why tell me she was off limits?”

“Health reasons. Not that it matters,” I shrug. “You went behind my back and then lied to my face for months.”

He straightens his jacket. “And you knew about it and lied to *my* face the whole time. Why pretend that you were unaware of what we were doing?”

This is the point in chess where the next move is critical. It would be easy to lose the whole game. I swallow the lump of disgust as I bite out a half-truth.

“Because I saw how happy you were. You couldn’t hide it even though you tried. You’ve smiled more in the last year than in the fourteen years I’ve known you. I didn’t want to take that away.”

The truth is too hard for him to handle. Ray stands up and prepares to forfeit the game. “But you *did* take it, Zav. You could have spun any story that didn’t include me.”

I look up at him as he aimlessly seethes. I won’t give in to him and argue. “I’m not a liar. I wasn’t about to lie to her face.”

“Why does it matter to you? You snatched her away from me.” No matter how hard he tries to mask it, he fails to hide his heartbreak. His shoulders slump as he looks away. “She was it for me.”

It’s hard to feel sympathy for him when I know he’s not the one for her. He was a temporary stop, but *I’m* the final destination.

Regardless, I offer him a sombre look. “I am sorry. I never would have said anything if I knew it would push her to end things.”

My friend doesn’t look appreciative of my apology. In fact, he seems irritated. “I greatly respect you, Xavier, so please don’t feed me bullshit. You knew what would happen. But I don’t understand why you would do that to me? To her?”

His tragic, pleading look has anger burning in my blood. I should tell him she never wanted him. Maybe if he knew she

wanted me *first*, he would move on with his life. But instead of wasting my move, I end the conversation.

“This conversation is done. When Savannah returns to work, she *will* resume as your PA, and you *will* treat her with respect and fairness.”

He walks until he is standing in front of my desk. “I know avoidance when I see it. Fourteen years of friendship,” he reminds me. “You should have told me you wanted her, and I never would have gone there.”

I stand up. “I *did* tell you not to go there, but you went anyway. You betrayed me.”

“I turned her down for six months because I gave my word to you. I walked away when I found out about the surrogacy!”

He speaks as though he never ran straight back into her bed. He stands before me as though he is a nobleman.

“And then you walked straight back to her!” I shout.

“Because I was fucking in love with her! I *love* her!” His scream vibrates off every surface in the room. The vibration carries his anger, frustration, and pain. But his face is a blank slate. “And you took her from me.”

I sit back down in my seat. “No, I didn’t.”

She was never yours.

Ray doesn’t back down. Every word seeps with treachery. “You burned my character to ashes. You assigned her to me because you didn’t plan on me falling for her. That’s why you

won't assign her to anyone else in case they, too, fall for her. It's why she's still living in your house and raising your kid."

I straighten my tie. "Don't throw a temper tantrum in my office. She ended things with you, which had nothing to do with me. I didn't intervene in your relationship with her, so extend that courtesy to me. You're my COO, but more importantly, you're my friend. I don't want to lose that over a woman."

He rubs his temple as he laughs. "No worries, my friend. You can have her. When she returns to work, I'll treat her as I would any other employee."

"Ray," I call as he goes to walk away.

He stops and shakes his head. "Let it go. You won."

I STARE AT THE wall ahead of me. The house is silent and suspended in darkness as I wait for Savannah to return home. It's nearly 11 p.m., and she still isn't back. She left the house at 10:31 a.m. with no phone and in Ray's Audi. There is no way for me to track her down. She and Elise could be dead for all I know.

Three months of trying to teach her has been futile. Savannah still runs by her own rules. She lives with no routine. She eats and leaves behind a mess. She doesn't make her bed. She still hasn't fully unpacked. There's no order in the home, nor does she follow *my* orders.

And tonight, I've had enough.

The security alarm sends a notification to my phone when the front gates open. I don't move from my spot, even when I hear her kill the engine and talk to Elise as if the baby understands. I hide in the shadows as the front door opens, and she pushes the pushchair through the hallway to the kitchen.

She doesn't notice me sitting seething as she walks past the living room.

She lets out a sigh of relief. "There's my phone! At least I didn't lose it. Let's go and find your daddy."

Her shadow follows her up the stairs. "Xavier? Where are you? Ellie bought you a present!" Her footsteps disappear as she walks to the other side of the house to look for me. Minutes tick by before my phone rings, displaying her name. Her footsteps stop at the top of the stairs. "Xavier? Are you downstairs?"

I don't answer her. Her shadow follows her down the stairs until she stops in the living room doorway. My silence and blank expression intensify her curious gaze until I can feel it without looking at her.

"What are you doing in the dark?"

"Where have you been?" My query comes out cold and detached.

In my house, I know everything that goes on. I know who goes where, with whom, for how long, and why. Savannah has been gone for over twelve hours, and I can't answer any of those questions.

She walks into the room and sits on the coffee table in front of me. The smile on her face is bright and beautiful, even in the dark. "I took Elise to see my mum, and on the way home, there was a winter fair."

"Where's my daughter?"

Her smile falters as she realises I'm angry. "I put her down."
Her hand rests on my knee. "Is everything okay?"

When I look at her, it hurts how beautiful she is. Even when I'm angry at her, I can't deny how perfect she is. "No. You went missing with my daughter for an entire day. I was calling —"

"I left my phone."

"Don't interrupt me," I snap. "Do you know how worried I was? I thought something had happened. After Emery, you can't disappear on me like that! Do you understand?"

Guilt floods her eyes, and she bows her head slightly. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise I left my phone until I got there. I figured you could see from the cameras that we were okay."

"You have to be *in* the house for me to see that."

The fire-filled Savannah I've become used to comes out at that statement. She pushes off the coffee table, crosses her arms over her chest and stares down at me. "Do you expect me to stay within these walls and never leave the house?"

"If you're going to vanish for an entire fucking day, then yes!"

If looks could kill, I'd be dead in an instant. Savannah looks down at me like dirt. "I don't need your permission to leave the house," she responds calmly.

I stand so we're almost eye-to-eye. "When you have *my* daughter, yes, you do."

It was a low blow, and I know it. Savannah has been more of a parent than I have in the three months Elise has been alive.

“Legally, she’s *my* daughter too! I know how to protect her, and I will. If I want to run to another country with her, I can.” She tries to walk away, but I grab her arm.

I stare her down. “Are you planning to run away with my daughter?”

She shakes me off her. “No.”

“Savannah!” I shout when she tries to walk away again.

She spins on her heels. With an exasperated gasp, she says, “Every time I think we’re in a good place, you fuck it up.” She holds her hand up to stop me from interrupting her. “My whole life, I’ve been trying to fill a void, but nothing was enough... *until her*. She’s the thing I wasn’t looking for but found anyway. I was coming home to tell you I don’t want to lose this.”

I can almost taste the victory of winning the game, but her speech isn’t complete.

“But,” she continues, “This isn’t a life I want to live - one where my home feels like a prison or my sole duty is to serve the king.”

“Savannah...”

She shakes her head. “I’ve made so many sacrifices for you. I’ve lost *so much*.” Her voice cracks. “How much longer until you sacrifice something? I’ll take anything at this point – even a measly pawn.”

If only she knew how much I have done for her - how many pieces I've knocked off the board.

"I've lost too," I argue.

"My body. My home. My privacy. My independence. My job. Elliot. Emery. Hux. And now you want whatever remains of my freedom." She gives me one last look before walking away.

I remain rooted to the spot as the win slips away from me. Emery was easy – she didn't ask questions and followed my orders well. Savannah fights me every step of the way. She gives me a glimmer of hope before snatching it.

Her disobedience almost pushes me to tell her to leave, but after all I've done, I can't give up now.

My steps are slow up the stairs. I lean against the doorway as Savannah stares at a sleeping Elise. Her sniffles are quiet, but her tears give away her cries.

I make another sacrifice by offering an apology she doesn't deserve. *She's in the wrong.*

"I'm sorry. My worry came out as anger."

She brushes away evidence of her cries. "I've been stuck in this house for three months, Xavier. All I wanted was a day out to think and *breathe*. You work all hours of the day while I'm stuck staring at the same walls. It's no wonder Emery went crazy."

Ignoring her flippant comment about Emery, I crouch in front of her. "You need to *talk* to me. I can't read your mind. I

thought you were happy at home.”

Her words fail to come out as she watches Elise. Her internal battle plays out in her eyes. “Am I a bad person if I miss my life before?”

Before Elise or before me?

“What do you miss?”

“Having something for myself. I’ve been working since I was sixteen, and now, I’m a stay-at-home mum. I feel like I’ve lost myself. Does that make me selfish?”

Taking her face in my hand, I brush the pad of my thumb across her cheek. “It makes you human.”

Returning to work is something I can handle. If anything, it would bring me a sense of peace. There would be no more disappearing, and I’d have her close to me.

“Do you want to return to work?”

She looks at me in surprise. “What about the baby?”

I shrug, trying to ease her apprehension. Right now, I need her back in my eyeline. “We’ll find a daycare or a nanny.”

The excitement lasts only a moment before it falls away. She shakes her head. “No. I can’t. She needs me more than I need to return to the norm.”

I clench my fist behind my back. This back-and-forth with her is getting exhausting. I’m giving her what she asks, *yet* she’s still arguing with me.

“What if you met somewhere in the middle?” The idea of a baby in the office doesn’t please me in the slightest, but anything to get her back in my eyeline. “Bring Elise to work.”

She scoffs at the idea. “Hux will never agree to having a baby around.”

I take her hand in mine and kiss the back. “Leave that with me.”

She tries to hide her excitement but fails. “I promise she’ll still be a priority. I won’t miss a feed or nappy change, *and* I’ll be home at a decent time.”

The happiness on her face is worth every sacrifice I’m going to make for her. I can’t stop myself when I cup her face and bring it closer to mine. “I’ll give you anything you ask for, Savannah Hayes. Just ask.”

Her lips part, fanning her breath over my skin. Her eyes meet mine and pull me under her spell. We can’t look away from each other. Her eyes dart down to my lips as her tongue dampens her bottom one. She leans in ever so slightly until her lip brushes against mine.

I want to pull her close to me until nothing separates us. But my rational part knows it’s too soon for us to make that move.

“Savannah.” My voice is hoarse with desire.

She presses her lips with slight pressure, only for a moment, but enough to have me craving more. Her gynaecologist gave her the go-ahead four weeks ago, but neither of us has made the move or discussed it.

It hasn't stopped me from relieving myself when watching her shower through the cameras.

She completely pulls back, effectively bursting the bubble. "Let me show you what we got for you." She runs down the stairs to collect my gift.

I use the time to admire the perfection I made and Savannah brought to life. Elise has a pretty flush to her round cheeks. Her lips are pulled into a pout as she sleeps peacefully.

"Here," Savannah says as she hands me a small plastic bag. "Ellie chose it."

I offer a small smile at the ridiculous statement. I pull out a navy blue baseball cap. On the front, in white capital letters, reads *NUMBER 1 DAD*. I can't look away from the headwear as reality hits that I'm a father. It's an odd feeling staring at the word. It reminds me that my own is gone and never got to see me raise a child like he raised me.

Would my father be disappointed in me? My attention has been solely on Savannah. My father never put anyone above me, including his wife.

I look at my daughter and promise to protect her the same way my father protected me.

Nobody will ever hurt you.

"Are you crying?" Savannah sounds surprised.

I clear my throat and blink my tears away. "No. Thank you."

Her arms wrap around my waist, and she rests her head on my chest. “You’re welcome. We love you, Xavier.”

I wrap my arms around her tight. “My love for you two knows no bounds. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to have you both.”

“I know,” she whispers.

We let ourselves have this moment of peace before another problem comes and takes it away.

She pulls away sooner than I wanted. “Why don’t you join us tonight? No funny business,” she grins.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Let me put the pushchair away while you get ready for bed.”

She nods at me and disappears into the bathroom.

I remove the baby bag and rubbish stuffed into the bottom carrier. I fold it down and place it carefully into the storage cupboard. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, I feel conflicted, but the thought of leaving the mess behind is too much for me to bear. I empty the bag and work quickly to wash and sterilise everything.

My fingers twitch when I notice Savannah, once again, left the lid on the kitchen bin open. I’ve lost count of how often I’ve asked her to stop doing that. Now that she’s staying, we need to discuss cleanliness and order.

I pick up the scrunched receipt to see how much she spent on the cap. I don’t want her spending any money on me. Now that

she has given herself up to me, money will never be an issue, but I don't want her to make a habit of it.

The receipt doesn't list my cap, but I see everything she bought – mainly food. I throw the receipt into the bin and rush back upstairs. Savannah is still in the shower, but Elise is awake and staring at the ceiling. I carefully pick her up and carry her. She stares at me in wonder. Her grey-blue eyes mirror mine, but hers hold wonder while mine conceal secrets.

“You probably don't recognise me, but I'm your father. You can call me Dad.” She stares at me. “Did you have fun today? Did you eat lots of food? What did you do today?”

Savannah laughs at me as she exits the ensuite. “She can't reply.”

I chuckle. “I know. Why is she awake?”

She takes her from me without asking. “She's probably hungry. Like me.”

I sit at the foot of the bed as Savannah rests her back against the headboard. Without shying away, she lifts her t-shirt until her breasts are revealed. Without knowing any different, Elise latches on and nestles against her.

“You didn't eat much today?” I ask, not wanting to reveal I snooped through the bin.

She scrunches her nose. “Funfair food is horrible.”

I climb off the bed. “Let me see what I can rustle up for you.”

Her smile knocks the breath out of me. “Thank you.”

My feet don't move as I watch her completely enthralled with Elise, who's staring at her. Her hair falls forward, concealing her face from me.

“Savannah?” I call.

She looks over to me. “Yeah?”

“No more lies.”

Her brows furrow before she smiles. “No more lies,” she echoes.

“SHE’S A VERY LUCKY woman,” Fiona, the sales assistant, says as she finishes wrapping the gift.

I give her my most charming smile. “I’m the lucky one.”

Despite knowing I’m buying for a woman, she sends me a flirtatious smile. “I’m sure she’ll feel lucky after being gifted bespoke jewellery.”

I take the bags from her and nod. “Thank you for all your assistance.”

The drive home takes longer than anticipated, but I quickly put away the new pieces and head to the office. Spencer catches me in the elevator and uses the short ride to provide an update on one of our more temperamental clients. I thank him for his hard work as he exits to his floor. Once I reach my floor, Francesca starts to give me my messages, but I rush off to Ray’s office to see Savannah after being away from her all morning.

The baby is sleeping in her pushchair while Savannah types at her computer. Her thin blouse doesn't seem appropriate for a workplace, but I wasn't looking to argue with her this morning.

I knock and enter the room. I stroke Ellie's cheek before smiling at Savannah. "How's your first day back going?"

"Trying to get through everything with all the interruptions. It's safe to say she's the office favourite." The proud smile on her face surges in my heart.

"She is pretty perfect," I gloat. I turn to Ray. "Hope she's not giving you too much trouble."

He didn't say much when I told him of Savannah's unexpected early return. Nor did he put up a fight about Elise being in the office with her.

His deep chuckle forces Savannah to look at him. "Even if she was, how could I say no to that face?"

Savannah's soft smile mirrors his. "You did plug your nose when she pooped," she jokes.

He scrunches his face in disgust. "How can something so potent come out of someone so tiny?"

I laugh. "Well, let me take her off your hands for a while. Give you a chance to work in peace. I'll drop her back before my meeting."

"Are you sure? She's no trouble."

I grab the baby bag and sling it over my shoulder. “We leave at five.”

Her eyes flicker over to Ray. “Okay.”



“It’s a great deal, Mr Roberts. You know it, too.”

When you’ve been in the business as long as I have, you know when someone isn’t convinced, and this man needs a little more convincing. “It’s out of our budget, Mr Rivers. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll throw the security cameras in as a goodwill gesture.”

The older man looks at me. He looks past retirement. The thin skin around his eyes is covered with wrinkles that suit his grey hair. “I was surprised when you came with this offer personally. Why does my business mean so much to you?”

I unclasp my hands and lay them flat on the table. Body language experts say it makes you appear open, honest, and trustworthy. “Organisations like yours helped my late wife. She spoke highly about the work the likes of you have done. I want to help you protect yourself while you protect others. That’s why I am handling this myself. It’s why I am willing to give you the best deal.” I point at the contract. “I’m making next to nothing in profits at that rate. Any profit I make from this deal will be donated to charity.”

He looks surprised at my statement, but it works because he nods. He pulls his pen out and signs on the dotted line. “I look forward to doing business with you, Mr Rivers.”

I shake his hand. “Likewise, Mr Roberts. I’ll visit the sight to assess how much equipment you require.” I hold the conference door open for him. “My PA, Francesca, will see you out. Until next time.” I wait until he disappears into the lifts before heading back to my office to finish up for the day.



The ride home feels lonely with Savannah in the back with the baby. All her attention is on Elise, and I despise that I am envious of my own daughter.

When we get indoors, Savannah is quick to give her a bath and cuddle with her on the rocking chair until she falls asleep.

I lean against the door frame. “You were phenomenal today. Work *and* a baby? A real rockstar.”

Pride radiates off her. “Thank you for helping out.”

I walk into the room and sit on the floor in front of her. “You don’t need to thank me for looking after my daughter.”

“I know, but it meant I could complete everything I needed to.”

I stroke her knee. “Things seem to be better with Ray.” I don’t like that they seem to be back to normal. But when

Savannah's scoff accompanies her classic eye roll, I note I had nothing to be worried about.

"Hardly."

Putting on my best sympathetic smile, I say, "Give it some time. I'm sure it will get better."

She leans her head against the rocking chair. "I don't think so." Her gaze trails off to the wall past me as she loses herself in her thoughts.

"Do you want to walk away?"

My question causes her shoulders to stiffen. "Why are you asking that?"

"Because I'm giving you a chance to walk away from the board before this."

I undo the red ribbon and open the first box. The small amounts of light in the room reflect off the diamond.

Savannah gasps. "What..."

"One day, this ring will sit on your finger, but for now, it can rest near your heart because you've invaded mine. From the moment our eyes met, I fought my feelings for you. But I don't want to do that anymore. I don't want to hide from you. I want you to have all parts of me... until death do us part."

Tears brim in her eyes as she stares at the diamond. "Xavier..."

Taking her free hand in mine, I place the ring in it before forcing her fist shut. "There are no rules in love. We can't

force it, the same way we can't stop it. This is more than a token or symbol. It's a promise that me and you are forever."

Her chest rises and falls heavily. The soft orange light embellishes how heavenly Savannah is. She opens her mouth to say something, but silence settles between us.

I open the second box and hold up an identical necklace.

"I thought love was universal," I begin. "I could never comprehend loving two people equally. Until you and Elise. Two completely different loves, but both bone-achingly pure. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you two. I thought I had it all when XR Securities made its first million. Then I thought it was when I bought this house. But I was wrong. Because I would trade *everything* for you two."

Savannah forces out a laugh through her tears. "Three months old, and she already owns a diamond."

If only I could tell Savannah I am simply returning something owed – something I *borrowed*. Elise is the rightful owner of this diamond.

Because as Savannah said, the day she named her, Elise will carry parts of Emery with her.

PART THREE:

Zugzwang

Savannah

MOTHERHOOD IS THE HARDEST thing I have done. Babies require constant attention even when you want to hide under the covers and sleep for eternity. I haven't slept, eaten or showered in peace in four months. Exhausted is an understatement. Xavier has been some help, but my unhealthy attachment to her has prevented him from relieving the pressure off me.

Except for now, when I needed to get through the rest of my list before Huxley returns to the office. He may not be on speaking terms with me, but he doesn't hesitate to scold me like a schoolgirl when I fail to get something done for him.

I know I hurt him when I ended things, but how could he hate me so much? Or perhaps I never meant anything at all. Since returning a month ago, I have begged for five minutes to explain. Every attempt has failed – he either walks away or ignores me.

Another chance arrives as he walks into the office. He spares me one glance before walking to his desk. He unlocks his drawer to check his personal phone. “Did you complete everything?” he asks without looking up.

I nod before realising he can’t see me. “Yes,” I say, finding my voice. “Hux—“

“Don’t.” His voice is cold and detached.

I walk over to his desk. “*Please* just give me two minutes. You don’t even have to speak; just listen. If you let me explain —“

“No.” He stares up at me. Any doubts about his feelings fade away because the hurt radiates off him. “*You* didn’t give me a chance. You *ran*.”

I blink back my tears. “You don’t understand.”

He looks at his laptop. “I don’t care to.”

“You said you loved me.”

His fingers come to a halt. He stares at his screen. “And you didn’t want it. I won’t chase you. I won’t beg for you.”

My chest tightens the longer I watch him. The right words fail to leave my mouth. I jump when he slams his laptop closed.

His voice is laced with anger. “I was ready to give it all up, Savannah. For you. *Only* you. But it wasn’t enough. I went against everything I believed in and *trusted* you. I gave you a part of me I didn’t know existed. And what did you do?”

I broke your heart. But I broke mine too.

“You’re hurt, I know—“

His cold chuckle cuts off whatever I was about to say. “*Hurt?* You think I’m *hurt?*“ He looks at me in disbelief. My favourite amber eyes turn to a thunderous stormy shade. “I’m angry. I’m confused. I’m *heartbroken*, Savannah! You took my heart and smashed it to smithereens!”

I look behind me to see if his yells have attracted any onlookers, particularly Xavier. When nobody comes rushing, I face his fury again.

“I needed to let you go before I did more damage.”

His claps are loud but slow. “Congratulations. You did your damage, but what else should I have expected when I knew I was lying in the snake’s den. It was only a matter of time before you left me with nothing but poison.” With one last look of disappointment, he takes his seat and reopens his laptop.

No matter how many deep breaths I take, nothing stops my sadness from leaving wet trails down my cheeks. “I’m not the poison. You have no idea what I’ve done to *suck* the poison out.”

“Ready to go?” Xavier’s voice cuts through the tension as he enters without knocking.

I subtly wipe my tears away. My eyes silently beg Huxley, but he doesn’t budge. His cold stare fills me with dread because he doesn’t understand how much I need him.

“Yes. I’m ready.”

The tension from the office follows us to the car and into the home. Xavier’s shoulders are stiff and raised as we start our new routine. After getting home, I bathe and feed Elise while Xavier makes dinner. I help by setting the table. Sometimes, she sleeps through dinner, but tonight she joins us. While I change into pyjamas, Xavier stays dressed in his suit pants and shirt. We talk about our day and plans for tomorrow. After dinner, he washes up while I feed the baby. Xavier showers while I wipe the dishes away, and then it is my turn to shower while he reads in bed.

The routine has been established. As Xavier wanted, I’ve been domesticated. There are no more midnight drives to satisfy cravings or last-minute trips to another city. Everything is routine and familiar. *Except tonight.*

I exit the bathroom in the new lingerie I bought a few weeks ago. The red garters match the lacy underwear and bra. I have to clear my throat before Xavier looks up.

His eyes widen as the book slips out of his hands. “What are you doing?” His voice is hoarse as he eyes me up and down.

My body has changed since being pregnant and giving birth. While my breasts are fuller, my areolas are darker, and my nipples are longer. Purpleish stretchmarks line my skin along my torso. Even my belly button has adapted. While I miss my old body, I’m proud of this one because she brought a wonderful life into this world.

I stalk towards him. “I thought we could celebrate four months of smashing parenthood by... smashing.” I straddle his lap and run my hands through his soft locks.

“There’s no rush.” His fight is useless because I feel his cock growing hard between my legs.

“But I want to,” I whisper. I grind lightly against him. “And I can feel how much you want this too. Plus, I owe you an orgasm, right?”

“Savannah.” His voice is stern, and it pisses me off.

I give him a straight face. “I’m horny, Xavier. I want to get fucked. Hard and *fast*. If you won’t...” I climb off his lap.

He grabs my hand, stopping me from moving. “Take your clothes off, Savannah,” he orders.

I smile to myself, knowing it would work. I turn around to face him. “I got a surprise for you.” Standing at the end of the bed, I grab his hand and place it between my legs. “Feel that?”

Xavier grins at me. “Crotchless? You dirty girl.” He rubs my clit slowly. “And you’re already wet for me?”

I push his hand off me. “Get on your knees, Mr Rivers.”

He splutters. “What?”

“Get. On. Your. Knees. If you want me, you have to *earn* me.”

Like a hypnotised man, I get the CEO of a multi-billion-pound company to kneel before me. He looks up at me in amusement. “What next, Miss Hayes?”

“I’m going to fuck your face until you make me come.” I straddle his face and lower myself into his tongue.

Xavier doesn’t hold back as I ride his face. His tongue does most of the work, adding the pressure exactly where I need it. His hands grip my thighs to hold me in place as he brings me to my first orgasm of the night in record time.

I’m still catching my breath when he slides out from under me and pushes me face down onto the bed. His boxers fall to the ground. He rubs the head of his dick along my slit, gathering the moisture.

“Fuck, it’s so wet. I’m going to fuck you so hard.”

“Is that a promise?” I tease.

His palm comes down hard on my ass three times, earning a yelp from me. “It’s a fucking threat.” My gasp gets stuck in my throat as he pushes into me. “Oh shit,” he groans.

“Xavier.”

His hand comes to the back of my neck, pushing me further into the mattress. “Take it like a good girl.” He removes his length before driving back into me again. “How does it feel?”

I mumble something incoherent, unable to think straight.

He grabs my hair and pulls on it, lifting my head up. “I can’t fucking hear you, Miss Hayes.”

“God.” My moan wavers as he fills me all the way.

“I love it when you worship me.” He pulls out and flips me onto my back. The lust in his eyes is enough to bring me to my

knees. He doesn't look repulsed by my changed body. "You're so perfect," he murmurs. He pulls my legs up and spreads them wide. He sticks his fingers in my mouth, forcing me to choke on them. With his lubricated fingers, he plays with my sensitive pussy. He hums in appreciation before he thrusts into me again.

"We have two minutes before the baby wakes up. Carry out your threat, Mr Rivers."

And he does. Any restraint he displayed earlier ceases to exist as he pounds in and out of me. The bedframe rocks against the wall as Xavier takes what he wants.

"You gave me a baby, but still, this pussy is so tight for me," he groans.

"Make me forget about the rest," I beg.

His hands close around my throat. "Don't remind me about the ones before me."

I wrap my legs around his waist, hoping to push him deeper inside me. "Or what?" I tease.

The wild look in his eyes makes me shiver. "I'll fuck every one of your holes and make them watch. I fuck you until you can't remember their names." He slams into me. "You're mine, Savannah. Say it."

"I'm yours."

He spans my breasts. "Scream it." My sensitive nipples are rolled between his index finger and thumb.

“I’m yours,” I shout.

Xavier pulls back with a lazy grin. “That’s my girl.”

His body presses against mine. His lips attach to mine as he kisses me with an insatiable hunger. His mouth devours mine. The thrusts become sharper before sloppy as he comes close to his release.

“I miss your pregnant belly. I miss your swollen pussy.”

I thread my fingers through his hair. “Give me another baby. Fill me until your cum is dripping down my thighs.”

His eyes screw shut as he spills inside of me. “Fuck. Fuck.” He rubs my clit. “Come one more time.” His fingers work quick, and he continues to thrust inside of me.

With his dirty whispers in my ears, it only takes a few minutes before I come undone again.

He collapses on top of me as we catch our breath. “That pussy was too good for me to hold back,” he chuckles.

I run my fingers up and down his bare back. “We have a baby. Get used to quick fuck sessions.” I sigh. “I need to shower before she wakes up for a feed. I feel too... icky to touch her with cum streaming down my leg.”

Xavier groans but gets up anyway. “Come back quickly.”

I kiss his cheek. “Why don’t you go to sleep? You have a board meeting tomorrow, and I need to feed her.”

He pecks my lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I leave Xavier to clean himself up while I walk to the ensuite in the guest bedroom. I hurry to lock the door and lean against it.

My chest heaves up and down. I cover my mouth with my hands to hold in my cries. My knees shake as I walk over to the sink and stare at my reflection. My cheeks are blotchy, and my neck is marked with his handprint and teeth. I feel sick at the sight of my reflection. Turning the shower on to conceal the noise, I heave over the sink, but nothing comes.

You had to do this. He probably heard your conversation with Huxley. He has to believe you want him. That's the only way this works.

I get into the shower and scrub my skin raw. I don't want any trace of him on me. After three rounds of scrubbing, I get out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel.

Elise is awake in her nursery when I pick her and the key up. I peer into his bedroom to see him fast asleep. With her carefully wrapped in my arms, I silently climb the stairs to Emery's hideout room. I unlock the door to let myself in before locking it behind me. After putting the baby on the bed, I grab the folder hidden behind the bathroom cabinet. Settling down in one of the seats, I loosen my towel and let Elise have her overdue feed.

I open the folder and skim through all my information on him. His mother's disappearance, the two women who vanished, the diamonds, Elliot and... Emery.

My heart hurts as I stare at her picture. I look down at Elise, who has so much of her mother's features – her mother, who was murdered by her father. She deserves to have a mum. She deserves the truth.

Xavier might have built an empire, but I will stop at nothing to burn it down.

He thought I would be easy. He underestimated me. I've sat back since Emery died – thinking, researching and planning. I let him think he won, but a good chess player always has a trick move up their sleeve. I let Xavier set the board, but it's my turn to make a move, and he won't see it coming.

Elise lets out a little whimper. I stroke her cheek. "Don't worry. I'm going to protect you. I'm going to take him down for you, Emmy."

I stare out the window to the guesthouse where it all started. Xavier said the queen protects the king. *Wrong*. The queen is going to take the king down.

Checkmate Xavier.

Xavier

SAVANNAH SITS AT THE kitchen island, staring down at her phone that rests upon it. Her expression is unreadable while she remains completely still. She doesn't even notice my presence until I break the silence.

“Are you okay?”

I wonder if it's Ray on her mind. Whatever discussion took place last week before I walked in has affected her mood. She's been reserved. I barely caught a glimpse of her tears before she wiped them away.

She locks her phone and sits taller. “It's Jordan.”

I stifle my groan at the mention of Mr. Hunter's lackey. “Is he bothering you again?”

“No. He just wants answers and doesn't know who else can offer them.”

The sound of the tap fills the quiet as I contemplate how I want to play this.

“What does he want you to do?”

Her hands rub over her face in frustration. “I don’t know,” she groans. “But I feel like I need to do something.”

I grip the glass tighter to conceal my irritation at this recycled conversation. “Why? You got him proof of life,” I remind her.

Narrowed eyes, pursed lips and squared shoulders all indicate another pending argument. “One thirty-second voicemail will never be enough,” she snaps.

Those fucking thirty seconds took hours out of my life. Splicing together one word at a time until it was a seamless blend took work.

“It’s not my fault that was all he could be bothered to send.”

“That’s not like him. He would have bragged for days about his luxurious life.”

We’re back to this.

I slide my glass across the counter before leaning against it. Behind me, my fingers grip the edge with all my force to stop me from breaking something.

“I’m not having this argument with you again.”

“Who’s arguing with you?”

I give her a pointed stare. “You’re trying to.”

“It’s a problem if I share my thoughts with you now?”

“When they’re laced with accusations, yes, it is a problem. I’ve given you all the reassurance I can that he got on a plane.”

She grips the ring that rests on her chest. Her fingers move in slow motion as she rubs it – I wonder if she knows she’s seeking comfort from it.

“You can’t get angry at me for worrying about him.”

“He’s not part of your life anymore.”

“And who’s fault is that? You’re forgetting I didn’t want him out of my life – you forced it without talking to me. He was a big part of my life, and I can’t help but miss him.”

Seven months have passed since Elliot took his last breath, yet he continues to present a problem in our lives.

“Do you want him back? Are you still in love with him?”

She lets out a long groan. “I never said that!”

“Then *what*, Savannah?” I bark.

“I want to know he’s okay!”

“I’ve given you that!” I shout just as loud.

Savannah doesn’t say anything. I watch her shoulders rise and fall as she breathes in and out. She doesn’t divert her gaze from me. Her mouth doesn’t move, but her demeanour says it all.

I don’t believe you.

When she speaks, her voice is lower and her tone softer. “We’re sat here in our untouchable mansion with our fancy china and crystal glasses. We are bad people, Xavier. We’ve *hurt* so many people. We’ve taken hearts and smashed them to smithereens. All in the name of what?”

“Love,” I answer without hesitation.

My answer disappoints her. “Love shouldn’t hurt. It shouldn’t be at the cost of others. We’re selfishly sitting with diamonds around our necks. It’s selfish that we dined in a fancy restaurant to celebrate your birthday like a happy family, as though we never stole that dream from Emery. It’s selfish that we decorated this god-forsaken house like Santa’s grotto, forgetting that it was Emery’s favourite thing to do. It’s selfish that we’re building memories while Elliot’s family relive the ones they have left of him.” She stands up and tucks her chair in. “I won’t stop until I find Elliot.”

One of the first things I loved about Savannah was her determination. However, it’s become a nuisance.

“I think you’ve forgotten all the wrong he did you. Gambling, debt, money borrowing and threats. Logic doesn’t exist when it comes to him.”

“I lead with my heart, not my head, because real life isn’t a game of chess.”



Ray settles into the couch opposite me. His living room is starkly different to mine, with wood furnishing and a lived-in feel. In a rare occurrence, he’s traded his formal wear for a t-shirt and jeans.

“What did you need?”

I lean back into my seat and sigh. “How did you know I needed something?”

“There’s no way you trekked it to my house unless you needed something.”

He’s right – I need something, and he’s the only one who can give it. The Elliot Hunter situation needs to be put to bed.

“The ex. Find him.”

He doesn’t query whose ex I’m referring to. He sips his whiskey and then places it down on the coffee table without using a coaster. The glass is going to leave a pesky ring on the surface.

“Why?”

I look away from the drink to him. “Because she asked.”

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Why me?”

I force the next few words out because it kills me to admit it. “She trusts you.”

Something in those three words has the clogs turning in his brain. He doesn’t say anything. The only sound is the ticking of his clock on the wall.

“Why doesn’t she trust you? It would make more sense for her to mistrust me after her father.”

“Because I’m the reason he’s gone.” I fill in the details, excluding the part where I killed him. There is no expression on his face. He looks as lifeless as Elliot’s cold corpse.

“And now she wants to reconcile with him?” he asks at the end.

I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know. She’s asking for proof of life.”

“I thought you already gave that?”

“She’s become paranoid ever since her father’s death. And even more so after Emery. At one point, she thought *you* killed her.”

He necks the rest of his drink without so much as a wince. “Why are you going through all this trouble?”

I pull on my cuffs until they align with my suit jacket. My hands run down my shirt to remove the invisible creases.

“Part of me feels responsible for her. Since coming into our lives, we’ve inflicted so much pain on her. The ex. The father. Pregnancy. Emery.” I shake my head as if it will eviscerate the image burned into my memory.

“You didn’t see her when Emery died. The isolation. The crying. The accusations. After giving birth, she had a breakdown. After all we’ve done, we owe this to her.”

This is the first time Ray lets me see his pain, and it’s all for her. “And what if she chooses to walk away?”

It won’t come to that because my plan is foolproof, but I feign uncertainty. “Then I’ll let her go.”

Ray nods. “Consider it handled.”

There's the friend I've known my whole life – putting his work above his feelings. He doesn't want her to go, but he will because I asked.

It's because he wants her to be happy, even at the cost of his happiness.

I hate that my subconscious is right. He's not doing me a favour. He's making a sacrifice for her. The knight is surrendering to save the queen.

It's a worthless martyr because he doesn't know I've already saved her.

In the privacy of my car, I hit dial.

“Is it time?” he asks.

“Yes. Fuck this up, and you'll meet the same fate as the real Elliot Hunter.”

Savannah

I FEEL SICK TO my stomach as I pace the dingy hotel room. I recheck my watch. This only works if Huxley follows my clear instructions. Doubt plagues my thoughts.

What if he didn't check his draw?

What if he hates me so much that he ignores it?

What if he told Xavier?

Bile rises in my throat. The naïve part of me believes he wouldn't after I specifically asked him not to. Plus, Xavier isn't in the office today – I know this for sure.

But he could call him?

I jump when there is a knock at the door.

What if it's Xavier? What if he found out about my plan?

What if he's here to kill me?

Only one way to find out.

Before opening the door, I check on Elise, who is soundly sleeping in her pushchair. I let out a sigh of relief as I take in Huxley.

He gives me an odd look as he walks past me into the room. “What is going on?”

I lock the door. “Did you leave your phone in the office?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes. Why am I here?”

I shake my head and pull him into the bathroom. “Take your clothes off,” I order. I pull my top over my head and feel frustrated when he’s still standing like a statue, watching me with a bewildered look. “Take them off, Hux.”

“Why?” he pushes.

“We’re going to have sex.” I plead with my eyes. “Just do it. Please,” I whisper so quietly.

He doesn’t protest as he quickly works to discard his shoes, suit and shirt.

I do the same until I’m as naked as the day I was born. I raise my brow as I stare at his boxers. “And those.”

He huffs as he pulls them down his legs. We both stand stark naked in the filthy hotel bathroom. I kneel to gather our clothes before dumping them into the bathtub and closing the shower curtain. I then open the bathroom door for him before closing it behind us. The curtain showers a layer of dust as I pull them closed with more force than necessary. I turn the lamp on, and we stare at each other.

“What is going on with you? Because I am not having sex with you.”

I walk over to him. “Can you check the room for any bugs?”
I whisper.

His eyes roam the room with disgust. “This place is filthy. It’s probably got bugs everywhere.”

I shake my head. “No. Not that kind. The other kind.”

Huxley steps away from me. “What is going on with you? Do I need to call Xavier?”

Fear crawls over me at the thought. My hands grip his biceps, holding him in place. “No. Please don’t do that. I’ll explain.”

His eyes soften with worry for a moment, but it passes within seconds. His lips press into a line. “Talk.”

Huxley gives me a few minutes to find the words to explain my madness. I don’t know how to explain how we got here. *Where did it all go wrong? How did I get myself into this position?*

Sensing me feeling overwhelmed, Huxley relaxes his shoulders. “Explain the naked thing first?” His voice is soft and filled with concern.

I nod my head. “In case our clothes are bugged. I can’t have him listening to us.”

He cocks his brow. “He being... Xavier?”

I nod.

“Why would he bug our clothes?”

I take a deep breath. Trusting Huxley is a gamble because he could be on Xavier’s side. Perhaps he’s been playing me too. But a part of me knows he isn’t. Huxley *is* a good man, but more importantly, Xavier doesn’t trust anyone.

“Because I’m pretty sure he bugged the guesthouse and the car he gave me. He has cameras all around his house.” I swallow the lump in my throat. I stare at Huxley, wanting to gauge his reaction. “He’s dangerous.” The lump in my throat tightens as tears threaten to spill over. “He’s committed murder. And I think I’m next.” At the admission, my tears fall.

It feels as though Huxley’s features move in slow motion, but they transition fast: confusion, worry, surprise and then bewilderment.

“What are you saying?”

My words come out rushed. “People around him disappear. His mother. His ex-girlfriends. Elliot. Emery. There might be others we don’t know about.”

I expect him to call me crazy and storm out of here. Instead, Huxley bravely sits his naked ass on the bed. “You’re going to have to give me more.”

Okay. This is good. He’s listening.

Or maybe he’s gathering intel for Xavier.

My tears are brushed away, and I eye him suspiciously. “Why are you so calm? I just accused your best friend of

murder, and you're not jumping to his defence or calling me crazy."

He clasps his hands in his lap. "You're a smart woman, and there must be a reason why you're spewing all this out. Let me hear your argument, and I'll consider and then counter it."

The smart thing would be to see this as a red flag. Most people don't sit calmly when discussing a potential murderer. But then again, Huxley ordered the hit on my father. Though different methods, the principle remains. Even if he is working with Xavier, there is no harm in sharing my theories, as he probably already told him that he was meeting me.

I begin by telling him how I first met Xavier and the friendship that was built between us. "It was all fine until I moved into the guesthouse. He never overstepped. I think his obsession began when he watched me through the guesthouse cameras. He told me they were turned off, but he slipped up one day."

Huxley looks confused. "What happened?"

"He said I was going to wear out the left side of the bed."

"So?"

He made the comment long before Xavier and I ever shared a bed. I never thought much of the joke until months later.

"How did he know that was the side I slept on?"

He sighs. "It was just a joke."

I clench my hands but move on. I tell him about Elliot's theories. "We only ever spoke about Xavier in the BMW – the car *he* bought me. Elliot raised his concerns, and then *two* weeks later, he's gone? That can't be a coincidence."

Huxley clasps his hands. "What did he find?"

"Nothing! He couldn't find his mum or Caitlyn." I can't help but laugh. "My apologies, he found an Instagram account for Caitlyn, which is bullshit. No pictures of her face. No workplace. No friends tagged or commenting."

I almost tell him about Caitlyn's vague conversation with a fake account I made, but it offered no information or reassurance that it was her.

"That doesn't mean she's dead."

My head drops back. *I'm getting nowhere with him.* Needing a few moments to collect myself, I turn around and pace the room. But no number of deep breaths nor reassuring thoughts ease the anxiety bubbling inside me. I need Huxley to believe me, or else Elise and I are stuck with Xavier.

I kneel in front of Huxley and grab his hands. "It doesn't mean she's alive either. I need you to believe me, Hux. None of this works without you. That's the only reason I manipulated him into letting me go back to work. He wanted me at home, domesticated the way Emery was. It's why I made him make you take me back as a PA."

I wasn't mentally ready for work and a baby, but the longer I stayed within those walls, I felt myself losing my mind. I

thought Xavier would have put up more of a fight, but disappearing for an entire day was enough to push him over to my side.

“So, you used me?”

I squeeze his hands. “No! Not like that. I know I hurt you. If there was any other way, I’d never put you through being around me after what I’ve done. But your laptop is the only one that he can’t trace. I needed access to see if I could find her or *something* to prove she wasn’t dead. I couldn’t find it, Hux,” I cry.

Huxley goes quiet. His eyes dart from one wall to another. He purses his lips as he nods his head. “What about family? If they have been missing all this time, they would have been reported missing.”

“I couldn’t track anyone down. I need you to investigate it without Xavier realising.”

Huxley stands up and walks away from me. His back muscles are strained. “I’m not doing that! I was there when Caitlyn left. He was devastated. You can’t fake those emotions. He didn’t kill her. She got on a plane and left.”

“So where is she, Huxley?” I shout. “Where is Sara? She was *eighteen* when they broke up. How does an eighteen-year-old know how to vanish without a trace?”

I stand and walk until we’re face to face. Anger swirls in both our eyes as we stare at each other.

“You’re wrong,” he declares.

“He killed them. And Emery. And Elliot.”

He turns around to face me. For the first time, he looks at me like I’m crazy. “If he murdered your ex, why would he ask me to bring him back for you?”

My body stills. Xavier took my bait. When I asked Jordan to confront him, I thought Xavier would offer more than a lousy voicemail. I needed more. I needed something that could be traced. Xavier would eventually have to ‘find’ his body or some physical evidence.

However, I wasn’t expecting him to outsource the work to Huxley. *Why would he do that?*

“You’re lying.”

That doesn’t make sense. Why would he tell Huxley to find someone he knows is dead? Elliot is dead. I just know it. No matter what contract he signed, he would have called me. He would have checked on me.

“He’s trying to keep me on his side,” I reason. “He must have a backup plan.”

Huxley walks over to me. He takes my face in his hands, and his eyes are filled with worry once again. “You’re connecting dots that aren’t even on the same page. None of this makes sense. You’ve had a stressful year, and now you’re looking after a baby and exhausted—“

I push his hands off me. “This is the first time in over a year I’m making sense. Everything is right *there*, but we were blinded by his security, money and charm. Xavier is not a

good man.“ Tears brim in my eyes. “He killed Emery.” At the mention of her name, Elise coos in her sleep. I walk over to her and stroke her cheek.

He watches us with sadness overcoming him. “She died in an accident. Xavier was in the office, and Emery was drunk.”

“She wasn’t drunk,” I say with confidence.

“The toxicology report proved she was.”

I sit on the edge of the bed and look up at Huxley. “That’s how I know he was behind this. Emery was not drunk when the accident happened.”

“How do you know?”

I raise my brow as I play the move I’ve been holding onto since that day. “I saw her only an hour before she died, and she was more sober than a recovering alcoholic. She begged me to protect her baby. Right before she told me that Xavier was going to kill her.”

Savannah

JUNE 2024

My phone buzzes repeatedly, no matter how much I ignore it.

Huxley looks up from his desk with a look of annoyance. “Answer it or turn it off.”

I slide my finger across the screen and bring the phone to my ear. “What?” I hiss to Mia.

“The wife is here and demanding to speak to you.”

My eyebrows pull together in confusion. Why is Emery calling me from Mia’s phone? Did the meeting with the lawyer go that badly?

“Okay. Give it to her.”

There are some muffled noises before Emery’s voice comes through. “There’s a café in Soho called Delilah’s Delights. Meet me there as soon as possible. You won’t tell anyone

you're meeting me, especially Xavier. Do not call or text me. Leave your phone at the office. You're going to hang up and tell Ray you're going to get his lunch. Don't ask any questions. Just do it. You owe me for fucking my husband."

She doesn't allow me to ask any questions because she hangs up. I stare at my phone in confusion. What game is she playing? Is she finally going to exact her revenge and kill me?

"Who was that?"

"Mia," I half-lie.

"What did she want? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I'm about to become a ghost.

I stand up and grab my jacket. "Nothing. I'm pregnant and hungry. I'll be back with your lunch."

Huxley eyes me with suspicion but doesn't ask any questions, occupied with his work.

I go to grab my phone before remembering her instructions. Getting out of here without Xavier asking questions is going to be hard. I peer into his office to see him in a meeting. I quickly hurry past him to the lifts, where I press the button continuously. Luckily, the doors open, and I escape before he spots or stops me.

The entire way there, I wonder what this could be about. It must be about their meeting with the lawyer. When Xavier abruptly asked for a divorce, I was shocked. I didn't think he would follow through with it, but he did – for *me*. He really wants a future with me. I wish it wasn't at the cost of the

family Emery craves, but this will be good for everyone – even the baby. At the thought, I rub my belly.

Emery wouldn't kill me while I was carrying her baby.

When I enter the bakery, I spot Emery sitting in a booth that hides her from the world. I walk over to her and slide in opposite her.

She doesn't look at me with hatred. She doesn't even look angry. She looks... scared?

“We don't have much time.”

“For what?”

She takes my hand in hers. “I need you to promise me that, no matter what, you'll take care of my baby. You will protect them.”

My eyebrows pull together. “Where are you going?”

Her eyes dart around the bakery. She leans in closer. “He's going to kill me.”

My blood turns to ice as I realise she isn't joking. She really believes what she's saying.

Xavier was right. *She is crazy.*

I pull my hands out of hers. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It might not be today or tomorrow, but he will because that's what he does.”

“Why would he kill you?”

“Because Xavier doesn’t believe in divorce. He gave me full custody.”

My heart aches for Xavier. Being a father has been his dream, but he’s forced to give it up for her.

I can’t help but look at her in disgust. “Why would you do that to him?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t do anything. He forfeited, and we both know Xavier doesn’t ever accept defeat. Not unless he knew the loss was temporary. *This* is what he does. When someone stands in his way, they vanish.”

Normally, I would storm out of the booth, but the fear on her face keeps me in place. Her eyes dart around us as if she can sense someone watching. Maybe it’s the fear she’s radiating or my suspicions surrounding Elliot that make me question if she’s telling the truth, but I can get myself to walk away.

“Why are you telling me? Why don’t you go to the police?”

She looks at me like I’m an idiot. “They can’t protect me from him. Nobody can. But I need you to promise that you’ll look after my baby. Promise that they’ll know my name and who I am. Promise that you won’t let Xavier corrupt them. Promise that you’ll stay with them. Promise that they’ll feel a mother’s love. Promise that you’ll protect them.” Her voice cracks at the end as a few tears escape and cascade down her cheeks.

There’s a tightening in my chest. “Nothing is going to happen to you.”

She wipes under her eyes and clears her throat. “Promise me, Savannah.”

“Emery—”

“I waited my whole life to hold my baby in my arms. I waited for the family I never got. When you got pregnant, I knew it was God’s promise of the happily ever after I was owed. I didn’t care that I was in a loveless marriage because my baby was the only thing I needed to love.” Her body shakes as she cries. “And now I’ll never get to have it. But this baby deserves to know good, and you’re good, Savannah. So, promise me.”

I cradle my bump. “Of course, I promise. But nothing is going to happen to you,” I reassure.

She ignores the last part. “Tell my baby all about me. The good and the bad. I want them to know I wasn’t perfect. I don’t want them to strive for perfection but for happiness.”

“Emery—“

“Thank you for carrying my baby. Thank you for making that sacrifice for me. I know you’ve had to give up so much, and for that, I’m sorry.”

If I felt guilty before, there is no word to describe what I feel right now. I betrayed her trust, yet she’s apologising to me.

“You’re emotional and not talking sense. Let’s go home, and you can sleep it off.”

She laughs through her cries. “I’m not drunk. I’m sober and finally awake. You need to get back before you arouse

suspicion. I think Ray would enjoy the BLT from here.” She stands up.

“Where are you going?”

She straightens her dress. “His grandfather owned a crematorium in Cookham. All the pieces were right in front of me, but I couldn’t see the whole picture until it was too late,” she mutters to herself.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

She smiles down at me. “The diamonds. He’s been doing this longer than anyone knows. It all comes down to the diamonds.”



January 2025

Huxley doesn’t look any more reassured at the end of the story. “What do diamonds have to do with it?”

“Do you believe me now?” I ask, ignoring his question. “She wasn’t drunk.”

“She could have gone to a bar right after meeting you.”

I scream in frustration. My scream turns into cries. “What more do I have to give you? Why don’t you believe me?” I try to control my tears, but they fall anyway. “I didn’t listen to Emery’s warning, and look what happened to her!”

I've always hated how flawless Huxley's poker face is. Through his stormy stare, he watches me fall apart.

He shakes his head. "What do you want me to do? This is all fucking crazy! Look at us! Standing in a hotel room naked with a sleeping baby while you throw around accusations of murder. This isn't normal. You're paranoid, and I get it. After your dad, you can't trust anyone. I accept the blame for that, but this isn't healthy. You're starting to sound like Emery. I think you need to get out of that house."

I pick up Elise as her cries fill the silence. I hold her against my bare chest and offer her the comfort I crave from Huxley. She nestles against me and settles.

"Emery was right, so how does that make her crazy? She's dead, isn't she?" I rest my cheek against her head, letting her hair soak up my tears. "He's going to kill me, Hux. It's only a matter of time. I'm begging you to help me."

His eyes lose all life. "With what? What are you planning?"

"When we met, you said disappearances were your speciality. Help me disappear before he makes it happen."

Huxley backs away from me. "Disappear? You can leave – he told me if that's what you want, he won't stop you."

"Xavier doesn't let you walk away. He won't let me leave, especially with Elise."

His eyes widen. "You want to steal his baby?"

I hold her tighter. "She's still legally my baby. Even if he lets me go, he won't give me her, and I promised Emery to keep

her safe. As long as she's around Xavier, she won't be safe. I'm scared for our lives, Hux. Will you help us, or will our blood be on your hands?"

He stares down at the ground as he contemplates. After a few minutes, he looks up at me. "Here's my counteroffer. Let me look for Elliot. If I find him, you drop all of this."

I know he won't find Elliot.

Hope crawls over me. "And if you don't?" I ask.

He nods. "I'll help you both disappear."

Xavier

PHEOBE HAYES HAS NEVER liked me. In the few incidences where I've joined Savannah for a visit, she eyes me with distrust and scowls when I move or speak. That's why I'm not surprised she's glowering at the necklace her daughter now wears.

“Take that off,” she demands, pointing at it.

Savannah grasps the ring as if to protect it. “It was a present from Xavier.”

A different side of her comes out when she's with her mother. Her voice is lower, and her gaze softer. She moves slowly as though her mother might get scared. But above all else, Savannah seeps love and care when around Pheobe.

Unlike Savannah, Pheobe's eyes are a dark, ugly shade of brown, veering on the edge of being black. They pierce through me every time they land on me – like right now. Hatred lives in her for me, no matter how hard I try to convince her otherwise.

“It’s a death sentence,” she calmly states. “You will have to kill me before you hurt my daughter.”

My fingers twitch in my trouser pocket. She has no idea I would happily kill her before the cancer does. Her mother is the only potential hazard to my relationship with Savannah.

I know better than to voice any of this, though. I smile at her the very same way I did to Caitlyn’s family. “I assure you, Ms Hayes, I have no intention of hurting her.”

It doesn’t work.

Her eyebrows lift in surprise before she lets out a breathy laugh. “Men only know how to hurt. You are selfish creatures who only care for yourselves.”

“Mum...” Savannah pleads. She gently forces her mum to look away from me to her. “How’s treatment going?”

Neither woman looks or speaks to me for the next thirty minutes. I stand in the corner of the room as they discuss her treatment plan and *my* daughter. Elise sits on Savannah’s lap, too occupied with her fingers to care about anything else. As she gets fussy, I step forward to take her, but Savannah rocks her, and she settles.

This whole situation fuels my irritation.



I lead Ray into the living room. I pour us some whiskey before taking a seat. “I wasn’t expecting you. Is everything okay?”

He sips his drink and looks around the room. “Where’s Savannah?”

Out. She’s always out. Out with her friends. Out for a walk. Out to run errands. She’s always everywhere but *here*.

“She likes to take Elise for a walk in the park.”

Ray slowly nods before shrugging his shoulders. Before I can ask to share his thoughts, he speaks. “I found Mr Hunter.”

I would be surprised if he couldn’t. It had to be easy to find the fake Elliot stationed in Bali. The real Elliot Hunter was too stupid to know how to go underground.

I sip my drink. “Good.”

He nods. “Yeah. It was easy,” he gloats. “Makes me wonder if it was too easy.”

“The man isn’t on the run,” I remind him bluntly. “Why would he need to hide?”

Ray runs his thumb around the ring of his glass. “So why couldn’t you find him? Didn’t Savannah ask you to contact him when he first left?”

Fucking Savannah and her loose lips.

“I didn’t look for him,” I admit. “I didn’t want him back in her life. The last time she spoke to him, he threatened her safety, and I wasn’t about to have that happen again, especially while she was pregnant with my baby.”

He holds the sip of whiskey in his mouth as he contemplates my argument. He nods as he swallows. “What would you like

me to do?”

I stare at the wall ahead as I pretend to think. I already know how this move ends – with my fake Elliot refusing to return. “Make contact with him. Tell him the contract has been nulled. He can return to the country and resume his relationship with Savannah.”

Ray looks surprised at my offer. “You’re going to let her go?”

I smile at my friend. “She’s not my prisoner. And perhaps, he can help her in ways we can’t.”

He places his glass down on the table. “What makes you say that?”

I sigh. “She’s not the same girl I met in the coffee shop. Maybe that girl was just a front for who lives inside. She’s paranoid and obsessive.”

Ray frowns. “Those are heavy words to throw around, Zav.”

I cross my leg over my knee. “She asked Eddie from our tech team how to hide her electronic footprints.”

I don’t like the way Ray is studying me. His irises move erratically over my face like he’s waiting for my mask to slip.

“Have you asked her why? Maybe she’s scared.”

“Why not come to me or you? Why go behind my back and speak to Eddie?” I place my glass down and prepare to make my next vital move. “It’s because she didn’t want me to know she’s been speaking to Caitlyn.”

I elude the fact that Caitlyn is, in fact, me. When the first message came through, I wasn't surprised. Elliot filled her head with nonsense. My responses were timed according to the time in California. The short conversation seemed to reassure her enough because she never messaged again.

"How do you know about it?" he questions.

I embellish the truth when answering. "Caitlyn checks in every few months. When multiple fake accounts kept messaging her, she asked if I could help. It all traced back to Savannah."

Ray remains silent. The clogs are turning, but he doesn't give me an insight into his thoughts. He picks up his glass and swishes his drink. When he looks up, it isn't at me but the empty room that carries our silence.

"You must miss Emery."

A large gulp of whiskey is needed to force the lie through my mouth. "Very much." I sigh. "But with the way Savannah has become, sometimes it feels as though she's still here. That godforsaken room has become Savannah's sanctuary. What can one person be doing all those hours alone?"

My friend opens his mouth and then closes it without saying anything. He doesn't want to discuss Savannah because the conversation diverts back to Emery. "Did you ever find out where she spent her final few hours alive? It must be killing you."

Instead of answering, I ask an alternative question. “Does it make a difference? It won’t bring her back. I’ve finally realised it doesn’t matter how much security you have; some things are out of our control. People get hurt in life.”

Ray’s eyes soften as he watches me. “Where did your hurt start?”

In a rare instance, I answer with honesty. “My mother’s infidelity. She broke my rose-tinted view of life, love, and marriage.”

“Why don’t you reach out to her? You have a daughter now. Make amends.”

I stare at the ground as I share the truth after fifteen years. “She’s dead.”

His breathing stops for a moment before his shoulders deflate. His eyes are drowning in surprise and sadness. “I’m so sorry, Zav. How long have you known?”

After holding the secret for many years, I want to tell him the truth. I want to tell him I knocked the life out of her, and I’m not sorry about it. When you betray those who love you, right and wrong don’t exist. The black and white merge to create a grey space. In the grey, anything is permissible, and lying has consequences.

“Since my dad died,” I lie. “I realised life was short, so I looked for her. But she’s dead. Emery never loved me and made it clear with her affairs, but I tried to make it work. My whole life, I’ve tried to hold onto those I love. My mother,

father and Emery. After all these years, I've finally learnt that sometimes letting go is easier than holding on." I stand up. "Call Elliot and tell him to take Savannah back. I'm officially letting her go."

Savannah

“WHAT TOOK YOU SO long?” I snap as Huxley walks through the door. I lock the hotel door before turning around to face him. “Strip.”

He holds my arms in place. “We’re not doing this again. Keep your clothes on,” he orders. From his tone of voice, I know Xavier won him over with whatever bullshit he fed him.

“Did you find him?”

He tosses the folder onto the bed. “See for yourself.”

I scramble to snatch the brown file as though the contents may disappear at any given moment. The few pieces of paper show flight details and bank transactions. The last is a CCTV snapshot of Elliot walking in a mall. I bring the image closer to analyse it. His face is turned away from the camera, and his rose neck tattoo is barely visible. His hair is a little lighter, and his shoulders are broader.

“This isn’t Elliot,” I declare.

It's not possible because Elliot is *dead*.

Huxley sighs. "Yes, it is. You can tell from the tattoo."

I throw the papers at him. "This is someone who has a similar build and tattoo as him. That is not Elliot!"

"Lower your fucking voice Savannah," he shouts louder than me. "No more chasing your tail."

Xavier did it. He convinced him that Elliot is alive.

"I thought you were better than this," I laugh. "One picture, and you believe him?" My knees hit the back of the bed, and I can't help but cry. I risked everything, and Xavier *still fucking won*.

At the sight of my tears, he lets go of his frustration. "I spoke to Elliot and asked him to return." He hesitates. "He didn't want to."

"Liar," I accuse. "Show me proof. Let me hear his voice."

"I didn't record it, but this is his number. Call him and *let* yourself believe that he's alive and happy." Huxley hands me his phone with the number ready to be dialled.

I hit the call button. There is no ringing tone – just an automated message that the number has been disconnected. I try again. And again. And again. I scream as I throw his phone to the ground.

"Whoever you spoke to was an imposter. Why else would he get rid of the number?"

“He told me he didn’t want to come back to this life. He’s built one for himself out there.”

My laugh starts slow until it becomes hysterical. “Build a life? That isn’t Elliot. He is an idiot who would spend his day drinking himself stupid on the beach while hitting on every person with a vagina! He is the type to blow that much money on a stupid sports car. He is a gambler who doesn’t have any self-control.” I let myself fall back onto the bed as I cry. “He is dead. He’s dead.”

My tears stream into my ears as I cry until it hurts. Huxley was the only person who could help me; now, I don’t even have that. Even if I run from Xavier, what’s to stop him from coming after me? I don’t have anywhere to go, while he has all the resources to follow me anywhere.

I remember Emery warning me to run from Xavier after she found out about the affair. She was wrong. You can’t run from men like Xavier. You either die at the hands of them, or you bring them down. If Elise and I have any chance of surviving, he must be brought down.

I sit up and wipe my tears. “Thank you for trying.”

Huxley blocks my way. “Where are you going?”

“Home.”

He holds my arms. “Savannah, you’re not thinking straight. You’re making things up in your head. Whatever you plan on doing is going to hurt people.”

I push his hold off me. “What should I do then? Sit around and wait until he decides how he wants to kill me? What about all the people he’s hurt?”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down. His brown eyes meet mine, and all I can see is sincerity. “I think you should speak to a professional. Someone who can help make sense of what you’re feeling.” Before I can protest, he adds, “You’ve been through so much since the first failed pregnancies. I don’t want you to suffer in silence.”

My fists react before I can think about it. They come down on his chest. “I came to *you*,” I spit. “I asked *you* to help me, but you can’t see what I can.”

“What you’re seeing doesn’t exist.”

“I’m not crazy!” I snap. “What? Because my mother has schizophrenia, I must have it too?”

“No! But you haven’t been yourself.”

I step away from him. “Because of him.”

“Did you make a fake Instagram account to stalk his ex-girlfriend?” The accusation is evident in his voice. He isn’t asking if it’s true. He’s asking to see if I admit it. I should have known Xavier would use that against me.

“Yes.”

“Did you design the nursery?”

“Yes.”

“Did you try to convince Emery to leave him?”

“Yes.”

“Did you fall in love with him?”

“Yes.”

“Did you choose to stay after giving birth?”

“Yes.”

“Who made the first move after Emery died?”

My thoughts go back to the night in Xavier’s office where I practically begged him to have sex. How do I explain to Huxley that I needed the time to try and clone Xavier’s phone the way he did with Graham’s all those months ago? My attempt was useless because it didn’t work. Even if it did, would Huxley believe me?

A single tear falls as I realise how obsessive my truth makes me look. But it’s easy to believe that narrative when context isn’t given. I designed the nursery *with* Emery. I convinced her to leave because *she* was unhappy. I chose to stay because Elise needed me. And I fell in love with a man who doesn’t exist.

“Your obsession with him isn’t healthy. You need to walk away. You need a fresh start away from all of this. I can help you find somewhere new to begin.”

My eyes glance over to the pushchair. “I won’t leave her with him.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

I grab hold of the pram and wheel it to the door. “Just watch me. It’s easy to believe lies because everything is perfectly tied together. The truth is ugly and messy. The truth is always harder to believe, even when she’s standing before you, *begging* you to save her life. Do you remember what you said to me the day you told me you loved me?”

My unfiltered sadness makes him flinch. “You don’t have to fight on your own.” He pauses. “Let me slay the dragons.”

When he said those words, I believed him like a fool.

“You lied,” I whisper. “But that’s okay because I’ve fought alone my whole life. I’ve never needed a man to slay my dragons. I’ll do it on my own.” I wipe my tears and stand taller. With a newfound determination, I stare Huxley down. “This all started when he asked me to carry his baby. Instead, I’ve been carrying his lies. Now stand back and watch. I’m going to fucking *burn* every single one of them to the ground.”



“Where are you going?” Mia screeches behind me.

“Don’t open the door to anyone. Keep your phone turned off. Only open the door when you hear my voice on the other side.”

“Sav!”

I turn around to face her. “Jordan won’t be home until midnight. No one else should be coming. Promise you won’t

open the door?”

“I promise, but you need to explain why I’m hiding away with a baby.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. Not yet. He won’t know you’re here. Just keep all the windows and curtains closed. There’s enough milk in her baby bag.” I place a lingering kiss on Elise’s cheek. “I’ll be back.”

“Savannah!” Mia pleads one final time.

I hug my friend tight. “Thank you.” I rush down the hallway, out of the building, into the car. I take a deep breath before beginning the drive back to the house, hopefully for the last time.

When I enter, I’m thrown off by the roses that create an aisle to the house. I slowly open the door and turn the hallway light on to see the same red roses covering the marble floors. The scent of the flowers wafts through the entire house as thousands line the floors.

I shake off my confusion as I gather all the things I need. I carefully descend the stairs with the folder tucked under my arms and his favourite chess board in my hands. I remove the large floral centrepiece that matches the rest of the new décor. With it tossed to the floor, I place the chess board and set it as though a game is about to take place.

Smiling to myself, I add to the ambience he set by lighting a few table candles. I turn the lights off, imitating a romantic evening.

Back in the bedroom, I brush through my hair and give myself a self-assured nod. I carry all my essentials, including my passport, down the stairs.

I take a seat at the dining table and wait.

Smiling like a lunatic, I gloat. “Honey, I’m home!” My eyes narrow, knowing he can see me through his cameras. “Come and get me.”

As expected, Xavier returns home at 9 p.m. He calls out for me, but I remain silent. There is a low thud as he places his briefcase down. His footsteps get louder before they fall silent as he joins me in the dining room.

“Dammit. I was hoping to get home before you and surprise you.” He chuckles. “Surprise?”

I don’t crack a smile. “We need to talk, Xavier.”

His blue eyes deepen, and his eyebrows curve inwards. “What’s wrong?”

“You can drop the fucking act.”

“Savannah...” He looks around the room. “Where’s Elise?”

“Give me what I want, and I’ll tell you.”

His chest rises and falls rapidly. “What the fuck have you done with my daughter?”

I smile at him. “Don’t worry. As long as she’s not with you, she’s safe.”

“What are you—“

“Drop the fucking act. We both know what you are.” I point to the seat in front of me. “This is *my* negotiation. *I* talk, and *you* listen. I’ll tell you everything I know, and when I’m done, you will let me walk out of here.”

“Or what?”

“You’ll never see your daughter again.”

If I couldn’t get Xavier to admit the truth, I knew there was one thing I could do to guarantee my safety – a promise to return Elise. I have plans to flee before he makes me do that.

In a matter of seconds, gone is the Xavier I have known all this time. His eyes are void of any emotion as he stares through me. He leans his neck to the right until a loud click resonates through the house. He straightens his suit before lining his sleeves with his shirt cuffs.

He pulls the chair out and smiles at me. He takes the seat opposite me. “Okay, Savannah. Let’s play.”

Xavier

THE CANDLES WERE A nice touch to the ambience. The flame flickers in her beautiful brown eyes as she stares me down. Her lips are set into a straight line, and her eyes narrowed. I smile at her, knowing she wants me to break the silence. Wasting time works in my favour.

Clearing my throat, I lean forward and move the grey crystal pawn. “Your turn.”

I have to give her some credit as she maintains her stony expression. She doesn’t look at the board or cower away from me.

She really thinks she can beat me.

“I’m not playing a stupid fucking game of chess with you,” she spits at me.

I click my tongue. “I guess I’ll play against myself.” I spin the board and make a move with the clear crystal pawn. “Tell me what you think you know.”

“You killed your mother, ex-girlfriends, Emery and...” Tears brim in her eyes. “...and Elliot.”

I turn the board back around and contemplate how I want to play this. While I should deny it, a part of me wants *someone* to know the truth. It may as well be her, as I’m not letting her walk out of here as a free woman. “Yes.”

There’s no going back now.

She doesn’t waver. There’s no surprise. Her deadly eyes stay trained on me. “Why?”

I have never understood why people ask such a complex question, knowing they’d never get an honest answer. “Why does anyone do anything?”

“We’re not discussing why you painted your walls white. We’re talking about murder.”

I peer up at her through my lashes. “They were accidents.” My smirk finally causes a reaction.

“You’re sick.” She scowls at me in disgust. “You are fucked in the head.”

My chuckle startles her. “*Women* are fucked in the head. You adulterous whores.”

Her head falls back as she laughs. Images of strangling her fill me with adrenaline. “Mommy issues? Are you fucking kidding me? All of this,” she gestures to the room, “Is because your mum shagged another man?”

The rook will shatter if I grip it harder than I already am. “Watch your fucking mouth.”

Her eyes turn to slits while she smirks at me. “Or what, Xavier? Are you going to kill me too?”

I rest my elbows on the table and lean in closer. “I would never kill you. You brought my daughter into the world. *She* is the only reason I didn’t kill you the night you returned from the fair.” I tilt my head and wait for the penny to drop.

Her eyes dart across the chess board as I make a few more moves. “What are you talking about?”

Leaning back in my chair, I revel in the power I hold. “You thought you could outsmart me? I spent most of my childhood in Cookham. There was a town carnival – *The Magic Junction*- every summer and winter. It was a family-owned carnival. Did you know it came about because the family were famous for their corndogs?”

Her almond eyes widen ever so slightly despite her efforts to conceal her surprise. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Rylee’s Dogs.” I chuckle. “It’s funny because that was the name of the family dog. It was the name printed on the receipt you left in the bin. I tried so hard to teach you how to look after things. But no matter how hard I tried, you never learned to clean up after yourself. If only you took my advice, I never would have known you were being a nosey *bitch* and snooping around my grandfather’s crematorium.”

Stone replaces her features. “What are you talking about?”

The chessboard gets spun again. I examine the board for the best move as I say, “Who were you with, and what did you think you’d find?”

“If you’re so smart, you tell me.”

My smirk makes her uncomfortable. “Mia would have asked too many questions. Your mum is...” My lopsided grin ignites a reaction.

Her hands slam down on the table. “Watch your fucking mouth.”

My laugh tumbles out at her meek anger. “Apologies, Miss Hayes. That only leaves one person – Jordan. He already knew what you were investigating.”

“Which was what?”

I ignore her question, choosing to get further under her skin. “You should have broken in and collected Mr Hunter’s ashes. You would have saved me a job.”

Her hands close over her mouth to hide her gasp. She stares at me with so many pathetic emotions for her useless ex-boyfriend.

“You killed him?”

“For you. To protect you.”

“*Protect me?*“ she sneers.

My face twists in rage. “How can you not see it? I *saved* you!”

Disbelief glows in her amber eyes. “*Saved me?*“ she echoes. “I didn’t need saving! I was perfectly fine before *you*. *You* dragged me to hell!”

With a devilish smile, I say, “Hell isn’t big enough for me.”

Her beautiful caramel skin blanches. She squints as she studies my relaxed face. Her head slowly nods. “That was months ago. Why pretend?”

I use my rook to knock off one of her pawns. “You thought you were playing me, but the truth was I needed time to put my plan in place.”

“What are you going to do to me, Xavier?”

My groan makes her jump. “Why are you ruining the game, Savannah?”

“Why are you doing this to me? Why pursue me when you knew I was fucking Huxley? I cheated before we even happened.”

The reminder flares my anger. I should have known she was not the perfect woman I was looking for. She was as much of a liar as my mother and the others.

“You didn’t pay attention to any of your customers, but when you looked at me, you *really* saw me. You smiled at me and asked what my favourite coffee was.”

Unlike Ray or I, Savannah’s facial expressions reveal her emotions. Like right now, her eyebrows are pulled together, forcing the skin between them to crease. Her cheekbones rise

slightly as she looks at me, confused. “What are you saying? You’ve been stalking me since... when?”

Disappointment fills me as I realise she doesn’t know our whole love story. “Since I walked into the coffee shop.”

She pushes away from the table but doesn’t get up. Her chest rises and falls as she struggles to breathe. Her hands go to her chest.

Wanting to see her struggle up close, I stroll to her side of the table. I kneel before her and watch in amusement as she tries to get away from me. I close my eyes and revel in the sound of her struggling to breathe – the gasping reminds me of Caitlyn when I gripped the life out of her.

“Oh God,” she mutters on repeat. For the first time tonight, she begins to cry. “I thought... I... You...”

Her inability to finish a sentence begins to irk me. “How could you think I would let you go after that wonderful encounter?”

Savannah looks at me as though *I’m* the crazy one. “What are you talking about? *Nothing* happened between us. I took your order, and you thought, what? That I was in love with you?”

My eye roll was low tact but made my stance clear. “I’m not delusional. I knew you weren’t in love with me but *would* fall in love with me.”

She stares past me as tiny droplets streak down her face. She looks mesmerising like this – a melancholy soul immobilised

by sadness. “So, everything?” she whispers. Her eyes come down to mine. “It was all a lie?”

My hand reaches up to her face as I remain crouched in front of her. The pad of my thumb wipes her tears away. “Only how we met. The rest was a beautiful love story.”

Her hand closes over mine. “You killed two people, Xavier,” she cries. “It’s not a love story. It’s a tragedy.”

“But *we’re* still here. Me, you and Elise. We can still have the perfect ending.”

Her head shakes, revoking my offer. “How are you any different to your mother? Her infidelity resulted in a death sentence. What about you?” she snarls.

“My wife was a liar. It was an eye for an eye. My mother did not love that man. I love you.”

She pulls my hand from her face but doesn’t release it. “You’re not capable of loving anyone. You’re a psychopath.” She lets go. “And it’s only a matter of time before you kill me.” As she says the words, fear instils in her. She no longer carries the strength she displayed since I returned home.

“I’m not going to kill you,” I reassure her.

She wipes under her eyes, erasing any evidence of her cries. “Let me go.”

Here I am, bearing the most vulnerable side of me, and she wants to fucking leave?

“Not yet.”

“Let me out of here, or I swear I will scream to the world about your precious diamonds.”

Excitement fills me. “What diamonds?” I ask, playing dumb.

“The one you made me wear. The ones that you harbour like a psychotic freak.”

My jaw twitches. “Watch your mouth, Miss Hayes. I don’t take kindly to name-calling.”

My cold stare moves from her up to the ceiling. Above us is my closet with my *new* diamond collection. The day I bought Savannah the ring, I replaced *my* collection with replicas.

I shrug. “They won’t find anything in them.”

She laughs. “I know it’s made from ashes. Emery practically told me.”

“I know she told you. I know all about your meet-up with her the day she died.”

“How do you know? I didn’t tell anyone except... Hux?”

The temptation to lie and blame him is big, but I want her to know I was always five steps ahead of her.

“I knew bugging you would be too hard, but you left your queen unprotected.”

“Elise?” The question is followed by her tears again.

“Her car seat and pram.”

“You bugged your own daughter?”

“For her safety. You were going off at all times of the day without informing me.”

For the second time, Savannah’s palm meets my cheek with a loud *thwack*. The skin tingles from the impact. Unlike last time, I don’t hide my anger.

Before she can react, my fingers grip her neck. “Watch yourself, Miss Hayes,” I warn. Not wanting to leave a mark on her, I let go. I laugh as I recall her asking Ray to strip like a crazy person. “Stripping was a good idea, but you underestimated me.”

“Tell me something. The guesthouse? The car? You were watching?”

I nod. “And listening.”

Her eyes close. Her chest rises and falls rapidly until it becomes slow and even. When she looks at me again, desperation shines through.

“What are you going to do to me, Xavier? We both know you’re not letting me walk out of here.”

“Yes, I am. We had a deal, remember?” I walk back over to my side of the table and take my seat. “Are you going to tell me where my daughter is?” I smile at her.

The sound of the clock ticks in the silence. I count nineteen seconds before she speaks.

“Why are we playing this game? You’ve known where she is this whole time.”

My upside-down grin unsettles her. She still can't see the entire board.

"If I move this piece, what happens?" I move my queen on the board and grin.

"What are you waiting for?"

I laugh at her. She's getting warmer to the truth.

"It doesn't matter which move you make, you *lose*. I've got you cornered."

She stands up. "You're buying time."

"What was it you said to Ray?" I pretend to think about it. I echo the words that have replayed in my head. "We are not God. We cannot decide who lives or dies. We are not mercenaries of death," I snarl.

Her tears are back. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I decide who lives and dies. I am the Gamemaker. You were right. I am *not* God. I am much larger than a deity who does not exist. I am *here*, on Earth, where the world can see me." I hold my hands up. "I've chosen to *protect* lives with these hands. These hands have also taken lives. I am Xavier Rivers, and tonight, I will create your fate."

She looks out the window to the driveway. "Who is that?"

I stand up, feeling the full effects of being the most powerful in this game. My fingers twitch in anticipation. I've been waiting for this moment since that night.

“You made it so easy for me, Savannah. *You* inspired my final move. All those days and nights, sitting up alone in the room. You became a recluse. You stopped eating and sleeping. You had a mental breakdown after giving birth. You threw crazy accusations of murder. You reduced your digital footprint because you were convinced somebody was following you. You asked Ray to strip naked because you thought someone bugged your clothes. You asked Mia to keep a baby hostage.”

She backs away from me. “I’m not crazy.”

My smile ceases to exist as I narrow my eyes. “But you made it so easy for me to convince everyone else you were. I simply watered the seeds you planted.”

“A medical professional will see through it.”

“Not when the people who love you will testify to your erratic behaviour. It’s in your genes. A traumatic experience can trigger symptoms, and you’ve had your fair share of trauma.”

“Because of you!” She begins to panic.

My eyes soften. “You need help, Savannah. You’re not well.”

“You’re the one that needs help! I’m going to tell them everything!”

I shrug. “Go ahead. They won’t find anything. Every secret you discovered, I buried even deeper.”

“I’ll dig it up myself! I’ll bury you in the truth.”

“You lost, Savannah. You can either tell them and prove how crazy you are with your conspiracies of a CEO committing murder and stalking you, or you can stay silent and spend the rest of your life in a care home for the crazy.”

“You said you would let me go,” she cries.

I shake my head. “No. I said I wouldn’t kill you.”

Her eyes dart around the room. “The cameras.”

I straighten my tie. “I stole a move from Emery. Can you guess which one?”

Savannah falls into her thoughts. Her eyes are wild, trying to figure it out. She runs past me to the light switches. The sound of the switch being flicked up and down accompanies her panting but, otherwise, does nothing else.

“The breaker,” she says.

I turn to face her. “A smart move by my conniving wife.”

Savannah laughs. “The generators turn on within ten minutes.”

Anger fills me. Even after everything, she’s still too stupid to understand. “If there were generators, don’t you think I would have seen you weren’t in the guesthouse? Do you think of me as a moron? An idiot? A fool?” I take a deep breath. “There’s no proof of anything.”

She runs towards me and lunges for my neck. Her nails scrape against my skin as she claws at me. “I’m going to kill you! I’m going to kill you!”

With perfect timing, the doctors walk in and pull her off me. I put on my best scared, sad face as she goes down, kicking and screaming.

Tears are forced out of my eyes. “Tell me where she is, Savannah! Tell me where my daughter is!” My begging is hardly heard over her screaming.

“He set me up! He did all this!”

She thought she could *steal* from me. I step towards her. “You tried to steal my baby. Where is she? Please?” My voice cracks towards the end, adding to the effect of a desperate father.

“Mr Rivers, please.” The female doctor stands between us. “I understand you’re worried, but we will find your little girl. Once she’s medicated, she will tell us.”

I yank my tie away. “What if you’re too late? What if...”

Savannah screams as the second doctor tries to control her.

“Please don’t hurt her,” I beg. “Please let them help you, Savannah. Don’t make this harder than it is.”

She runs towards me in attack mode. “You did this!”

The male doctor pulls her off me.

“I did this to help you,” I plead.

As expected, Savannah snaps and begins to get hysterical. “He did this! Check the diamonds!” Her screams continue as she’s forced out of the house to the car that waits for her. Her

fingers clasp around her necklace. She tugs on it until it snaps off her neck. She throws it into the night.

“Can I have just one moment with her? I need her to know I’m here. She has no one else.”

The two doctors nod and take a step back.

Savannah doesn’t look up from the ground, accepting her fate by remaining completely still.

I wrap my arms around her and pull her close to me. I lower my head so my lips rest at her ears. Only so she can hear I whisper, “*Zugzwang*.”

Xavier

3 MONTHS LATER.

Despite all the money I've donated towards the care home, it still has a robust medicinal scent. You'd think they would spend a few pounds from the thousands to buy air fresheners. I leave the box of freshly baked cookies at the nurses' station before walking to her room.

I knock but don't wait for her to welcome me in. Even after three months, Savannah hasn't spoken a single word. Not to me, her visitors or the professionals that tend to her twenty-four-seven.

As expected, she is sat on her bed with her knees tucked under her chin. Her hair falls to the front, covering most of her face. Her frame has become thin and frail from the lack of food and movement.

"How are you today, Savannah?" I ask, knowing I won't get an answer. "Your mum is doing well. I've made good progress

with her. She lets me sit in her room with her. She asked about you, and I had to lie and tell her you were doing well.”

Silence.

“Elise had her first tooth come in, and she does the most adorable bear crawl. I think she’ll be walking in a few months. Maybe when you’re better and safe to be around, she can join me for a visit. What do you think?”

Her head stays bowed as she fiddles with a stray thread on her throwover.

I take a seat on the bed in front of her. “You need to do better than this, Savannah. You need to prove to me you’re going to do better.” I sigh. “I didn’t want to tell you this because I’m worried about what it will do to your mental state, but your mum’s cancer has progressed to stage four. I’m ensuring she gets the best care possible, but it’s not looking good.”

Nothing.

I don’t want *this* Savannah. I want my Savannah back, but she seems to be long gone.

I lean forward and place a kiss on the top of her head. “It’s Ray’s birthday today. He said he’ll come and see you later. I love you, Savannah. All you need to do is prove you’ve changed, and all this will go away.”

I hesitate in the doorway when I hear a snuffle. When I look back at her, the light catches a single tear as it strolls down her cheek. Closing the door behind me, I approach the main doors.

“Mr Rivers! How are you?”

“Mr Roberts! I’m well, thank you. How are you?”

He gives an exasperated look. “Our patients keep us busy. Did you make any progress with Savannah?”

I shake my head. “Unfortunately not, but she’s in the best hands with your staff.”

The proud look on his face is sickening. “And thanks to you, we have the best security.”

The stupid man doesn’t question the chances of me offering security cameras at a low rate and then having someone I know placed in the same home. He simply proves that money turns eyes blind. In this situation, it works in my favour.

“Very true. You’ll let me know if you have any issues?”

He nods and bids me farewell.

The past three months have been a massive learning curve now that I’m a single father. I’ve had to change my entire life for the little girl – but she’s worth it. She will grow up to be perfect, unlike the rest of them.

Elise changed me for the better. I don’t need a queen to protect me. The queen only ever brought me a mess to clean. I am much more powerful on my own, and the board is mine to control. All the pieces are where they belong, and nobody is looking for the ones that got lost along the way.

One day, Elise will ask me about her mother. Perhaps Savannah will be well enough to be part of our lives. Until then, I’ll keep an eye on her.

In the safe confines of my office, I log into my account and load the live feed.

Savannah hasn't moved from the spot I left her in. I touch the screen and close my eyes, imagining I can feel her soft skin. She might hate me right now, but hatred is born out of love. I won her love in the first match and will win it again.

Until then...

Checkmate.

Savannah

12 MONTHS LATER

Xavier's blue eyes burn into mine as I pull back from the kiss. The few friends around us cheer as we are declared *husband and wife*. Elise's dress swirls around her as she runs to us with unsteady legs. Her soft tufts of hair flow behind her before she crashes into my legs. With a tight grip, she hugs them. The moment lasts mere seconds because she's called back to her seat.

Xavier smiles at me, and I return one back.

"Ready?" Huxley asks.

I nod. "Never been more ready."

There is a glint in his eyes that I've missed. He threads his fingers through mine as we leave our guests behind.

The car ride is silent as we are lost in our thoughts. I didn't expect to become a wife, but I need it.

Once we arrive at his house, he sweeps me into his arms and carries me in.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Ray.”

“Mrs *Huxley* Ray. I like the sound of that.”

There is a troublesome glint in his eyes. “What would you like our first act as husband and wife to be?”

I cup his face with a tenderness I didn’t think I was capable of anymore. “You know what.”

He kisses my cheek. “I got it.” He carries me up the stairs into his bedroom.

His long hair is pulled into his signature bun. His eyes are soft yet determined. His facial hair tickles my fingers as I trace his jaw.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“For what?”

“Everything.”

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart.” He gently places me down on the foot of his bed. He draws his curtains closed. “Clothes on or off?”

I chuckle at the look on his handsome face. “Would we be doing it right if our clothes were on?” I start pulling the straps of my wedding gown down, but his rough hands stop me.

“It’s our wedding night. Let me undress you.”

Huxley’s hands move slowly as he unbuttons my dress. Every brush of his skin against mine makes me shiver. Once

he's done, he steps back and admires the view.

“You're perfect,” he murmurs.

The soft look in his eyes weakens my defence. I want to fall apart in his arms, but remember what this was for. I'm not going to be blindsided this time.

This time, I've got my eye on the whole board.

I stand taller. “Your turn.”

Huxley undresses himself faster than he did me. We're both naked in the middle of his bedroom within a few seconds.

“Ready?”

I swallow hard. “He made everyone think I was crazy. He got me institutionalised. He's the reason my mum died alone. He's why I couldn't be there when they laid her to rest. He snatched my chance of saying goodbye to her.”

Tears threaten to fall as I remember sitting alone in the home after being denied *one day's* release to bury my mum. Xavier did everything to keep me his prisoner.

“We're going to do this, Savannah. We're going to get Elise back. We're going to take him down.”

I realise how much he's already sacrificed by marrying me. With Huxley as my husband and next of kin, Xavier can no longer make medical decisions for me.

I shake my head. “You don't have to do this. If you want to back out—“

Before I can finish my offer, Huxley cuts in. “I’m not in the business of saying things I don’t mean. It’s me and you.”

I take his hand in mine and stare at the closet door. “Us versus him. Are you ready?”

His nod is one of confidence. “I’m in the snake’s den.” Huxley grins at me. “Haven’t you read a fairytale before? A true gentleman slays the dragon.”

I twist open the door and flick the lights on. Huxley pushes the clothes apart to reveal the murder board we’ve created. Every person linked to Xavier has their face on it with his face in the centre.

“He might be the dragon, but I’m the one that will do the burning.” I step up to his picture and stare at it. A genuine smile breaks out on my face. “Are you ready, Xavier? Because the queen is back on the board, and she’s burning your lies.”

~~The End.~~

The game continues...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The entire process of planning, writing, and editing *Carrying Your Lies* has proven to be a difficult feat. What started as inspiration from the word ‘surrogate’ blossomed into the twisted journey Savannah found herself on.

My heartfelt thanks go to every person who lent an ear to listen to my struggles or a shoulder to bear the weight of my tears. I am forever appreciative to every person who read the drafts of this book and provided honest feedback.

Thank you to my book cover designer, Rebekah Pell. You are truly magnificent at what you do. You can find her on Instagram *@RebekahPellDesign* or at

www.rebekahpelldesigns.com

As ever, a special thank you to my family, who bear the brunt of my writing dream. Once my fingers start typing away, I forget the world around me exists. Without them, I would forget to eat, sleep and breathe. Everything I do is for you.

Thank you to you, my readers. I will forever be grateful to every person who picks up a copy of my work. I hope you fall into the worlds I create as I do.

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