



A Simple Game (Simple Game #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Saoirse

The rules to the game are simple: find rich men, take as much from them as possible and get out before things get messy.

That was my plan for Xavier Atwood—CEO of one of the largest media companies in North America. The man has more money than God, which should make this the most profitable set-up yet.

As long as I keep my attraction to him under control.

Easy. Right?

But sometimes controlling our desires is the most difficult game of all, and Xavier is not a man who likes to lose.

Xavier

Being CEO of A-One Media has become my sole identity. I've lived my life with minimal distractions, working hard to leave my past behind me. But nothing hurts more than knowing that my son was left there too.

In my search for him I find myself in Nyx's path. She's beautiful, charismatic, feisty and may just be the key to helping me reconnect with my child—if only her very existence wasn't a temptation to stray off course.

She's too young... I shouldn't want her.

Yet I can't resist the pull I feel, even if the current might drag me under.

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PROLOGUE

SAOIRSE SUTHERLAND

Five years ago

Not bad for a Tuesday ,” Diana , one of the strippers, says as she counts up her tips. It’s the slowest night of the week, but she’s still got a decent stack of cash in her hand. I saw her take a greasy-looking man to one of the backrooms, so I’m assuming whatever she did in there earned her a pretty penny.

I look at my own tips from waiting tables. It’s nothing in comparison. This job is enough for me to keep the lights on at home, but not a dollar more. All because Morrissey has some sort of “moral rule.”

“ No girls under the age of twenty-one are stripping at my club.”

It’s a joke if I’ve ever heard one.

He’s in his fifties and his second wife is the same age as me, making her one year older than his youngest daughter. I’ve argued with him about his decision more times than I can count over the last three years, to no avail.

It all changes this week, though. Tomorrow is my twenty-first birthday and, by the end of the week, I’ll have my first shift as a dancer at XXXtasy . Most little girls don’t grow up hoping to strip for a living, but I’m a realist. My mother spends all the money she makes from the local diner on drugs and, after the last altercation between

her and my father, the restraining order ensures that he stays far away from the both of us. It's for the best, but if I ever want a chance of getting out of Ravenscroft, this is my best bet.

I redo my ponytail, tightening the blonde strands of hair, when a dark voice that makes my skin crawl calls out to me. "Serah, baby. My brother tells me you're going to be up there soon."

I glance over and sure enough, Gage Yarrow is eyeing me from a booth in the back, his arms crossed, various tattoos on display. I don't know why Brooks would say that. I've told him on more than one occasion how uncomfortable his half-brother makes me, but does my boyfriend listen? Never.

"You're going to save me a dance, sweetheart." He's sitting casually with legs spread, watching me as if I'm nothing more than prey.

"I'll pass," I murmur.

He laughs, a deep throaty sound. "I wasn't asking."

I cut my eyes away from him and exit the building, not taking a breath until I'm in the driver's seat of my old beater with the doors locked. I steady my breaths. I don't know much about Gage other than he's an absolute creep and that from the second I started dating his brother, he's had me in his sights. Little comments here and there, but Brooks insists that he's not serious and that it's all just a joke. I'm not so sure.

I send a quick message to my boyfriend, letting him know that I'm off work early and that I'm going home to shower before heading over to his place. I don't spend every night there, because of Gage —the certified psycho that he lives with, but I would like to wake up to something other than my mother stumbling in under the influence at five a.m. on my birthday.

When I enter the house, I hear a headboard hitting the wall with vigor, and then, on cue, my mother's moans. Disgusting . I don't even want to know what trash she dragged in tonight. I'm about to go down stairs to my room when I hear, “ Oh , yes, Brooks .”

My ears ring and my eyes go wide. Slowly , I place my bag on the floor, doing my best to swallow the bile that's rising. Her screeching grows louder with every step I take, and when I crack open the door, I scream.

On top of my mom is none other than my ever-loving boyfriend.

“ You've got to be kidding me!” I yell, as Brooks scrambles off of her, pulling a blanket over himself.

“ I thought you were working late,” he exclaims, reaching for his shirt.

“ Oh , you're right. My bad. Let me go out and come back later, so that you can finish fucking my mom.”

I look over at her, but she only watches me with a smirk.

From the minute I turned eighteen, I have done nothing but work to keep us afloat and this is how she repays me, by laughing right in my face.

“ She's always been dramatic,” my mother says to Brooks , and my blood boils. “ He's a good lay. I see why you like him so much.”

I clench my jaw, grinding my teeth together. I've never wanted to strangle someone more.

Brooks gets up and attempts to approach me, and I lose it. I grab the closest thing to

me, a white vase with pink flowers painted on it, and throw it at his head. It misses, the ceramic shattering on the floor, but it's enough to stop him in his tracks.

“ You're out of your damn mind if you think you're going to touch me right now!”

“ I'm sorry, baby. It just happened!”

“ You're sorry ? You're even worse than her,” I say, pointing to my mother who looks like she's watching a Broadway show unfold in front of her. “ At least she knows she's shit and owns it. You think I could forgive this?” I laugh despite the feeling of my chest caving in. “ You're not sorry yet.. But you will be.”

“ This is fucking sexy,” Gage whispers as his finger follows the snake that winds its way up my spine. It's been a couple of days since I started staying here, and I still have to remind myself not to shudder at his touch. The sex was good, but the look on Brooks ' face the next morning when he woke up to find me standing in his kitchen in his brother's oversized shirt had been better.

“ You didn't.”

I grin at him. “ Oh , but I did. Three times, actually.”

I watch as his face contorts with rage. “ But you hate him!”

“ No . I hate you. You are nothing. In fact, you're less than nothing. And every time you see me, I hope that you're reminded of that,” I say calmly.

He opens his mouth to speak, but his half-brother's voice fills the space instead as he enters the kitchen. “ Shut the fuck up, or get out.”

“ I can't believe you're actually fucking her.”

“ Need I remind you whose house you’re staying in?” Gage’s voice is ice cold. If it were directed at me, I would be terrified. He sits at the table and pulls out a switchblade from his pocket, flicking it open and watching as the sunlight glints off of it. It may be my imagination, but I swear I see a speck of dried blood on it. “ You don’t have to be here, but she stays as long as I want. Got it?”

Whatever Brooks sees in his eyes makes him back off. He looks at me and scoffs before walking out the door. I hadn’t planned on staying here past the morning, but I really don’t want to go back home. It's not like I have many options. So , I pour myself a cup of coffee and join Gage at the table.

Somehow , the man who so deeply unsettled me last night has become my saving grace in the daylight.

Since I’ve moved out and will no longer be covering the household bills, I treated myself for my birthday and booked a hair and tattoo appointment. Now , I have Lucious —the snake—on my back, and my blonde locks are jet black. I’m in the bathroom getting ready for the day and as I look at myself in the mirror, I barely recognize the person staring back at me, which is fitting since I don’t feel like myself anymore. I was never naïve—something that life made sure I couldn’t afford, but the person who I was on the eve of my twenty-first birthday died right there in that bedroom.

Gage joins me in the small space, wrapping his tattooed arms around my body, watching me through the glass. If he feels me tense, he gives no indication as I stare into his dark brown eyes, not the slightest hint of emotion in his gaze. They say that eyes are the window to our souls, but I’m not convinced that Gage has one.

Still , I force myself to relax in his hold.

Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.

One year later

“ Do you know who that man was?” Gage asks as I walk out to him after I’ve counted my money for the night.

“ Which man?” I say, confused.

I’m not in the mood to deal with one of his fits of jealousy tonight. We aren’t exclusive, although we may as well be. It’s understood around Ravenscroft that I’m attached to Gage , and while that grants me a certain level of protection around town, it also means that no guy will look at me for longer than two seconds... unless he’s paying for a dance.

My fear of Gage is no longer at the forefront, but that’s only because he’s getting what he wants... me. So , I have nothing to be worried about.

“ The one that stuck about eight hundred dollars in your thong. Don’t play coy.”

“ I’m not playing and it was seven hundred,” I mutter, ready to call it a night and sleep. I glance over to where the man is still sitting, with Jeannie now whispering in his ear.

“ Well , it’s a damn shame it wasn’t more.”

I turn my head, not understanding what he’s talking about. Gage is a lot of things, but ironically, he’s never had an issue with my job.

“ You want to give me pointers?”

“ No . What I’m saying is that he could have given you a lot more money.” He leans in and the gleam in his eyes makes me nervous. Wherever this is going, I don’t think

I like it. “ That was Matthew Croft .”

He says the name as if I should know who it is, but I’m lost. And then, it clicks. “ Like Croft Marketing ?”

“ Bingo ,” he replies, leaning against the wall.

Croft Marketing is one of the biggest digital marketing firms in the world, with its headquarters only a forty-five minute drive away in New York City . “ Why would he be here?”

“ He’s not the first. Those guys like slipping out of the city and coming to smaller towns to carry out their less-than-savory acts. He’ll be taking Jeannie back to whatever shady motel he’s staying at.”

Sure enough, when I look over, they are standing, ready to leave. “ Doesn’t he have a wife?”

“ Sure .” Gage smiles and his gold tooth glints in the low lighting. “ But she’s well-kept and provided for, so when her husband leaves for the night, she’s not asking questions.”

I snort. “ Well good for J , I guess.”

“ It could be good for us, too,” he says, and I’m not sure I understand. “ Serish , baby, how about we play a little game?”

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SAOIRSE

Four years later

I wake to the sound of glass shattering downstairs. I look at the clock on the nightstand: five forty-five a.m. Annoyance flows through me. He's late, he was supposed to be here hours ago. The concoction that I gave Barry last night is probably wearing off.

I hear more shards hit the ground.

“ Nyx ?” Barry groans.

He's still groggy, that's good.

“ Hmm ?” I murmur, pretending to have just woken up.

When the sound of footsteps echoes from the staircase, he tries to sit up, clutching his head when he's upright.

“ Hide . Someone is in the house.” He reaches into his bedside table, pulling out a gun. His movements are in slow motion and it almost makes me laugh. He thinks he can protect me. Even if I hadn't drugged him, there was no chance. He's sixty and still in decent shape, but I wouldn't trust him with my life. There isn't a single person on this earth that I trust that much.

“ I thought he was supposed to be asleep,” Gage says when he walks into the room, a bandana covers half of his face. He’s completely unfazed by the gun being pointed in his direction. Barry’s hold on the weapon seems shaky at best. At this point, I’m thinking he may accidentally shoot himself and make this whole thing a lot easier on us.

“ He would have been if you had got here when you said you would. You’re four hours late,” I hiss, rising from the bed.

I see poor Barry’s confusion as he tries to piece together why I’m casually chatting with our intruder. “ Nyx ?” he says, uncertainty and sadness meshing together in his tone.

I like to think of Nyx as my alter ego. Most of the time she’s sweet, demure and just wants a soft life provided by a rich man. But her personality changes to suit each target. Whatever they’re looking for, they find in her. Every game has its players, Nyx is mine.

Before Barry has the chance to think, I disarm him, snatching the gun from his hand and walking toward Gage . He pulls the covering off his face and kisses me roughly. After all these years, we’ve come to an understanding in our relationship. We’re partners in crime who fuck. That’s enough for me. I’ve long grown out of the delusion of having one true love. There are no Prince Charmings in this life.

Barry attempts to stand but the drugs in his system are still doing their job as he falls back onto the bed, reaching out to grab his cell where it normally charges on the side table.

“ Uh uh,” I say, waving his phone in my other hand. I grabbed it after he knocked out last night, not wanting to take any chances.

“ What are you doing? You dumb bitch,” he slurs.

I laugh. “ Come on, Bare . Why would you say something like that?”

Turning my focus back to Gage , I say, “ The safe is in the closet.”

“ What did you do to me?” Barry continues. I’m so tired of this. If G had gotten here when he was supposed to, we would have had this handled without all the extra irritation.

“ This isn’t the time for questions. And my name isn’t Nyx . So , you can stop calling me that.”

His eyes go wide. “ Who are you?”

That makes me smile. “ I would tell you, but then I would have to kill you.” I wave the gun in his direction to emphasize my point. I’ve never taken a life. But if it came down to me or Barry ... I’d do what needed to be done.

I can see the fog beginning to lift in his eyes, adrenaline taking over the drugs. I call out to Gage . “ How's it going?”

“ I’m in!”

“ I trusted you,” Barry says from the bed, watching helplessly as his own weapon is pointed at him.

“ Well , that was your first mistake.”

It’s been three long months of being Barry Goodman’s mistress, but admittedly one of the most profitable games we’ve played yet.

The objective is simple. Take these men for as much as their worth and leave before things get too messy. When Gage first suggested we could wring these men for cash, I thought he was joking. There was no way. But it turned out to be a lot easier than I thought. Apparently , when men make a little—or a lot—of money, their egos inflate. Gage hadn't been wrong. A lot of wives look the other way as long as their lifestyles are being upheld and they aren't being publicly embarrassed.

Take Barry's wife, for example. They share a bank account, but when he gave me a ten thousand dollar Tiffany necklace, she didn't ask a single question. Nor did she seem to care that her husband was seemingly spending more time at his vacation house in Martha's Vineyard . Hell , she was probably thankful for the time alone. He is pretty annoying. She's welcome . Although , after tonight, she'll have to find another way to occupy him.

Of course, most of his gifts were sold. He may have understood Nyx's style, but he didn't understand mine. Still , I kept the brand new pair of Louboutin pumps. Anytime we need extra funds, these men supply it. In the last five years, between the money I've been bringing in and what Gage makes handling his shit, we were able to buy a new, much larger, house in North Ravenscroft along with a couple new cars.

I don't dance for survival anymore, it's more of a lucrative side gig, and well, Gage still does what he does. He wouldn't be able to leave the streets if he tried, it's who he is. It's not about the money. Ravenscroft is his kingdom and he'll be damned if he gives it up.

He walks up beside me, a full bag in hand. “ I got it all. We're going to need you to issue a wire transfer,” Gage says to Barry who seems to still be piecing the night's events together. “ How does half a million sound, baby?”

I sigh dramatically. “ It'll do. I guess.”

I leave the picking of the targets to Gage . Rich men, typically somewhere in their fifties to sixties, looking for a young twenty-something to make them feel important. Enter Nyx . How they've accumulated their wealth varies, but most are businessmen with more money than they know what to do with. They all have one thing in common—they frequent XXXtasy . Once the mark has been decided upon, that's when the real fun begins. Nyx gives them a dance and offers to take them to the back. Not one has ever declined.

At first, I thought G was setting me up for something. The level of calm he displayed when he stated that I should do whatever necessary to get these men wanting to see me again was shocking. But he never once has held it against me... I guess because he's profiting too. That and the fact that he knows men like Barry really are no threat to him. Sure , Gage might be a horror, but he's kept me safe. More than I can say for any other man in my life. And toxic as our relationship may be, he's the only constant I've had over these last five years.

A few months is the max I've played a game for, long enough for me to get what I want without having to worry about the men figuring out who I am. Regardless of the time frame, each game has the same grand finale. A stick-up and wire transfer to tide us over until the next, or at least that's what we tell ourselves. Maybe it's just our final way of rubbing salt in the wound.

“ I'm not giving you any money. I'll call the damn cops,” Barry says, true to his stubborn nature. I guess you don't get to be the CEO of a Big Four firm without being headstrong.

“ Go ahead, Bare . Please . I'm sure your wife and children would be delighted to see your latest affair splashed across the tabloids. I can just picture it now. And doesn't your company have some sort of morality clause? Oh , but I'm sure the board of directors would make an exception for you. That is, if all of this doesn't cause your stocks to tank. We both know five hundred thousand dollars is chump change to you,

so you decide if it's worth all of that."

He looks at me pleading in his eyes. " Why are you doing this?"

" Because I can, and because you weren't smart enough to see it coming." I raise his wife's diamond earrings from the dresser, watching as they glint in the moonlight before I pocket them.

" His laptop is in the office across the hall," I tell Gage .

Bag still in hand, he exits the room. When he reenters, he has the computer. He places it on Barry's lap. " Initiate the transfer."

I have a bank account setup as Nyx Yarrow , so that there are no questions when I ask for money. Not that we need him to do this. I already know all of his passwords. But there's something satisfying about watching men accept defeat.

" A hundred thousand," Barry suggests, trying to lower the price.

" This isn't a negotiation. You're going to give us what we asked because the alternative...well, it's not so pretty," Gage says.

" And what do I tell my wife when she gets back home next week?"

G shrugs. " Your house was broken into. You don't know who did it, and you're lucky to be alive." All true statements.

Barry casts one more forlorn look in my direction and then begins to type.

An hour later, I'm back home with Gage , a look I know all too well in his eye. These nights always seem to turn him on the most. I'm still in the shirt I fell asleep in at

Barry's as he unzips his pants, walking toward me.

"I already found the next one," is the last thing he says to me before his mouth is on mine.

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XAVIER ATWOOD

I throw my suit jacket onto the armoire in the corner of my office and roll the sleeves of my shirt up, exposing the tattoos that go up my right arm. I run my hand through my hair and grab a short glass, ready to pour a scotch and mellow out.

“ It’s not even noon,” my assistant, Caroline , says, entering the room and sitting on my couch.

I look at her out of the corner of my eye, and finish pouring my drink. “ It’s five o’clock somewhere.”

“ I don’t know what you’re so upset about. This is a good thing.”

“ Is it?” I ask, joining her on the sofa.

“ You can always say no, but I think if the biggest news anchor of this decade wants to interview you, you should go.”

I grunt. “ They just want a rags to riches story.”

“ It’s your life story.”

A story that I have very little interest in rehashing on TV , despite the fact that I now run one of the largest media outlets in the world. I prefer privacy and letting my work

talk.

“ Whatever . I’ve got a few months before I have to deal with that. New topic.”

“ You had a couple of phone calls while you were in the meeting. Tessa and Levi .”

I had been expecting to hear from my accountant, Tessa , but Levi , my private investigator, is a surprise. There’s only one reason he would be reaching out to me and my heart rate picks up.

“ I’m going for a walk,” I say, abandoning my drink and heading out the door.

Once I’m outside, I dial Levi’s number. He picks up on the second ring, skipping the pleasantries. “ I think I found him.”

“ Are you nearby?”

“ Close enough.”

“ Then be at my place in twenty.” I hang up and head back to the office to get my car. I’m on autopilot the entire drive home, preparing myself for whatever it is that Levi needs to tell me.

When I pull into my parking garage, he’s already there waiting for me, leaning against his vehicle.

“ Where is he?” I ask as I pass him, heading straight to the elevator entrance of my home.

“ Living just outside of the city.”

My heart simultaneously clenches and drops. I haven't seen my son in ten years. Every time I've tried to reach out to him, I've been met with no reply. I don't even know if the number I have for him is correct anymore.

Levi drops a file on the table, and I'm immediately met with a large photo of Harrison — my son— walking next to a girl who appears to be laughing at whatever it is he's saying. Seeing his face for the first time causes my throat to constrict painfully. He looks good, strong, different from how I once knew him. He's a man now. A man who wants nothing to do with me . “ Who's she?” I point to the girl in the photo.

“ Not sure, could be a girlfriend?” He shrugs. “ I've spotted her with him a few times.”

I nod. There's no denying she's beautiful, and it brings me a small sense of peace knowing that he's potentially found someone who cares for him.

“ All the details are in there,” Levi says, eyeing the papers under the photo. “ What are you going to do?”

I stand straight, rolling my shoulders back. “ I don't know.”

Of course, I want to march right over to his home and demand that he see me, but I know he would slam the door in my face. I can't risk him shutting me out, so whatever action I take needs to be well thought out. No rash decisions.

“ Seriously , why are we here?” Kellen asks as we pull up to a dingy looking strip club in Ravenscroft .

I laugh.“ We're getting you a lap dance.”

“ We couldn’t do that in the city? Preferably at a club that won’t give me an irreversible disease just from sitting on the chair?” My best friend and COO stares at me blandly.

“ When did your ass get so bougie?”

“ Around the same time it got some money. You should really step up your own standards.”

I shake my head. He’s not wrong. This is definitely not the type of establishment I would choose to frequent, but if Harrison hangs out here, then it’s worth a shot.

Once I decided that just appearing at his doorstep wasn’t a smart move, I started considering my other options. According to Levi’s reports, he comes here a few times a week. I figure if we happen to see each other— by coincidence, of course— maybe he’ll be more open to speaking to me. And less likely to think that I’m outright stalking him.

I came a couple nights ago, but had no luck. And when I spoke to the sleazy-looking owner, he said that he didn’t know anyone by his name. Still , I’m not giving up. Tonight might very well be the night that I come face to face with my son. What will I say to him when that happens? Well , I haven’t gotten that far yet.

The club is dark and smells oddly of incense as we walk in. My eyes adjust to the low lighting as Kellen taps my shoulder and points to an empty table in the middle of the room. I scan my surroundings, hoping that I’ll see Harry , but he isn’t here... yet . I take a seat, positioning my chair so that I have a good view of both the stage and the entryway. If he comes in, I’ll spot him.

Suddenly , every light in the building goes off. “ What the fuck? Don’t tell me you brought me to a place that can’t even afford their damn light bill, Xave . I swear to

Go? —”

A deep voice rumbles through the overhead speaker, cutting Kel off. “ Here to deliver you your wildest fantasies... Nyx .”

A spotlight glares down on the stage, and on walks the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen. Hair so dark and shiny that it damn near sparkles under the light. She’s dressed as a slutty police officer and the irony that I , someone who spent eight years locked up, is attracted to this, isn’t lost on me.

Music blares over the speaker as she struts across the stage. When she makes it to the end, she grabs hold of the pole, spinning herself around, then bending over so that her ass—in a barely there micro-skirt—is in the face of a dirty old man. He wastes no time placing bills in her thong and when he does she spins around so that her breasts are now hovering above him. She takes the hat she was wearing off and places it on his head, blowing him a kiss.

I’m disgusted. Not because of what she’s doing but because god damn, I wish it was me. My blood is already traveling south, so I don’t stand a chance when Nyx is back on her feet, her top coming off in record speed. Her perky tits are in full view with a piercing going through each nipple as she expertly works the pole. I do my best to readjust myself in my pants without being too obvious.

“ Jesus ,” Kellen breathes out harshly as she removes the tiny skirt she has on.

Though I hardly hear him because her eyes are locked on... me. She holds my gaze as she slowly takes off her final piece of clothing, leaving her in nothing but a small G -string.

A small smirk plays on her lips as she moves, her hands caressing her body. When she looks away from me and turns to a different man, I feel something resembling

jealousy. Relax . Remember why you're here .

Damn it. I force my gaze away from the dancing goddess and scan the room again, hoping that I'll spot Harrison somewhere, but still nothing.

Letting loose a sigh, I turn back to the stage to find that Nyx is gone. I take a sip of cold water, willing my erection to go away.

“ She was hot as fuck,” Kellen says, reaching for his own glass and sitting back in his chair.

I don't reply, unsure why his words spark a flare of annoyance. I brought him with me and he's saying the same thing I'm sure every man in here is.

“ We should probably head out soon.” I'm ready to give up on any chance of seeing my son tonight. Maybe another time.

“ You're not leaving already?” A sultry voice, that speaks directly to my cock, says. I turn and look behind me. Nyx .

SAOIRSE

Did you see him?” Gage asks when I get off of the stage. My heart pounds and a light sheen of sweat sticks to my skin.

I take a sip of water and pull a top on, stashing my money off to the side. I’ll be going out one more time, so I’ll count it up later. “ Yeah .”

Gage had given me all the details on our newest mark the other night. He had spotted the CEO of a large media company visiting the club and just like that another sucker had fallen into our laps.

It had been impossible not to notice the man as he watched me on stage. With his chiseled jaw, accentuated by the stubble on his face, and his dark brown hair that had been mussed to perfection. I felt trapped by his stare, as if I were dancing for him alone. His green eyes held me captive.

“ You should go talk to him.” I don’t miss the excitement in his voice.

I raise an eyebrow. “ Now ? I’m not even done for the night.”

“ What did I tell you?” G shifts on his feet, unable to keep his energy at bay, and I wonder if he’s taken something. But I know that’s not his style. Don’t get hooked on your own shit . Is what he always says. He sticks to weed, that’s it. “ That man has enough money to make every game we’ve played look like pennies. Fuck the rest of

your night. If you talk to him now, you'll end up with more cash than any of the other men out there would give you."

I chew on my bottom lip considering his words. " He's not typical. He's young."

Gage shrugs his shoulders. " He's forty-five. I figured for access to his bank account we could switch our normal type up a bit. But if you're not up to it, or if you don't think you could gain his interest, we can find someone else."

" No ." The part of me that always wants to win rears its head. " I'll talk to him."

" That's my girl."

I roll my eyes, but don't pull away when he grabs my chin, bringing me in for a kiss.

When I walk out to meet our newest target, Xavier Atwood , I hear him telling his friend that it's time to go.

" You're not leaving already?" I interject, hoping that he'll remember me. He certainly hadn't been able to look away while I was on stage.

The second he turns around, I know he recognizes me. He tries to act as if he doesn't care, but I can see the lust in his eyes when his gaze trails from my face to where my pierced nipples poke through my shirt.

He clears his throat. " I think I probably should."

" What if I asked you to stay?" I pout, placing a hand on his shoulder and letting it run down the front of his chest.

" For what reason?"

I step closer to him and sit on his lap. “ Come with me, and I’ll tell you,” I whisper into his ear.

Given the hard length that’s pressed firmly against me, I don’t think I’ll have to work too hard to convince him. He glances over at his bearded friend. He’s handsome as well, in a more rugged type of way, but he’s no competition for Xavier . He immediately shuts his mouth, which appeared to be open in shock. “ Don’t worry about me. I’m good here.”

I can sense Xavier’s hesitancy, and I wiggle my behind against him. He shuts his eyes for the briefest second and when he looks at me again, I know that I’ve got him.

“ I think you’re trouble.”

“ Don’t you want to find out?” I smirk, standing up.

Joining me on his feet, he whispers, “ Lead the way.”

“ Is Nyx your real name or something that you just use here?” Xavier asks, as he sits on the dark red velour couch in the club’s backroom. I shut the door and the pounding music becomes a dull whirl in my ears.

“ My real name,” The lie rolls easily off of my tongue.

He hums thoughtfully, and I realize he doesn’t think I know his name. “ What’s yours?” I ask.

“ Xavier .”

“ Sexy name.” I smirk and kneel next to him, trailing my fingers down his arm until I reach his hardened cock. “ Sexy guy. I couldn’t keep my eyes off you up there,” I

whisper directly into his ear as I gently squeeze his shaft. “ Should we do something about this?”

He pulls out his wallet and drops a set of bills onto the small side table. I can't tell how many there are, but I know Benjamins when I see them.

My lips tug up in a smile, whether they're forty-five or sixty, all men are the same. Easy .

“ Tell me what you want, Xavier , and I'll give it to you.” He hisses as my hand strokes him once more.

Before I'm able to process what's happening, he pushes me down onto the couch and is on top of me in a flash. He pulls down the pants I have on, leaving me in only my thong. “ What are you?—”

“ You said you would give me anything I want.” He positions his head between my legs and peers up at me. His eyes are dark, waiting for me to refuse him. I'm sure he can see the evidence of how turned on I am right now. There's no use in denying it. I close my eyes and throw my head back, raising my hips a little.

He grazes my clit as he moves the flimsy material to the side and my whole body shivers. The moan that slips out of my lips at the first stroke of his tongue surprises even me. This is the first time this has ever happened to me while on the clock. Maybe they aren't all the same.

Xavier expertly licks and sucks on my sensitive bud. My eyes squeeze shut and my entire world reduces to the feeling of his mouth on me. “ Ohhh , fuck me,” I whimper as I pinch my nipples between my fingers. But when he slows down his pace, lapping at my clit with strong unhurried licks, I see stars.

“ Yes , yes, yes . Oh my god, keep doing that.” He hums in appreciation, sending a jolt of electricity through my body, but doesn’t let up.

Goosebumps scatter across my skin, and I bite my lip so hard, the metallic tang of blood fills my mouth. He keeps a firm grasp on my hips as he wrings out every ounce of pleasure that my body has to give.

When I’m nothing more than a limp set of limbs, he stands. His hard cock is evident in his jeans. Confusion racks my brain. Is he leaving?

“ What about you?” I’m still breathless as I sit up on the couch, glancing at the money he’s left on the table.

“ I got what I wanted.” He smirks, his hand resting on the doorknob.

“ I don’t believe that,” I respond, looking once more at the impressive bulge in his pants.

“ Next time, hurricane.” Hurricane ?

“ What makes you so sure there will be a next time?” I don’t know why I’m putting up a fight. This is exactly what I wanted.

“ Because I know you won’t be able to get what just happened out of your mind.” I huff a sarcastic laugh, but I know he’s right. I’ve never come so quick from having someone go down on me. “ Your body calls to mine.”

“ You’re awfully confident about your abilities. What if I was faking?”

“ I could feel your clit throbbing against my tongue. You weren’t faking shit. And you don’t make it to where I am in life without a fair bit of confidence.” He pulls out

his wallet and hands me a business card with his name and number on it. “ Text me and we’ll meet again, perhaps in a better location.”

“ And if I don’t?”

He shrugs. “ Then I know where to find you.”

With that, he exits the room, and I collapse against the couch. I know that I’ll see him again. That was the whole point, but why does it feel like somehow, I’m not the one in control?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:32 am

4

HARRISON ATWOOD

A few days earlier

When I walk into XXXtasy , Morrisey informs me that someone stopped by looking for me.

“ I didn’t tell him anything.”

Of course he didn’t. The club tends to have a strict privacy policy. Sure , those local to the area know who comes in and out regularly, but there’s a reason that people from the city frequent the establishment as well. Privacy . You come here to watch and maybe get your dick wet. And not everyone wants their business spread around. Besides , Morrisey knows just how much I appreciate being left alone; he wouldn’t just hand my whereabouts to anyone.

“ Who was he?”

He shrugs. “ Looked to be in his forties, maybe? Dark hair. I’d never seen him before. Pretty sure he was from the city.”

Why would a random man from the city be looking for me... unless?

I pull out my phone and type in the name of the last person I expect to show up at a strip club in Ravenscroft . “ Is this him?”

Morrissey looks at the photo I'm holding up and grunts. "Yup . That's him."

Huh . Good to know. " Thanks ."

I walk away, contemplating what this means. Pops has somehow found himself in town. Interesting . I don't know what he could possibly want, but he must be out of his damn mind if he's picturing some sort of warm and fuzzy reunion. There's no chance. He's dead to me.

When I needed a father, he was nowhere to be found and, by the time he decided he wanted to have a relationship with me, it was too late.

I was seven years old when he went to prison. Too young to understand what was happening. My mother did her best to shield me from the realities of who my dad was, which wasn't too hard considering we had never lived under the same roof.

Your father made some bad decisions and has to go away for a little while to make up for it. That was what she always told me when I would ask for him, but that was never enough for me.

I didn't understand why he couldn't repent in the city with us. Why would he leave us? Leave me.

Not once did we visit him while he was gone, and I often found myself feeling like an outsider in my family. My mother had moved on, marrying Jason , my step-father that same year. All while she simultaneously cared for my two-year-old brother.

With every year that passed, the resentment toward my dad grew. By the time he was released, I was fifteen, no longer confused as to why my father had disappeared. Turns out that making a living off stealing and dealing came with its own risks. The kids at school ostracized me. Parents didn't want their children fraternizing with the

son of a drug lord as if it were some sort of contagious disease.

As if I would have chosen him for a father.

When he showed up at our apartment in the “lower basin” of Eidelberg —where all the low income housing was— Mom wouldn’t let him through the door. At that point, the hatred for him in my heart had already solidified.

“ Get the fuck out of here! Are you insane?” she seethed. “ We want nothing to do with you.”

“ He’s my son. I have every right to see him .”

“ We can debate that in court.” He tried to push through the door and rage filled my young body. He may not have been much of a parent to me, but Mom had done her best.

I ran out of my room, seeing him for the first time in years. I barely remembered his face, but he didn’t look like someone I ever knew. He looked older. Different .

“ There’s my boy.” He smiled at me.

“ I’m not your boy.” My voice shook as the words exited.

He glared at her. “ Turning my son against me. Classy .”

“ I did nothing. You made your choices.” She looked down at me. “ Harrison . Go to your room, please.”

I did as my mother asked, but not before saying the one thing I had thought multiple times over the years. “ I hate you.”

I could still hear their heated whispers from where I sat on the edge of my bed.

That night, I pressed my ear against the wall, listening to my mother tell Jason about what happened while he was at work.

“ He says that he’s going to change. He’s done dealing. Apparently , he’s getting an office job.”

“ Do you believe him?” The skepticism was evident in my step-father’s voice.

“ I don’t know, but I don’t want him influencing Harrison .”

“ Then he won’t.”

The next morning, they announced we would be moving. They never said it was because of my father’s release, but it was no coincidence.

Time passed, and I had almost forgotten about him. Almost . Until I saw his face on the cover of a damn Forbes magazine. There he was. Xavier Atwood : a rising star in the business world. I read the article that detailed how he had gone from the slammer to VP of Communications for A - One media in only five years.

I couldn’t believe it. Here we were a family of four, barely getting by. The cost of my mother’s medical bills were sending us into crippling debt and my father was living the high life.

I dug online until I found the phone number for his assistant, who seemed quite shocked to hear that her boss had a son. A few days later, we were set to meet. As much as I didn’t want to go to him for money, I knew it was a matter of life and death for my mom.

I could suck it up for her.

There was also a small part of me that wanted to see him. Or maybe I just needed him to see the man I had grown into. But when the time came, he never showed. No explanation. No call. Nothing .

I should have known better than to place hope in a man who had barely been around.

When my mother passed away because we couldn't afford to move her into a more advanced cancer treatment facility, I vowed to never speak his name again. As far as I was concerned, Xavier Atwood had died right alongside her.

It's been a decade since then, and now he's sniffing around Ravenscroft looking for me. He won't like what he finds, that much I know. Who I am now has nothing to do with him, but maybe it is time that I take what's due. Not because I need it, but because I want to watch him fall.

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5

XAVIER

Unknown: Have you missed me?

Me: Depends on who 'me' is.

My lips tug up in a grin. I know exactly who it is. I'd be lying if I said I haven't spent the last two days waiting expectantly for this exact message, despite knowing better.

Unknown: How often do you go around giving strangers your number?

Me: Ah, well if it isn't my little hurricane blowing through. Let me guess, you can't get me out of your head.

Nyx: I already regret texting you.

Me: I don't think you do.

Nyx: You know your confidence is bordering on cocky.

I laugh as I type out my next message.

Me: When can I see you again?

Nyx: Tonight.

Me: How do you feel about Italian?

Nyx: How do I feel about a cuisine based almost exclusively around carbs? Pretty good.

I chuckle as I lean back on my desk chair. Fuck . This is not right. I shouldn't be wanting this girl. I didn't go to that club to pick her up. I went to find my son. And she's young. Too young.

She might be the key to finding him . A little voice inside my head tells me. Maybe I can use her to fish for information.

There's nothing wrong with spending time with her. I can keep my dick in my pants. As soon as I have that thought, I'm assaulted with memories of my face between her legs. She tasted so goddamn sweet. It had taken everything in me to pull away when she finished.

Enjoy that memory, because that was the last time .

Me: Send me your address and I'll send a car to pick you up at seven.

Nyx: Thanks, but no thanks. I'll drive myself.

Of course, she wouldn't accept my offer.

Me: If you insist. Villa Rosa at eight then.

Nyx: Swanky. I'll see you then.

I'm sitting at our table when Nyx arrives. I watch as her eyes sweep the private room I reserved for us. She's wearing a black dress that ends mid-thigh and ties around her neck, leaving her shoulders and back exposed.

"Hello ." I stand, finally catching her attention.

"Hi , how did you manage this? Last I heard, getting a table reservation here required a year's notice and the promise of a kidney—much less a room."

I shrug. "I know the owner."

"Huh . Figures ."

She walks toward her seat, and I note the dark snake tattooed on her back, winding its way up her spine.

"Order anything you'd like."

"Thanks . I planned on it." She smirks, picking up the menu.

I hold back my chuckle. After we've both placed our orders, I cut to the chase. "You intrigue me, hurricane. Probably a bit too much. Tell me about yourself."

"What do you want to know?" she asks, picking up her glass of merlot.

"Everything . I suppose I should get the most basic question out of the way though. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-five. How old are you?"

I wince. "Forty -five."

To my surprise she hardly bats an eye at my age. Just nods her head.

“ And I’m not by chance taking another man’s woman on a date, am I ?” I hold my breath, waiting for an answer. Either way, it doesn’t matter.

She places the glass down, staring at me intently before she responds. “ One , do you really think I would be here if I were seeing someone? Two , I am no man's woman. Ever .”

“ You don’t date?”

“ I fuck.” I damn near choke on my bourbon and she rolls her eyes, a small laugh slipping from between her full lips. “ I didn’t mean to scandalize you. Are you hoping to lock me down, Xavier ?”

The way she says my name sends a jolt straight to my cock, and I force myself to breathe.

“ I think I’d be a fool to try.”

“ I thought a man like you would like a challenge.”

“ I do.” I smile, taking another sip of my drink.

“ There’s no one else at the moment, if that’s what you’re curious about.” She offers that tidbit with assurance, and I’m not sure how to feel about it. At the end of the day, I know that sleeping with this girl is off the table, but damn if she doesn’t make it tempting.

“ Good to know.” I polish off the rest of the amber liquid in my glass.

“ What about you? No wife and kids?”

The mention of children causes a near painful sensation in my heart. My son. He should be my focus, not fucking this raven-haired girl who lives in his town.

“ I’m divorced.”

“ Oh , do tell.” She places her chin on both of her hands, batting her eyelashes at me.

“ There’s not much to tell. We tried, but it didn't work out, so we parted ways.” I expect her to ask more questions, but she seems content with the answer I’ve given her. Truth be told, I don’t have much more to say on the matter. I spent three years of my life married to my ex-wife, Miranda . We had gotten married after I was released and they were good years, but nothing remarkable. By the end of the relationship, she had come to the realization that she needed someone who wasn’t so focused on work and we agreed that we were both better off as friends. “ There were no kids, so the split was easy. I have a son from before my marriage, but we’ve lost touch.”

“ Oh ...” I can see that she’s contemplating what to say as the server brings out our food.

I’m not sure how much I should divulge on the matter right now myself. The whole point of seeing her again was to find out if she could help lead me to Harrison , but I don’t want to come off too strong.

“ It must be hard not being close with your child.”

“ It is.” I cut into my chicken. “ Are you close with your parents?”

She snorts. “ Not at all. My dad left when I was a kid and my mom... Well , let’s just say we had a falling out.”

“ Is it irreparable?”

“ Very much so.”

“ I’m sorry to hear that.”

“ Don’t be. She isn’t.”

I wonder what could have possibly happened, but I don’t know her well enough to ask personal questions, and it’s not my place to pry.

We continue to eat in silence and when she’s finished, she pushes her plate of carbonara away from her, leaning back with a strong exhale. “ I’m stuffed.”

I should let her go back to Ravenscroft . That would be the smart choice. But I can’t.
“ How would you feel about a nightcap?”

“ I would feel you’re trying to get me into your home. Are you trying to take advantage of me, Mr . Atwood ?”

Something about her addressing me so formally sends a rush of blood directly to my cock. What am I doing? I should end the night here and let her leave.

“ Is that what you want, hurricane? To be taken advantage of?”

“ Yes .”

Fuck .

“ I’ll have two of my drivers come, one can drive your car to my place, but you’re riding with me.” I pick up my phone to tell them we’re ready to go.

“ No .”

“ No ?” I repeat, confused.

“ I’ll drive us.”

This makes me laugh. I don’t know much about Nyx , but insisting that she drive me herself seems in line with her behavior thus far.

I raise an eyebrow. “ You want to drive?”

“ Don’t tell me you’re one of those misogynist dicks that thinks he’s too good to be driven around by a woman.” Her eyes are locked on me, gaze unwavering. “ It only makes sense. My car is here, and you didn’t drive, so I can take us both.”

“ You don’t know the way.”

She rolls her eyes. “ Then you’ll tell me. I think you’ll make a wonderful passenger princess.”

I don’t have much of an argument, so I put my phone down and relent. “ Alright , let’s go.”

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6

SAOIRSE

I don't miss the surprise on Xavier's face when he sees my red Corvette . It's the flashiest and most extravagant thing I own, but I love it.

I unlock the vehicle and head to the driver's side. " Get in. Or would you like me to open the door for you, too?"

" This is...nice," he remarks as he takes in the interior.

" Yeah . I like it."

" Are you a car girl?"

" Not at all." I have zero interest in the subject. Gage , on the other hand, is obsessed.

" Huh ." Xavier murmurs to himself. I watch him with humor. Small lines crease around his eyes, but somehow they only make him look more handsome. His scent fills my car; it's warm and sexy, reminding me of bourbon and spice.

I had spent the entirety of dinner with a steady pulse building between my legs. Every time I watched his lips move, I was reminded of just how good it had felt having them pressed against me. The expert way his tongue had made me unravel.

" What ?" he asks when he notices me staring at him.

“ Are you going to give me your address?”

“ Oh . Yes , of course.”

“ Don’t tell me I’ve got you all flustered.” I chuckle and playfully hit his thigh.

He shakes his head, watching where my hand rests on his leg before he rattles off the address.

The first few minutes of the drive are quiet. Unnervingly so. I wonder what he’s thinking. It had taken me by surprise when he mentioned having a son. Gage had never mentioned him having children. Neither did my online search. Then again, if it had been a decade since they last spoke, I suppose there wouldn’t be much out there about it.

“ Can I ask you a question?” Xavier’s voice breaks me out of my thoughts.

“ I thought you had gone mute for a second.”

“ I’ll take that as a yes. The club... how long have you been working there?”

“ Eight years. I’ve been dancing for five. I started as a waitress.”

“ And you like it?”

It’s not unusual for men to question me about my job. This conversation comes up with nearly every mark we’ve had over the years. But never once has anyone asked if I genuinely enjoyed the work I did. They all assumed that I must be doing it out of sheer desperation and I let them. Yet , for some reason I can’t quite understand, I feel compelled to be honest with Xavier .

“ I do. I find it freeing. Whether or not I like it, men look at me. And I’m not trying to sound full of myself, but it is what it is.” I shrug. “ Even when I was young, the men my mother would bring home—total sleaze bags—would stare at me like I was nothing more than prey, and I was just a kid. I remember hearing one of them tell my mom that when I turned eighteen, he might have to ‘trade up for the newer model.’”

“ That’s disgusting.” I glance over at Xavier and find his jaw clenched, eyes on the road.

“ Yeah , well, it was my reality. And if men were going to look at me like that, I might as well get paid for it, right?” He nods, but remains quiet. “ Does that give you second thoughts about me?”

“ No . Given how I met you, it would be pretty hypocritical of me to say I don’t approve of what you do.”

I snort. “ Do you do that often? Go to strip clubs. It’s the first time I’ve seen you at XXXstasy .”

“ Sometimes . Not often. I was looking for Harrison that night.”

“ Harrison ?”

“ My son.”

Oh . “ He lives in Ravenscroft ?”

“ I think so.”

I rack my brain, trying to think if I know anyone by that name, but no one comes to mind. Still , this could be an issue. If Xavier is searching the town for his son the

likelihood that he'll stumble across the truth of who I really am increases.

"I don't know anyone with that name." I look over at him and see something akin to disappointment in his eyes. "But I hope you find him."

"This is me," he says, pointing toward the underground lot of a condo building.

"Where should I pull in?"

"Wherever you want." He shrugs. "The elevator is over there."

"I can't just park wherever I want." I say with confusion. Even men living in penthouses have their designated areas.

"Considering I'm the only person who lives here, it's a pretty safe bet you won't be pissing anyone off."

I look around at all the cars parked in the garage. After years of this shit, I pride myself on not being impressed by anything men have, but if these are all his...this is another level.

"You're the only one in this whole building?"

"I value privacy."

"You're fucking kidding me," I murmur as I pull into a free spot near the elevator entrance.

This earns me a chuckle. "Come on, hurricane."

"What do you want to drink?" Xavier asks me as I stand in the middle of his living

room.

The space can only be described as luxurious. Tall vaulted ceilings cover the main area that houses a beautifully decorated family room with a gas fireplace and modern kitchen. There are two spiral staircases, one leading to the upstairs and the other to a lower level, and I'm itching to look around. Instead, I stand in place, acting as if this isn't one of the most impressive homes I've seen in ages.

Barry would have been tripping over himself with jealousy.

“What do you have?”

He looks at me pointedly, and I answer my own question. “Right, everything. Cab Sauv?”

“Coming right up.”

He leaves, disappearing into another room which I assume must be housing a bar, and when he reappears, he's holding a glass of wine in one hand and scotch in the other.

I take a sip. “It's my turn to ask you a question.”

“Shoot,” he replies, sitting down on the couch. He removes his suit jacket and rolls up the arm of his shirt revealing a sleeve of tattoos on his right forearm that continues up under the white material. He looks too damn good.

“Why do you keep calling me hurricane?”

Xavier scans me from head to toe, and a shiver runs through my body under his perusal. “I may not know you well, yet, but it seems fitting. My first impression of you was that you were both strong and powerful. Someone that most don't want to

get too close to for fear of what may occur. And just like the storm, you leave chaos and disaster in your wake.” He smirks, still holding my gaze.

Heat floods my veins as I absorb his words. Don’t let him rattle you. You’re in control.

I inhale deeply, taking another sip of my drink. “ Shouldn’t I scare you, then? Most people don’t run headlong into a hurricane.”

“ I’ve been through worse.”

I don’t know what he means, but I vow to do a better search into who exactly Xavier Atwood is. Given the look on his face, there’s more to him than just being a billionaire tycoon.

“ You couldn’t just call me beautiful or something, huh?”

I join him on the sofa. “ There’s always a certain beauty in chaos. But for the record... You are beautiful, Nyx . I’ve thought so from the very first moment I laid eyes on you.”

“ Thank you,” I reply, hating the way my heart rate speeds up at the compliment.

For the first time in years, I wish that the man I was targeting knew my actual name. None of this is real. Except that’s the problem. Normally , I’m faking a persona, but that hasn’t been the case with Xavier . From the second I made contact with him, I haven’t had to change my personality. He takes whatever I give him and hardly bats an eyelash.

That doesn’t matter. I chastise myself internally, as I look around his home once more. This could never be my reality. My mind drifts back to Ravenscroft and Gage .

Whether or not I like it, that is where my loyalty lies.

My only goal is to take as much as I can from Xavier before he realizes Nyx doesn't exist.

But that doesn't mean I can't have fun doing it.

7

XAVIER

Nyx slides closer to me, her scent sweet and downright intoxicating, like berries and honey. Bringing her here had seemed like a good idea when dinner was over, but now I'm realizing that I may have been overestimating my willpower.

“Are you going to give me a tour?” she whispers directly into my ear, her warm breath causing the hairs on my neck to raise.

“Of course,” I say, standing from the couch and composing myself.

I guide her around the main floor of the apartment, showing her the kitchen, bar, gym and sauna. She takes everything in quietly, only murmuring sounds of appreciation here and there.

“The bedrooms and my office are up here,” I say as I lead her up the staircase.

When we get to my study, it's the first time she looks truly impressed. My desk is in the middle of the room, facing the floor-to-ceiling windows featured throughout my home. The remainder of the walls are lined with bookshelves.

“You read a lot?” she asks.

“When I have down time.”

“ How often is that?”

“ Not as often as I would like. What about you?”

She laughs and walks toward the shelves. I get the sense that I’m not quite in on the joke. She picks up a book, a James Patterson novel from the looks of it. “ Not a lot, but I do like to read. I don’t think we read the same stuff, though.”

“ What do you prefer?” I ask, leaning against my desk, mesmerized by her bare back in that sinful dress.

“ Romance . The dirtier, the better. And it doesn’t look like you’ve got any of that in here.”

“ No , not exactly my genre. But I’m open to trying new things.”

“ Good . More men should read those books. It could teach you a thing or two.”

“ Didn’t seem like I needed pointers when I had you coming on my tongue. But I’m willing to explore whatever you’d like, hurricane.”

Her jaw drops, but she quickly snaps it shut. “ Show me the rest.”

I guide her down the hall allowing her to see the three guest bedrooms, leading to my room.

The walls are all painted a dark gray, and an opulent crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling. My king sized bed is pressed against the mirrored wall, and the gray headboard with gold trimmings matches the rest of the decor.

Nyx steps further into the space, looking around, but I stay leaned against the door

frame, watching her.

“ So , this is where the magic happens?” She smirks at me.

“ I guess you could say that.” I don’t actually make a habit of bringing women back to my home. Life as a CEO can get pretty hectic, so it’s nice to have a space that’s peaceful. Just for me. Yet here Nyx is, flopping onto my bed.

Laying on her side, she taps the spot on the mattress next to her. The sensible side of my brain is screaming at me not to join her. But the other side? It’s begging me to lie next to her and bury my nose in her neck. My restraint can only be pushed so far.

My body doesn’t even give me the chance to debate what to do, moving of its own accord.

She removes the clip that was holding up her hair, letting the dark tresses cascade around her shoulder.

“ Is it my turn to ask a question?” My voice is raspy, desire coating each word.

“ Hmm . I suppose so.” Her fingers wander up my arm, the gentle touch like a direct caress to my cock.

With every touch, my ability to think straight evaporates and my resolve crumbles.

“ You could have approached anyone at the club the other night. Why me?”

She stops her movements, and her blue eyes pierce me. “ I told you I couldn’t look away from you while I was on stage. You intrigued me. Maybe you were just in the wrong place at the right time.”

There's a strange look in her eye as she says that last bit, but she doesn't give me the opportunity to inquire any further.

“ Okay . My turn.” She looks me up and down, mischief glowing in her eyes as she thinks of what to ask next. “ That night when you got home, did you touch yourself in this bed?”

“ Nyx .”

“ Did you make yourself come, remembering the taste of my pussy?”

Her brazen words spread heat throughout my body as I flash back to that night. She's half right. It hadn't been in my bed, but in the shower. The second I stepped inside, I stripped and got in, letting the hot water beat against me. With the taste of her still on my tongue, it had only taken me a few strokes until my orgasm overtook me. Using my hand to brace against the wall as ropes of cum shot out, hitting the tile.

“ Because ,” she continues. “ I fucked myself with my fingers, thinking about what you had done to me. Wishing it was your hand.”

And just like that, all of my self-control turns to dust. There's no chance of her leaving without me burying myself inside her.

Once . We'll do this once. I'll deal with the consequences later.

“ Damn it, Nyx . You shouldn't have told me that.” I press my nose against the soft skin of her neck, inhaling her deeply as she wraps an arm around me, pulling herself closer.

“ Why not?”

“ Because now I refuse to let you leave this room until you’ve taken every inch of me.”

“ What if that was my goal all along?”

She reaches between us, palming my already stiff length.

I groan, placing a trail of kisses down her throat. “ This is a bad idea,” I murmur as I pull on the string tied around her neck, allowing me further access. My lips press against her collarbone.

“ But those lead to the most fun times,” she pants, tilting her head back to give me better access. I take full advantage, pushing the top of her dress down and rolling her onto her back.

“ You’re too young for me,” I say before pulling one pierced nipple into my mouth. She lets out a soft gasp and my cock jerks in response. “ I shouldn’t want you.” I turn my focus to the next breast.

“ Age doesn’t matter. I’m an adult. I decide what and who I want.”

I should sit up, tell her this was a mistake, and stop this right here and now. I don’t need her to help me get to Harrison . I don’t even know if she can. Instead , I run a hand up her thigh and force myself to breathe when I’m met with the warm heat of her pussy. Arousal coats my fingertips as I rub small circles against her clit.

“ And I’m what you want? Is that what your needy cunt is trying to tell me? Dripping down my hand like this.”

“ Yes ,” she huffs, grinding herself against my palm, seeking more friction.

“ Tell me, hurricane, did you not put on underwear hoping I would touch you right here?” I slide a finger inside her, earning me the most delicious moan.

Looking me directly in the eyes, she smirks. “ Yes , daddy .”

Jesus . That shouldn't turn me on, but it does. I am old enough to be her father, but my body doesn't care. My cock is rock solid, begging to be released from the confines of my pants, and I don't have to look down to know that pre-cum is leaking from the tip.

Fucking her with my fingers, I press the heel of my palm against her clit and her eyes roll back. Both of her hands rise above her head, grasping at the sheets with desperation. “ Come for me, Nyx . I can feel how close you are, squeezing my fingers like a good little slut.”

Her lids fly open and, for a second, I worry my words may have been too much. That I may have overstepped. “ Fuck . Say that again,” she cries out, throwing her head back.

“ That you're a good little slut?” I say, continuing to move at the same pace. I press against my shaft, hoping to ease some of the discomfort, but it's no use. There's only one thing that will fix this. “ Is that what you want to hear? That you're daddy's good little whore? Earn that title and come all over my hand and put me out of my misery. I need to fuck you, but not until I've watched you unravel.”

“ Oh , fuckkk ,” she whimpers. “ I'm coming.”

The vice grip her cunt has on my fingers is all the indication I need. I slow down, letting her ride out the waves of her orgasm.

Gently , I pull out of her, my digits glistening in the low light. Nyx's chest rises and

falls rapidly as she attempts to catch her breath. Her eyes follow my movements as I stick my fingers in my mouth.

“ I missed this. You’re so sweet. I may just be addicted.”

Well , get over it because you only have this once.

“ As much as I love hearing how addicted you are to my pussy, hurry up and get undressed. I need you to fuck me.”

My cock stirs, clearly wanting this too. “ Do you always have a comeback?”

“ Yup . Is that a problem?”

“ No . I just think that you need something in that pretty mouth of yours to keep you quiet.”

“ Oh ? Is that so.”

Her lips turn up in a smile. She shimmies out of her dress, and I quickly remove my own clothing.

Naked , Nyx is a sight to behold. On all fours, she crawls to the edge of the bed, taking my length in her hand, causing me to hiss.

She strokes me, using my pre-cum as lubricant. Heat fills my veins and my hips push forward. If her hand feels this good, I can only imagine her mouth... her pussy.

As if reading my mind, her lips close around my tip. Fuck . My eyes nearly shut from the feeling of her warm mouth.

She pushes her head closer, taking more of me, inch by inch. “ Fuck , you’re going to ruin me with that mouth.” I push forward, taking her by surprise and causing her to gag. A dribble of saliva falls from the corner of her lips.

Nyx pulls back a bit, then takes me deeper, and I can’t help the groan that escapes me. I gather her hair in my fist and her blue eyes stare up at me, tears pooling as her head bobs.

“ Fuck , look at you, my perfect little storm. I knew you just needed to have that mouth filled.” She rolls her eyes, and I thrust again causing her to drool. “ Touch yourself. I want you to come again before I take that pretty cunt of yours.”

She makes a desperate sound in reaction to my words, bringing her hand down to her center as she continues to suck on my cock. Everything fades away, my entire world narrowed to the sensation of her lips surrounding me. Her breathing is harsh and her moans near constant as she closes in on her own orgasm, and I fight off mine.

Nyx pulls back from me with a shout as she climaxes again. Her lips are shiny and red, and I can’t help but lean down pressing my mouth against hers, our tongues tangling.

“ Was that our first kiss?” She laughs.

“ I kissed your other lips the night I met you,” I growl, pushing her onto her back and spreading her legs. “ But kissing these lips,” I place another peck on her. “ Is a close second.”

I position myself at her entrance when I realize that I don’t have a condom on. “ Tell me you’re okay with me going in like this,” I grit out, praying that she’ll say yes. If I can only have her this one time, I want to feel every bit of her.

“ Yes . I don’t care.” She throws her head back. “ I’m on birth control. Just put it in.”

Slowly , I push into her. She feels even better than I imagined. I groan, trying to gather myself, my head falling into her neck again. “ You feel so fucking good.”

“ Move ,” she breathes out harshly. I do as she says, and she begins to whine. “ Oh my god . I’m so fucking full. I can’t.”

I retreat and thrust into her again. “ You can.” Thrust . “ Take it.” Thrust .

I squeeze her right breast and place my mouth over her other nipple, swirling my tongue around the small metal barbell that pierces it. I keep my pace steady as I fuck her into the mattress.

“ No , no, no,” she cries. “ Fuck , I’m going to come.”

Thank God , because I can feel my orgasm building. “ Yeah , hurricane? Give it to me. Come on my cock like the dirty girl I know you are.”

“ Ohhh fuck.” She’s coming, and I’m right there with her. My body takes over and my hips move erratically as I thrust at full speed, releasing inside her.

Fuck . I hadn’t expected it to be like that. I knew it would be good, but this was something different altogether.

I pull out, doing my best to catch my breath.

After a few moments of laying in silence, she stands. “ I’m going to clean up.”

she walks toward my en suite and I feel a sick sort of pleasure knowing that my cum is running down her leg.

When she exits, she bends to pick her dress off the floor, and I stop her.

“ It’s late. You can stay here.”

“ Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to overstay my welcome.” She bats her lashes at me.

I walk over to her. “ I’m going in there.” I point to the bathroom. “ And when I’m out, I better find you in my bed.”

“ And if I’m not?”

“ Go ahead and find out.”

I pass her and close the door. Once inside, I look at myself in the mirror, then close my eyes. I’m in over my head. I wanted help to get to my son. Not someone to fuck around with. Not her. And I don’t even know if she can help. This was not the plan. When did my judgment become so skewed?

I fucked her and now, alone with no one but myself to face, I can admit that once isn’t enough. You can’t do this . In what world can I justify this?

I can’t. I shouldn't.

Despite that, deep down, I know it’s not enough to keep me away.

8

SAOIRSE

L ate night,” Gage says as I enter the house. It’s nearly six a.m. and he’s sitting at the kitchen table, spinning his favorite switch blade around.

Quietly , I snuck out of Xavier’s bed this morning, careful not to wake him.

“ Yeah .” I’m still exhausted and the long drive home didn’t make it better. I just want to lay down and knock out for a bit before work tonight.

“ How’s it going with Xavier ?”

“ Good . I’ve got him right where I want him.” I place the Rolex I took from his dresser on the table, ignoring the slight unease I feel.

He picks it up and smiles. “ Atta girl, Sersh . What’s his place like?”

“ It’s big. Takes up four floors of a building that he owns. No one else is even there.”

“ Damn , living large. We aren’t going to be able to smash a window to get in then. Can you get me a key?”

I nod, grabbing myself a cup. “ There’s a key fob to enter, but I’ll look around next time. He must have a spare. There’s security on the ground floor, though.”

“ We’ll figure it out,” he replies, unfazed. “ When are you going to see him again?”

“ I don’t know.” I shrug, chugging a glass of water.

“ Maybe you should figure that out.”

I squint at him. “ I’ve got a handle on it. Don’t worry.”

When I walk past him, he tuts. “ Aren’t you forgetting something?”

I don’t have to think twice. I back up a few steps, lean down, and kiss him.

“ I missed you last night,” he whispers.

I stand straight. “ Well , you shouldn’t have.”

I hear his deep laugh as I walk to my own room. That was my one request when we got this house. I needed my space to decompress. A place that was just for me.

Gage never put up a fight about it and for that, I’m thankful.

Just as I close my door, my phone buzzes in my bag.

Xavier: Why’d you sneak out?

Me: I didn’t sneak. I left.

Xavier: You could have woken me up.

Me: It wasn’t necessary.

Xavier: After last night... yeah, I think it was.

Xavier: What are you doing tomorrow night?

I hate the small flutter of excitement I feel at the words on my screen. He's a mark, nothing else. For fuck's sake, I stole from him this morning.

There's no chance of there ever being anything more. He isn't as much of a chore to be around as the others, and the sex was phenomenal, but none of that matters. His time will be up soon enough, and when it is, he'll realize that Nyx was only a figment of his imagination.

Me: Working. Why?

Xavier: I have a function to attend and wanted to know if you'd like to accompany me.

Me: What time is it at?

Xavier: 8 p.m. It'll probably run late, so you can spend the night at mine as long as you promise not to run off in the morning.

I mull over my options. It wouldn't be an issue to skip my shift. Any of the girls at the club would gladly take my place. At the same time, Friday nights are a gold mine. I would be giving up a decent amount of cash if I decide to bail.

But it might be worth it if it gets Xavier to trust me more.

Me: Okay, I'll go.

Xavier: I'll pick you up at noon.

Me: I thought you said the event was at 8. And I'm perfectly capable of driving myself.

Xavier: I know. I need to pick up my suit and we can get you something to wear as well.

Me: You want to take me shopping? What kind of party is this?

I lay down on my bed, desperately wanting to shut my eyes.

Xavier: A charity gala. Consider the new dress a gift for coming with me to what is sure to be a boring gathering.

My lips spread into a smile, and I force my face to relax. This is standard for men like him, nothing to kick my feet over. I've seen it all before.

Me: Okay.

Xavier: I'll see you at 12, hurricane.

I place my phone down on the nightstand and roll onto my side.

He's just like any other man. But why do I feel like the person I'm lying to is myself.

"Your ride's here," Gage calls out.

"Get the fuck away from the window! Are you crazy?" I chastise him as I hurry down the hall with my small overnight bag. I need to get out of here fast. The last thing I need is for Xavier to decide he wants to come inside, forcing me to explain Gage's presence.

I bend over, sliding on my shoes, and Gage taps me on the ass. “ Have fun. Hope it’s worth our while.”

“ It always is,” I say with a smile and then exit the house.

I peer into the car and see Xavier’s handsome face. He hasn’t shaved and stubble lines his chin, making him look less polished and more rugged. I force myself to frown as I open the door. When I sit down, I cue the waterworks.

The ability to cry on demand has proven to be quite handy over the last few years.

Immediately , the smile that was on his face turns into a look of concern. “ What’s the matter?”

“ Nothing . I’m sorry,” I mutter, making a show of wiping away the tears from my eyes as I force more to appear.

“ It’s obviously not nothing. Why are you crying? I know I said the event would be boring, but not tear inducing.”

I let out a shaky chuckle. “ It’s just that...” I glance out the window dramatically. “ You know how I said that I wasn’t close with my mother?”

He nods, a saddened look on his face. “ Well , she called me this morning.”

“ How did that go?”

“ Not good. She’s sick and can’t afford treatment. I don’t know what to do. I don’t make enough to help her and support myself. I could sell my car, but even then...”

He takes my chin in his hand, forcing me to look at him. I knew this kind of play

would work on him the second he brought up his estranged son. I could see just how much family mattered to him, and this is what I do best: find the spots where these men are most vulnerable and use it against them.

“ How much do you need?” he asks, not an ounce of suspicion in his gaze.

“ I’m not sure, but it’ll be upwards of one hundred fifty thousand. I don’t have that kind of money, and I know we aren’t close, but I don’t want her to die.”

“ I’ll give it to you.”

Got him.

“ Are you insane?” I exclaim. “ I can’t take that kind of money from you!”

“ You can and you will. If it’ll help your mother, then it’s the least I can do.”

“ It’s too much.”

“ I’m not trying to sound like a dick here, but for me, it really isn’t. I’ll have it handled today.”

“ Thank you,” I say, keeping my tone soft as I wipe the last of my tears.

“ Anytime , hurricane. Maybe this situation will bring you two closer together.”

We’re still parked outside, and I look out the window at the tree’s blowing in the wind.

“ Yeah , maybe.” Not a chance.

“ Do you still want to go tonight?”

“ Yeah , I could use something to get my mind off everything.”

His smile is bright and genuine as he turns the car back on. “ Then let’s get my little storm a dress.”

Quickly , I type out a message on my phone.

Me: Keep an eye on the account today ;)

Gage: What did you do?

A pang of guilt stabs at my chest as we pull onto the highway, but I push it away.

This is what you do.

This is who you are.

XAVIER

I open the car door for Nyx and hand my keys to the store's valet. She seems in better spirits than when I picked her up, thankfully, and I'm hoping that I can keep a smile on that beautiful face of hers.

When we enter the brightly lit space, we're greeted by two of the shop's associates who immediately hand us each a flute of champagne. "Mr . Atwood , your order is ready for pick up at the counter. Is there anything else we can help you with?"

Nyx lets out a quiet snort beside me, but when I glance over, she simply sips her wine.

"My friend needs a dress for tonight. Formal attire."

"Preferably something in black," Nyx adds.

The worker scans her head-to-toe and forces a smile. "Sure thing. I'll grab some options, and I'll be back in a few minutes."

When she disappears into a different area of the store, Nyx turns to face me, smiling into her glass. "So , is this how it always is for you? Women tripping over themselves in your presence. ' Yes , Mr . Atwood .' ' Whatever you want, Mr . Atwood .'" She mimics the store clerk. "' Can I suck your cock in the change room, Mr . Atwood .'"

“ Are you offering?” I raise an eyebrow.

“ Please . It’s just pathetic how these women fall all over themselves just to get you to smile at them.”

“ Do I detect a note of jealousy?”

She straightens, standing tall. “ Not at all.”

I’m about to push back when the attendant walks back out.

“ I pulled a few dresses I think would be suitable. If you could follow me.”

We trail behind her, Nyx looking mildly annoyed. I smirk. She’s not wrong. Most women work overtime in an attempt to get my attention. On the other hand, Nyx has never once made me feel like I’m just a walking dollar sign. She shoots it straight and has a sassy mouth that I find cute as fuck. That’s one of the things I like best about her.

Being with her may be a terrible idea, but it’s not like it’s anything serious. It’s fun, and it’s been a hell of a while since I had any of that.

“ You can sit here.” The attendant points toward a couch next to the mirrors. “ And the dresses are in there.” She directs Nyx to a changing room. “ If you need anything at all, let me know, and I can select different options or sizes.”

“ Thank you,” Nyx murmurs.

I take my seat on the couch, waiting for her to come out in the first dress and, when she does, I have to remind myself to breathe.

“ What do you think?” she asks, smoothing her hands over the fabric of the black, floor-length, strapless dress. It hugs the curves of her body just right, with a long slit starting from the top of her thigh. She looks stunning.

“ Well ?” She stares at me expectantly.

I cough, taking another sip of champagne before finding my words. “ It looks perfect. You look...” Beautiful , sexy, delectable . “ Perfect .”

Her smile is shy as she turns, looking at herself from all angles. “ I’ll try on the others, but this is a contender.”

She walks back into the change room, and I release a breath. She tries on the next three dresses, but none of them hold a candle to the first one.

“ Fuck !” I hear her voice from behind the curtain after trying on the last gown.

“ Are you okay in there?” I call out.

“ Yeah .” And then after a few seconds. “ No , actually, can you help me.”

I step into the dressing room.

“ The zipper snagged on the dress material, and I can’t get it down.”

“ Let me try.” She turns her back to me, and the zipper is definitely stuck. No matter how hard, I try it won’t budge.

“ We have to rip the dress.”

“ We can’t!”

“ It’s fine, we’ll buy it. They won’t care.”

She sighs defeated. “ Fine .”

I forcefully yank the zipper and it finally releases its hold, creating a little hole. I push my fingers into the space, widening it before I pull the fabric apart.

The sound of the gown tearing is loud in the small room.

“ Um , thanks,” Nyx says, facing me as she struggles to hold the torn dress up.

“ Of course,” I reply, meeting her gaze. “ I knew I would tear you out of a dress today. I just didn’t think it would be here.”

She bites her lower lip, her eyes filled with lust. “ Is that what you have planned for me, daddy?”

I step toward her, causing her to back up against the wall of the confined space.

“ Call me that again, and I’ll make you come right here in this change room.”

Her eyes flare with determination, taking my words as a challenge. “ Daddy .”

“ Fuck , Nyx .” Before her, I’d never had a woman call me that, but every time she does, something inside me snaps.

“ Umm ... Mr . Atwood . I apologize,” the voice of a worker comes from behind the curtain. “ But we have a strict one person per change room rule.”

Nyx smirks and whispers, “ Oh , well.”

I poke my head out and look at the staff member. “ I will buy all four of these over-priced dresses if you leave right now and don’t come back.”

Her eyes widen and she looks over my shoulder to where I’m sure she can see Nyx , barely clothed.

She nods, and then without a word, walks away.

“ Oh my God , you didn’t just do that.”

“ Lean against the wall and keep quiet unless you want to give the workers a story to tell when their shifts are over.”

“ I’m pretty sure you just gave them that.”

I don’t respond. I’m too busy getting onto my knees. I push up her dress and place light kisses along the inside of her thigh until I’m met with the damp material of her thong. I inhale deeply, allowing my nose to brush against her sensitive bundle of nerves. Her entire body shivers with anticipation as my cock hardens. “ Fuck , you’re already wet. Was this what you were hoping for when I came in here?”

I push the flimsy fabric to the side, and let one finger glide between her slick folds.

“ No ,” she whimpers as my finger circles the spot most desperate for my attention.

“ Why are you lying, hurricane? Your body is giving you away.”

My mouth is watering for a taste of her. No longer able to hold myself back, I lap at her clit, taking my time teasing her.

“ You keep tempting me,” I murmur, my mouth pressed against her. “ I’ve thought of

nothing but doing this again since I saw you last.”

Her breath becomes shallow and one of her hands grasps at my shoulder as she struggles to remain steady. I suck on her clit and feel her grip grow tighter.

“ Fuck !” she whisper-shouts. “ I’m going to come, keep doing that.”

As if I could ever stop. I’m eating her pussy like it’s my last meal, her juices running down my chin.

“ Oh my God . Oh my God . Oh my God .” Her body writhes against me, chasing after her pleasure, as my tongue turns circles around her swollen mound. “ Ahh ! I’m coming.”

Her hips jerk, and I slow my ministrations as she comes down from her orgasm. I stand, pulling her in for a kiss so that she can taste herself on my lips.

“ Let’s get going.”

10

SAOIRSE

The gala is held in The Met and, just like I had expected, it's absolutely stunning.

"Wait, you never told me what charity the event is supporting."

"Starlight Foundation. They focus on cancer research."

"Look at what the cat dragged in," a man says, slapping Xavier on the shoulder, interrupting us. I recognize him as the guy from the club when we first met, and one glance at his face indicates he remembers me too. "No fuckin' way. What is she doing here?"

"She is standing right here," I respond. The nerve. I don't want to be spoken about like I'm not right in front of him. It's happened far too often in my life. Men take my job as an excuse to treat me like I'm not worthy of their respect.

"Right, sorry." He corrects himself. "What are you doing here?"

"I invited her, and I would think wisely about the next words you say."

His friend winks at me. "I meant no offense. I was just surprised. I'm Kellen, by the way."

"Nyx."

“ So , Nyx , what are you doing hanging out with this loser on a Friday night?”

“ Okay , that’s enough of you,” Xavier sighs. “ Can’t you be normal for five minutes.”

“ Normal is overrated. Don’t you think, Nyx ?”

I can’t help but laugh. “ I agree.”

“ You see; the lady agrees with me!”

“ Don’t encourage him.” Xavier runs his hand across his face. “ Do you want a drink?”

“ Yes , please. Red wine?”

“ Coming right up, hurricane.”

“ Hurricane ? Oh , we have got some catching up to do.” Kellen’s eyes are alight with mischief.

They walk toward the bar, and I take the opportunity to quickly check my phone.

There’s only one message.

Gage: We got the money.

I tuck it back into my purse. Xavier had let me know he sent the money while we were getting ready, but I hadn’t checked to confirm.

I look over to where he and Kellen stand. It’s hard to tell exactly what kind of

conversation they're having since Kellen appears to be laughing while Xavier's face betrays no emotion other than mild annoyance with his friend.

When they return, they both have smiles on their faces. Xavier hands me my glass of wine.

"Thanks," I say as I take a sip, letting the alcohol soothe me. I've never actually been to an event like this. Most of the men we target bring their wives to these sorts of things, not their mistresses.

Maybe that's part of the reason I've been feeling an odd sense of guilt over hustling Xavier. Usually, I'm content knowing that these guys aren't shit, but the more time I spend with him, the more I realize that he's not like the rest. He's kind, and a little cocky, but he has a good heart.

Ultimately, that changes nothing.

I take in my luxe surroundings, then focus on the stage where a short, balding man taps the microphone. "Ladies and Gentleman, I want to thank you all for attending tonight's event. We have raised over three million dollars for the Starlight Foundation, a cause that is near and dear to so many of us." The man drones on, and I watch the audience listen to his speech intently, laughing and clapping at the appropriate intervals.

I only zone back in when he finishes his speech. "And now, I would like to introduce our next speaker. Most of you know him as the CEO of A - One Media and the chair of the Starlight Foundation, Xavier Atwood."

My eyes go wide when a spotlight hits the man standing next to me.

"Well, that's my cue," he says quietly to me as he smiles at the audience.

I'm too stunned to speak. This wasn't some boring charity gala that he would be attending. This is his event.

Xavier strides onto the stage, all confidence and charisma. "Hello , everyone! Just as Bill said, thank you all so much for being here today. The Starlight Foundation is one that I care about deeply, and hearing about the support you have all shown is nothing short of amazing. These funds will make all the difference in the lives of so many as we press forward with finding a cure..."

"I take it you didn't know?" Kellen comes to my side, still watching his friend speak.

"That this was his fundraiser? No , not at all."

"Surprise ," he laughs. "It's been a 'passion' project of sorts for him. Something to occupy his time outside of the typical office work."

"That's really..." I struggle to find the words. "Sweet ."

"Yeah , the man is a six foot two Care Bear ."

I laugh. "I'm sure he would appreciate that comparison."

"We've been friends long enough that I no longer have to worry about what he appreciates."

"How did you two meet?" I ask him.

"Long story, but let's just say I wouldn't be where I am in life without him."

"Sounds like Xavier is a busy man. Saving you, running the company, and a foundation."

“ Sounds like you’ve been keeping him busier.”

I damn near spit out my wine. “ What did he tell you?”

“ What do you think he told me?” He raises an eyebrow, his lips pulling up into a boyish grin.

I laugh. “ I don’t think he told you shit.”

He tips his own glass of whisky in my direction. “ You’re smart. Xave isn’t one to kiss and tell. But I know my friend, and that is a man who got laid for the first time in a while.”

My interest is peaked. I glance up to the stage where Xavier is beginning to wrap up his speech. “ How long is long?”

“ Oh , no. You’re not getting any of those details out of me. It’s bro code.”

“ Give me a break.”

“ Why does he need to give you a break, exactly?” I hadn’t noticed Xavier walking off the stage, but suddenly, he’s in front of us, looking more handsome than ever.

A rush of arousal dampens my thong, and I force myself to pull it together. I’ve never had a low sex drive, but damn it, Xavier has me wanting to fuck twenty-four seven.

“ I think someone’s calling me,” Kellen says.

“ Nobody said your name,” Xavier counters.

“ Sorry , got to go.” In mere seconds, Kellen is across the room speaking to someone

else.

“ Whatever he said, he’s full of shit,” Xavier says, laying his palm on the small of my back and pulling me closer to him. I breathe in his warm scent.

“ What if he told me all the good things about you? Would he still be full of shit?” I can’t help the giggle that slips out. Fuck , this wine is potent. I’m not a lightweight, but I can already feel it going to my head, making me feel light and loose.

“ If that’s the case, he’s nothing but an honest man.”

Another laugh slips out before I remember what he had just been doing. “ This is your event.”

“ Did I not mention that?” His tone is coy.

“ Not at all.”

“ It must have slipped my mind while my head was between your legs.”

I look away from him, feeling my cheeks grow warm as I sip the last of the wine.

“ Can I get you another glass?”

I shake my head. “ One more drink and you’ll be able to take advantage of me.”

“ There goes my master plan.” He smiles, but his eyes are on my lips. I don’t know what makes me do it, but I tilt my head up and he meets me halfway, kissing me in front of everyone. “ All I’ve been able to think about since we walked in here is when I can rip you out of that dress.”

“ Didn’t you already do that once today?” My skin flames, thinking about what came after that.

I’ve never met a man that was so damn good with his mouth.

“ I don’t care if I did it seventeen times today. I’ll do it again.” His deep voice reverberates through my body.

“ I’m going to run out of clothes.” My words come out breathy. There’s no denying how turned on I am.

“ I’ll buy you a new wardrobe.”

“ That doesn’t seem very practical.”

“ I don’t really give a fuck. I’ve got a couple of people to say hi to and then we’re leaving.”

“ You can’t ditch your own party before it’s over.”

“ It’s up to you where it happens, but when the clock strikes eleven, I will be fucking you. If you want it to be here, that’s fine. I just figured you might like to go back to my place.”

My jaw drops. After this afternoon, I don’t doubt for a second that he would pull me into a hidden corner and fuck me senseless.

A steady pulse builds between my legs.

“ You know, I think I will get another drink,” I say, changing my mind. I probably shouldn’t, but having a drink to sip on right now would be nice, and I can’t possibly

be hornier than I currently am. I'm sure he can see how badly I want him written across my face.

“ I'll get it for you.”

“ No , it's okay. You mingle.”

He nods, and then walks in the opposite direction. I press my palm to my forehead, willing myself to breathe normally. What is wrong with you? It's not like you've been starved for sex your whole life .

But that only makes me think about Kellen's earlier words. How long has it been for Xavier ? He had briefly mentioned his divorce, but there's no way a man like him has been celibate.

I get another glass of wine, sit at our table, and people watch. Seeing how rich people interact with one another is like viewing Animal Planet . It's similar to the average person, but different at the same time. I'm eating the hors d'oeuvres the servers keep passing around, sipping on my drink, when Xavier's voice appears from behind me.

“ Thirty minutes.”

“ What ?”

I look up at him, and his gaze is dark. I glance at the clock. How the hell is it already ten-thirty? Where did the time go?

“ Thirty minutes until I'm buried inside of that sweet pussy of yours.”

Dear God . My entire body burns with need, but I do my best to play it cool. “ Seems like you're shit out of luck. There's no way we can make it back to your place in that

time.”

“ That’s too bad.”

“ It really is,” I say with a sigh.

“ No . You misunderstand me. That’s too bad for you . I imagine a bed would be much more comfortable.”

“ Than ?” I look at him, eyes wide.

He shrugs, but there’s something mischievous in his gaze. “ You pick the spot. At eleven, I’ll find you.”

11

HARRISON

I sit at my kitchen table with my laptop open, watching as Xavier Atwood gives a speech at his cancer foundation's charity gala. I sip on my beer, hoping to rid myself of the sour taste in my mouth.

He's an advocate for research and finding a cure. Funny , considering that when my mother was lying on her deathbed, his money was nowhere to be found. But I guess it's easy to play the hero when you're standing in front of a crowd that's never known what it's like to struggle a day in their life. They all go to these things in an attempt to make themselves feel better.

The temporary satisfaction of giving away money they didn't need.

As he speaks, his eyes linger on a dark-haired woman across the auditorium. She's got a glass of wine in her hand and she's laughing with the bearded man standing next to her.

He wraps up his speech, and I close the livestream. But not before I see him waltz over to them, a smile on his face as he pulls her close.

There's a look of adoration in his eyes as he gazes at her.

Interesting .

Rage burns inside me. An all-consuming fire. It's not enough to just watch him fall.

I want to see his world crumble.

I want to end him.

My mind drifts back to the woman he watched with affection and my plans shift. I have to expose any weak spots he may have and press on them.

If my mother can't walk this earth anymore, why should he?

12

SAOIRSE

My eyes trail after Xavier as he walks away. Is he serious? I remain in my seat, watching as he mingles with the other attendees. I lose track of him when an elderly woman sits next to me, deciding that I must be dying for small talk.

She wraps up, telling me a story about the trip that she just took with her daughter. I'm about to excuse myself to use the bathroom when my phone buzzes.

Xavier: Fifteen minutes.

I scan the room, searching for him, but he's nowhere to be found. Then, I spot him, standing with a group of men, but his eyes are on me.

My heart rate picks up as I weave through people, rushing to exit the area where the gala is being contained. Finally, I'm alone in the main entry of the building. I look left and right, unsure of where to go or why I'm doing this. As shameless as Xavier seems, he was hardly going to fuck me right there at the table. Still, that steady pulse that has been building inside of me all night demands satisfaction.

I contemplate walking up the grand staircase, but I have no idea where I'll end up. Instead, I choose to go left. Suddenly, I hear the echo of footsteps joining me in the entryway. I duck behind a colonnade and peek around the edge. I only look for a second, but it's long enough for me to see that it's Xavier. Quickly, I fall back into the shadows, waiting to hear where his next steps take him, but there's no sound. I

don't want to chance looking again. Instead , I run down the dimly lit hall toward the exhibits.

There's something eerie about being in a museum alone in the evening. I assume Xavier must have gone in the opposite direction; I haven't heard him since I was in the foyer. I look at the time as I wander through a section of European sculptures that seem a lot more menacing now than they would during normal operating hours.

Ten fifty-five .

I smirk to myself, knowing that I beat him at his own game.

Just as I'm about to crossover to the contemporary art exhibit, I hear a voice— his voice—cut through the silence. “ You didn't really think you could hide from me.”

I spin around trying to spot him, but I don't see him anywhere.

“ Well , you better show yourself,” I taunt him. “ You've only got three minutes.” Slowly , I walk backwards, not wanting to stay in one place but also not wanting to turn my back on him. “ Two minutes!”

And then, I see him, out of the corner of my eye, appearing from the shadows. His hand is at his collar loosening his tie. I'm frozen in place as he stalks toward me, his eyes dark and focused.

When he's mere inches away from me, he whispers, “ And now?”

My heartbeat races as if I've just run a marathon. I glance over his shoulder at the clock on the wall near the gallery entrance. “ One minute.”

In one swift motion, he turns me around, and pushes me onto the plush, cushioned

bench placed in the middle of the exhibit.

Gathering my dress in his hands, he pushes it out of the way, leaning over me. “ You can count down the seconds until I’m inside of you, hurricane.”

I hear a zip as he undoes his pants, and my body aches with need. I can feel the growing dampness gathering between my legs. I’m so hot its as though I’ve been set on fire and only he can put it out.

He pushes my soaked underwear to the side and slides his shaft against my slick folds, causing me to moan. I’ve never needed someone as much as I need him right now.

I wiggle my ass, pushing against him. He moves my hair to the side, exposing the column of my neck. “ Not yet. Count .”

I can’t believe this. I’m bent over in a public gallery, my dress hiked all the way up, my arousal now dripping down my thighs. Anyone could walk in. The event isn’t over and yet, as he presses the tip of his cock against my entrance, I do what he says.

“ Ten , nine, eight,” I count as I stare at the second hand on the clock. “ Seven , six, five, four.” The more he pushes against me, the harder it is to focus on the clock, each number coming out on a harsh exhale. “ Three , two, oh fuck! ”

Xavier slams into me, and I completely collapse against the sofa.

“ Quiet or someone will hear just how well you’re taking me. That’s my good little slut counting down the seconds until I can fill you.” My eyes roll back and my pussy clenches at his filthy words. “ God , your cunt is so greedy.”

He pumps into me, each stroke hitting the right spot, and I bite my lip. I should be

worried that someone could enter and see us. Everyone is in a different area, but there's nothing stopping them from venturing out like we did. Despite that, the idea of getting caught only turns me on more.

My rock hard nipples brush against the seat with each of his thrusts, sending waves of pleasure rippling throughout my body.

“ Pull on my hair,” I instruct him.

He doesn't hesitate, wrapping my thick strands around his hand. He pulls my head back firmly, not missing a beat as he fucks me.

“ Does my little storm have any other requests?” His voice is low and husky. I can tell it's taking everything in him to keep it together. He nips at my earlobe. “ There's nothing I want more than to watch you walk out there with my cum leaking out of you. Come for me.”

I clench around him and a string of curse words exit his mouth as he moans. I do it again and look back at him with a smirk. “ You come for me .”

“ Fuck , Nyx .”

I squeeze him once more as he moves inside of me. I can barely take it anymore. My pussy flutters of its own volition. “ Ahhh , ” I whimper, doing my best to keep it down.

“ Me too, fuck , me too,” he breathes out harshly.

One more thrust and we're coming together. I slap a hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming and Xavier slumps over me, his body the most comforting weight I've ever felt.

I don't know how long we stay there, simply collecting our breaths before he stands up, readjusting his clothing.

Nearly falling over, I stand, my legs shaking as I straighten my dress. Slickness coats my inner thigh as my arousal and his cum drip out from me.

“ Shall we get back out there?” He's done up his tie and, looking at him now, you would never have a clue that he just fucked me senseless in the middle of this museum. “ I just need to say goodbye to some people and have a quick chat with security. Need to make sure they erase that tape.”

My jaw drops. I hadn't even taken the security cameras into account. I'm usually so on top of it all, always thinking ten steps ahead and leaving nothing to chance. But I can admit that I've begun to let my guard down with Xavier . I trust him.

“ What if they don't delete it?”

“ They will. Everyone has a price, and I'll watch them do it.”

“ If you say so,” I huff. Honestly , it's probably a worse look for him than it is for me. Who really gives a shit about seeing me get the best dick of my life. “ Maybe tell them to give you a tape.”

Xavier's hand makes contact with my ass. “ Don't be cute. Let's go.”

“ I'm just going to find a bathroom, then I'll meet you out there.”

“ A bathroom for?”

“ To freshen up.”

“ You don’t need to freshen up. I wasn’t kidding. I want to see you out there, knowing that I’m still between your legs.”

My blood heats. That shouldn’t turn me on, but here I am, ready to climb him like a tree minutes after we’ve just finished.

I take a deep breath. “ After you, then.”

13

XAVIER

It's been three weeks since the gala, and I've seen Nyx damn near every day, the only exceptions being the nights she works. And even then, sometimes I surprise her and show up there, too. Still, she's yet to allow me into her home. Nyx has made it clear that she's very particular about having a space that's just her own and, although I wish she would let me in more, I don't want to push her boundaries.

I've fully shed the pretense that she's someone I could just fuck out of my system. The more time I spend around her and her smart mouth, the clearer it becomes that I'm growing attached. I just wish I could have a glimpse into her mind. There are moments where I think she's feeling the same, and others where I'm not so sure.

You're a piece of shit. A niggling voice in my head shouts at me, but I push it away. I'll save worrying about the consequences of my actions for another day.

"Come to Napa with me this weekend," I say as we lay in bed one evening.

She turns and stares at me. "I didn't know that you were going to Napa."

"I'm only going if you say yes. I have a villa out there, and this is probably the last time I will go for the year." I trail my fingers down her shoulder.

"A villa in Napa. How quaint."

“ It’s a good escape from the city now and then.”

“ Let me guess. We would fly there on your private jet.”

“ That would make things easier.”

Her mouth snaps shut. “ I was definitely kidding. You have a plane?”

“ It’s convenient.”

“ I think the word you’re searching for is pretentious.”

“ Would you prefer we fly commercial?”

She hesitates. “ No , let’s take your jet.”

“ That’s what I thought.”

She looks up to the ceiling and then rolls over, her back now facing me. I trace the snake that winds up her spine.

“ You know you’ve never told me about this.” I feel her tense under my touch, and I wonder if I’ve hit a nerve.

“ I got it for my twenty-first birthday.” Her voice is hollow, as if she’s no longer in the room with me but lost in some memory.

I want to know what could have possibly gone so wrong, but I leave it alone, not wanting to push her into opening up about something she’s not yet ready to talk about.

But she continues on. “ I came home from waitressing and found my mom and my boyfriend together, in bed.”

My eyes fly open; I hadn't been expecting that.

“ She wasn't even sorry. Just mocked me as though I was nothing more than a joke to her. I had always known that she didn't care about me, but that night solidified it.” She pauses. “ That was the last night we spoke, and I've been better off. I moved out that same evening. It was my worst birthday yet, but getting Lucious was a bright spot. He's my guardian and a reminder of my strength. He's got my back, literally.”

“ That must have been a lot to experience so young.”

“ Yeah , it was a good lesson. Even the people who claim to love us are capable of fucking us over.”

“ What about your dad?”

“ He was a piece of shit.” Her shoulders tense. “ A drunk. I was a kid, but I always knew to make myself scarce when he showed up in the evenings. He would come home full of rage, yelling about one thing or another. My mere presence was enough to send him into a tailspin. I was small, an easy target for his verbal abuse. He saved the physical stuff for my mom.” Nyx sighs and turns over to face me. “ Every night, he would drink a beer as if he wasn't already plastered, but it was like that beer was his switch. The second it entered his system, I could tell the difference in him. My mom would order me to my room, but I could still hear her cries as he beat her.”

“ I'm sorry,” I say, wishing that I could do something, anything , to go back and change her past.

She shrugs. “ It is what it is. Things came to a tipping point when he hit me. I had

been doing the dishes and accidentally dropped a plate. I'll never forget the sound of the ceramic shattering and then the ringing in my ears as his fist connected with the side of my head. That was what it took for my mom to go to the police. They had him forcibly removed from the house and she sought out a protection order. For years, I thought he would come back and do something worse, but Ravenscroft isn't huge, and I think the shame of everyone knowing what he had done got to him. He disappeared, and I haven't seen him since." Nyx drops my gaze. "I don't even know if he's alive, and honestly? I don't care. I blame him for my mom's drug addiction. After he left, I think she just did everything that she could not to remember. Even if it meant she had to forget me too."

"Well, that explains it," I say.

"What?" She looks at me once again.

"The incredible strength that I see in you. No one should ever have to endure what you have, let alone as a child. But through that pain, a woman of incredible tenacity and power was forged. You raised up like a phoenix from the ashes."

"It doesn't always feel like that," she says, her voice small. I can tell this isn't something she talks about often. Her openness and vulnerability causes an odd feeling in my chest.

"That's okay. You can be strong and still acknowledge the hurts of your past. But if you ever need someone to remind you just how incredible you are, I'm here, and I'll tell you every time."

She gives me a small smile, and I wish I could read her mind.

"What about your tattoos?" she asks, changing the subject. "When did you get these done?"

Her nails run along my arm, looking at the art that forms a full sleeve. I feel a knot form in my stomach; I haven't told her yet about the eight years I spent in prison. Not that I'm necessarily ashamed, but I'm certainly not proud.

Fucked up decisions I made as a kid cost me time I can never get back. They cost me my relationship with my son.

A stab of guilt hits me in the gut. My pursuit of Harrison has taken a back seat over the last few weeks. Instead of focusing on the best way to reach out to him, I've been sleeping with a woman that's damn near his age.

I push that thought aside as I answer Nyx's question. " Different points in my life. Some I got while I was underage, others when I was in my early twenties. I filled in my arm when I was released from prison. It was therapy, of sorts, I suppose. Almost everything else in my life had gone to shit."

Her eyes go wide and her mouth falls open, surprise evident on her face.

" Prison ?"

I chuckle, but there's no real humor behind it. " This wasn't always my life."

" What happened? If you don't mind me asking."

It's not my favorite topic, but opening up to Nyx feels easy. " I didn't have much growing up. Things were rough at home, and I fell into the wrong crowd. I was fourteen when I essentially became a bitch boy for the local drug dealer, Gio . He sort of guided me, shaped me into his ideal right-hand man."

" Oh my God , you were so young."

“ Yeah . At the time, it seemed like the best option. And when I got my girlfriend, Mayra , pregnant at fifteen, he helped me. Letting me take on more tasks. I started selling, doing whatever I could to get money for my family. I didn’t want my son to grow up the same way I had. Looking back now, I can see that I probably wasn’t doing him much good the way I was living then, either.”

I think back to how young and naïve I had been. I was a kid making grown decisions without understanding the consequences.

“ Mayra hated what I was doing, but I thought she was being dramatic. I believed it was what was best for us. For our family. It was true for a while, and when I turned twenty-two, things went south. Gio had me hold up a shop owner that owed him money. Police were called in, and I was charged with armed robbery. My sentence was light, all things considered, but it was still eight years of my life gone. Everything I had been working for beforehand? Gone .”

Remaining quiet, Nyx’s eyes search mine, urging me to continue.

“ When I got out, Mayra had moved on and gotten married. My son wanted nothing to do with me, and I only had myself to blame.”

“ I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“ Don’t be. That was the wake-up call I needed to make a change. I got myself sorted, got an office job, worked my way up, and I guess the rest is history.”

“ Is that how you met Kellen ? When I asked him at the gala he said it was a long story.”

I nod. “ Yeah , he was my cellmate. He got out a couple of years after me. By that point, I had built a reputation of being dependable, so I vouched for him and my boss

took a leap of faith, hiring him. Now he's right with me and a certified pain in my ass."

She laughs, leaning her head on my shoulder. "I like him."

"He likes you, too. So, I should probably keep him away."

"You have nothing to worry about. Can I ask you another question?"

"Shoot."

"Kellen insinuated that it had been a while since you'd been with anyone."

I purse my lips and remind myself to give that chatterbox a swift kick to the ass the next time I see him.

"So, what's your question?" I say, with a smirk.

"How long is long?"

I let out a sigh and think back. "Since the divorce; so, three years now."

She raises her head, eyes wide. "Three years?"

"No need to sound so surprised," I chuckle.

"I can't help it," she exclaims. "You mean you never once? Not with anyone?"

I shrug. "Work has kept me busy."

"Apparently," she replies, disbelief evident in her tone.

“ It wasn’t an intentional choice, it just happened. We broke up, and I threw myself into work. I’d get to the office early every day and leave late. It didn’t give me a whole lot of time for extracurricular activities, and I wasn’t interested in making it a priority.”

“ Until you met me.” A smug smile spreads across her face.

“ Until I met you,” I confirm.

“ You sure know how to make a girl feel special,” she jokes. And then she adds more softly, “ Thank you for being honest with me.”

“ Thanks for listening,” I say, pulling her body closer to mine.

A few moments of silence pass. “ How’s your mom doing, by the way?”

A flash of emotion passes over her face, and I immediately regret my question. In an instant, she shrugs, composing herself as whatever she felt disappears.

“ I don’t know. I sent her the money and she hasn’t taken my calls since.” She drops my gaze, looking down at the mattress.

“ Hey .” I lift her chin and force her to look at me. “ I’m sorry.”

“ It’s fine,” she mutters and then changes the subject. “ So , what should I pack for Napa ?”

“ That was easily the best flight I’ve taken,” Nyx says as we walk off of my toward the car waiting for us on the tarmac.

I smirk. I had my head between her legs before we had even taken off. “ Good . I’m

happy to hear it, hurricane. I was thinking we could drop our stuff off at my place and then grab dinner.”

“ Perfect , I’m starving.”

I place a hand on her thigh, inching it up until it cups her pussy through her jeans. “ Me too.”

“ Yeah , well, you’re always hungry.”

“ That I am.”

“ I love your appetite.” She sidles up to me. “ It’s one of my favorite things about you. In fact, you may just be stuck with me, Mr . Atwood .”

I place a kiss on the top of her head. I know that she’s joking, but a part of me wants her words to be true. Being ‘stuck’ with Nyx sounds like a taste of heaven to me. I don’t know when it happened, but my feelings for her have gone far past lust.

This isn’t just a fling. I can’t let her go.

And I won’t.

14

SAOIRSE

Y ou’re kidding,” I whisper more to myself as we pull up to the gate of Xavier’s Mediterranean style home, or should I say compound .

He certainly downplayed the size of his house. This is damn near a resort.

The driver parks and immediately jumps out to get our bags as we exit the vehicle.

Xavier places a hand on the small of my back. “ I’ll show you around.” Goosebumps rise across my skin at the slight touch. I’ve never met anyone who’s made my body react this way. Just his eyes on me can cause me to overheat.

“ This is beautiful,” I say as we walk through the arched entryway. The entire place is tiled with wood finishes and exposed beams coming from the roof. It’s nothing short of stunning.

“ This is the main living space,” Xavier tells me when we enter the fully furnished family room, but I’m not paying attention to that at all. My eyes are focused on what lies beyond the glass patio doors.

I turn and look at him. “ You made it sound like you had a cute little cottage here. How big is this place?”

“ I never said that,” he replies, walking up behind me. “ And by now, you should

know that I do nothing in half-measures.”

His arms wrap around me, his large hand spreading across my abdomen.

I lean into his hold; this shouldn't feel so easy. But it does. I've spent the last few weeks trying to deny what my brain already knows to be true. Xavier is becoming more than a mark to me.

This isn't just a simple game, this is more.

And it'll never work.

There is no happily ever after here, and my life is certainly not a fairytale.

How would I explain to him that I've been using him for his money and gifts? Stealing from him when he isn't paying attention and scamming him when all he's been to me is good.

And if by some small chance he could overlook these things, there's Gage . If I were to leave, his life would also change. He can take care of himself with what he makes dealing, but it wouldn't make up for what I bring in.

He's also the same psychopath that I was nervous to be around all those years ago. We're on the same team now, which makes him less scary, but if I were to cross him, I have no doubt he would hunt me down with a vengeance.

This will be over soon, anyway. Three more weeks. That's all we have left. Everything will come out on Halloween night. Gage will sneak in while Xavier and I go to Metu Noctis — the ultimate scare experience. I thought I would have to convince Xavier to go with me, but he had been surprisingly willing. One last 'fun' moment before he comes back home and finds Gage waiting for him, and learns that

Nyx is nothing more than a character.

“ Can I get you a drink?” he offers, breaking me out of my musings.

I force a smile onto my face. “ Yes , please. Something strong.”

He squeezes my hip and then walks away, leaving me to mourn this loss of his body heat.

When he reappears, he’s holding two glasses of bourbon, handing one to me. I take a sip and revel in the slightly sweet oak flavor before it warms my chest.

“ Thank you,” I say, trying to shake off my earlier thoughts.

“ I’ll finish the tour, then I’ll show you the back. I have a feeling you’ll love it.”

The whole home is spectacular, but when we step outside, I’m awestruck.

“ Four hundred acres,” Xavier explains, as I take in just how much land there is while I walk down the stone path that leads to the pool area. “ The tennis court and fitness center are over there.” He points over to the left.

“ Good to know, but you work me out just fine, thanks.”

“ Hurricane .”

“ Mr . Atwood .”

“ Fuck . If you want me to put you over my knee, you just have to ask.”

I laugh, pointing in the opposite direction. “ What’s over there?”

“ Stables and my vineyard.”

I have to force my mouth not to open in shock. Xavier truly is on a different level from any man I’ve been around. “ You have your own? For what reason?”

“ Privacy , and I wanted it.”

I shake my head in amazement. “ Essentially , you own everything as far as the eye can see.”

“ It sounds excessive when you say it like that.”

“ If it comes off that way, it’s because it really is.”

He ignores my quip, giving me a small slap on the ass. “ Are you ready for dinner now?”

“ Yes . Feed me, I’m starving.”

“ I want to take you to my favorite spots in the area. I’ve already booked us a table for all of them while we’re here.”

I find something to change into—a black, ruched mini-dress—and then we’re on our way. The restaurant is located on the grounds of a winery. String lights line the ceiling and surrounding trees. The entire place looks like something out of a travel magazine. The food is good, but the wine is incredible. It puts the bottles that I have sitting at home to shame. By the time we’re done with our meal and get back to the house, I’m full and slightly tipsy.

“ I’m exhausted.” I kick off my shoes and flop onto the bed.

“ I have something for you,” Xavier says, and I hear him opening a suitcase. I lift my head, trying to get a peek at what he might have gotten me. He looks over his shoulder at me. “ Close your eyes.”

“ Yes , daddy.” I obey with a smirk, knowing that every time I call him that it turns him on.

His footsteps get closer. “ Hold out your hands.”

I lay my palms out flat in front of me and he places something smooth in them. I open my eyes and look down at the red Cartier box in my hands.

“ What is this for?” Unable to hide the surprise in my voice.

“ For being you. For trusting me and opening up about your parents.”

It feels hard to swallow; I hadn’t expected to do that, but it had felt right in the moment.

“ It’s a custom piece,” he continues, “ I had them rush it.”

“ You rushed Cartier ?” My tone is incredulous. “ You know what? Never mind.”

I open the box and gasp. “ Holy shit!”

Inside the box, lies a diamond collar necklace made to look like a snake winding its way around your throat. “ This is beautiful.”

I slowly pick up the piece, admiring the emeralds placed for its eyes.

“ Just like you.”

Oh .

“ Thank you.” I know my voice is strained, but I can’t help it.

“ Anytime , hurricane. Now , let me put the necklace on you so I can fuck you in nothing but that.” My pussy pulses at his words.

He secures the jewelry around my neck. I look at myself in the mirror, and touch the tail of the snake that trails down my chest.

It’s absolutely perfect. Disappointment hits me like a lightning bolt. If Gage sees it, he’ll immediately push to sell it. It’s worth too much. It’s the obvious choice, but I’m not doing it. There’s no way that I’m giving this up.

I don’t want to do any of it anymore. Xavier doesn’t deserve this. He’s not some rich, obnoxious guy who needs to be brought down a peg. He worked hard to get to where he is now, and sure, he’s living in luxury, but that hasn’t always been the case.

The game ends here.

I’ll have to be careful with how I approach this with Gage , but I’m done.

The one thing that I never thought could happen has... I’m falling for the target.

“ I love it.” I look at him through the glass.

“ Good , I’m glad.”

He walks up behind me, and pushes the top of my dress down as he kisses my shoulder, his eyes still focused on me in the mirror.

My eyes shut and he whispers in my ear, his voice low and commanding, “ Eyes open, hurricane. I want you to watch us. You should see just how angelic you look when you’re coming for me.”

He pulls the rest of my dress down, leaving me completely bare, a stark contrast to him still fully clothed. One of his hands reaches between my legs.

“ So wet.” He rubs teasing circles over my clit, making me moan. “ Is my little storm ready for me?”

It’s not even a question. “ Yes , please.”

“ Please , what?” He unzips his pants.

“ Fuck me. Please , fuck me.” I breathe heavily.

“ I like hearing you plead for my cock, like a pathetic little slut. How badly do you want it?”

Fuck . I didn’t think it was possible, but his words turn me on even more.

“ So badly, please. I need you.”

Xavier lines himself up at my entrance. His other hand grasps my jaw. “ You look so pretty when you beg.”

Then , he thrusts into me. My hands fly forward, slamming on top of the dresser.

He fucks me ruthlessly, each stroke hitting that euphoric spot inside me that makes me see stars. Watching us in the mirror makes everything so much hotter. My cheeks are flushed and my breathing is ragged. “ Fuck , yes, I’m coming.”

I fall onto the wooden surface as my orgasm overtakes me, Xavier following right after me.

We stare at each other as we catch our breath, and I wish I could tell him exactly how I feel.

But it's not time yet.

15

XAVIER

Nyx has been quieter than ever since we got back from Napa .

We had a good time, visited various vineyards, I took her to my favorite restaurants in the area, and every night I fucked her in a different spot of the house.

But once we got back, it felt as though she retreated into herself. Her typical snark and sarcasm seems to have been replaced with a more demure personality.

“ Is everything okay?” I ask as we walk around Central Park on Saturday morning, coffees in hand.

“ Yeah , why?”

I point at a bench along the path, and she follows my lead. “ I feel like something has been off since we got back. If this isn’t something you’re interested in anymore, I need you to say it.”

She raises her eyebrow and a smirk plants itself on her face. “ If I’m not interested in what anymore?”

“ I know we haven’t had an official discussion about it, but we spend damn near every day together and when we aren’t together, I’m thinking about the next time I’ll get to see you. At my age, calling someone my girlfriend sounds childish, but if I

were to call you anything, it would be that.”

“ I thought if you were to call me anything, it would be your favorite little whore.”
She looks at me out of the corner of her eye while finishing the last of her latte.

“ That too,” I snort. “ But that being said, if all of this is too much—or if you’re not where I am, I’d rather you tell me now.”

“ It’s not that.” She shifts in her seat. “ It’s the exact opposite. I don’t want this to end, but...” her words drift off.

“ What is it?”

She sighs. “ I don’t know how to be a girlfriend. And I don’t want to fuck it all up. There’s still so much you don’t know about me.”

“ The only way you could fuck it up is by not being yourself.”

“ That’s what I’m worried about.”

“ Don’t be. I’m not asking you to be anyone but you.”

“ Okay .” She gives me a small smile, and I lean over to kiss her. I look down at the watch on my wrist. The usual one I wear day-to-day got misplaced a little while ago and has yet to turn up.

“ How about we stay in this evening?”

“ Fucking finally,” she says dramatically. “ We can put that theater room to good use.”

“ Whatever you want, hurricane. But I’ve got to head over to the office for a little while.”

She stares at me, puzzled. “ On a Saturday ?”

“ I know, but there’s going to be a press conference on Monday morning, and we need all hands on deck to be prepared. It shouldn’t take long, though.” She nods with understanding and it makes me feel worse about lying to her.

“ Take this.” I pull out the key to my home and hand it to her. I can see the look of surprise written all over her face.

“ You know, some people might say that giving your girlfriend a key this early is jumping the gun.”

“ When I know what I want, I’m all in. I don’t like to play games,” I assure her. “ I’ll meet you back at my place and we’ll have the movie marathon of your dreams.”

“ With unlimited popcorn?”

“ With unlimited popcorn,” I confirm.

“ Okay , deal.”

We walk out of the park together, and when she turns in the direction of my apartment, I pull out my phone and call Levi . “ I’m on my way.”

When I step into my office, my PI is already sitting on a couch, lounging with a drink in hand.

“ I’m glad you’re comfortable,” I grumble. “ Do you have it?”

He tosses a file down on the coffee table, and I pick it up, scanning its contents. I already knew what I would find. It's not entirely surprising, but that doesn't stop the sinking feeling in my gut.

“ How's the father and son reunion shaping up?”

I purse my lips. I'm as eager to talk about that as I am to have a bullet in my head. “ It's not.”

“ You changed your mind?”

“ No . There's just been a roadblock.” I shut the folder, no longer wanting to look at it. “ It'll be resolved soon, though.”

When I get home, I find Nyx in the living room. Her long hair is swept up in a ponytail and she's in a matching black tracksuit. Her favorite color to wear.

“ That was quick!”

“ As promised.” I smile, heading up the stairs to my office.

“ Did you get everything done?”

“ For the most part, yes. There are a few things that still need to be sorted out, but that can wait for after the weekend.”

“ Perfect . Okay , so I've decided on today's movie line up.”

I raise an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue.

“ We're watching all of the Halloween movies!”

“ Slasher films? What happened to classic rom-coms?”

“ Boy meets girl, they fall in love, the end. Puke . Those are so boring. Besides , it’s spooky season. It’s only right.”

“ Whatever you want, hurricane. I’ll watch every damn horror movie with you.”

“ That’s the spirit. I’ll start making the popcorn and you can change into something more comfortable.” She looks me up and down appreciatively. “ Preferably gray sweatpants.”

I chuckle as I continue up the stairs. I tuck the file Levi gave me into my desk drawer. Until I decide what I’m going to do, it’s out of sight, out of mind.

Quickly , I change then head back down to Nyx .

She hands me a bowl of popcorn. “ We’re ready to go.”

We sit on one of the reclining loveseats. “ I’m happy we talked today. I’ve been in my head over the last few days. I’m sorry if I gave you any reason to doubt me. You know you’re who I want, right?”

I stare into the piercing blue eyes I’ve been enamored with from the very beginning.

“ I know.” My stomach twists as I press my lips against her forehead. “ You’re who I want, too.”

I’ve seen a few of these movies before, but by the time we’re halfway through the third one I have to ask, “ I mean, why don’t these people just leave Haddonfield ? They’re all pretty much asking to be murdered at this point.”

“ I think that’s the point. No one ever thinks it’ll be their fate. It’s almost comical. We always think we’re immune to the bad things that could happen to us. Even when they’re staring us right in the face.”

“ I guess so,” I murmur. “ You never really know who or what you’re dealing with.”

She faces me, her eyes inquisitive. “ True . And the fact that it’s a fictional movie. It wouldn’t be much fun to watch if everyone in town cleared out.”

Nyx glances down at her bowl of popcorn. “ Looks like it’s time for a refill. I’ll be right back.”

When she reaches the door of the theater room, she turns back and faces me with a small smile. “ Don’t get scared while I’m gone.”

16

SAOIRSE

Something isn't right. I knew it the second we left the park this afternoon.

I had been on a momentary high after Xavier expressed he wanted a relationship. The very thing I had been thinking about consistently for the last few days. I still haven't figured out how to handle things with Gage . But the hidden necklace that Xavier gifted me is a constant reminder that my decision will undoubtedly come with consequences.

Still , after we talked, I could tell there was something else bothering him. His announcement about going to the office seemed out of the blue.

As much as I've grown to trust him, I wasn't able to tame the little voice in my head that questions everything and everyone. I needed to double check. So , I fished for information myself, calling his assistant, and pretended that I needed to see him.

" Hey , Caroline ," I said, keeping my tone pleasant. " I was just wondering how long Xavier is supposed to be at the office today? He forgot his wallet and I was thinking of stopping by, but he's not picking up his phone."

" Oh ? I don't think he's at the office today, sweetheart."

Surprise , surprise. He was lying.

“ You’re right!” I laugh. “ I’ve got my days all mixed up. Thank you.”

There’s no way Xavier wouldn’t have let her know he was going to the office. Which means he either wasn’t being honest about where his destination was, or whatever he’s doing there isn’t company related. Either way, he lied about it and it doesn’t sit right with me.

I mulled it over as I entered his home, changed and got things setup for the movie. Could it have to do with his son? I know he’s been keeping up his search, but he hasn’t said too much about it since I confirmed I didn’t know anyone by the name of Harrison Atwood .

Things only got more suspicious when he walked through the door clutching that brown manila folder like it was his personal life line. I almost outright told him I knew he was being dishonest, but I held my tongue. Maybe he had his reasons, and I was just being overly suspicious.

It’s not like trusting men comes easily to me.

But there was something in his tone as we watched and discussed the movie that caught me off guard.

“ I guess so. You never really know who or what you’re dealing with.”

For a moment, it felt like we were no longer talking about a slasher film. It was more personal. Despite my brain telling me I shouldn’t do this, I put the popcorn in the microwave and run up the stairs to his office.

Whatever it was that he needed to sneak away to work on today is in there. I’m sure of it.

I open the top two drawers, looking for the folder he had been carrying when he came in, but there's nothing in them except for work documents that mean nothing to me. When I open the third, I see it.

Gently , as if it's a bomb that could go off at any moment, I open the folder. And when I do, I feel my heart drop into my stomach. Laying on top is a photograph of me. I'm walking across the street, coffee in hand, black combat boots on and a leather jacket over my sundress.

The same outfit I had been wearing just a couple of days ago. I push the photo to the side and find a paper with my information clearly marked. My address, place of work, etc. the basic things he already knows. But that's not the part my eyes are glued to. No , what I can't tear my gaze away from is the all-capped, bold letters at the top of the document, spelling out my name.

Fuck .

I press one palm against my forehead and use my other hand to grip the desk with white knuckles.

How do I fix this?

And then, I hear his once comforting voice cutting through the room, cold as ice. “ What are you doing, Saoirse ?”

Slowly , I raise my head, and find Xavier leaning against the doorway, his arms crossed as he stares me down. I can't read the emotion on his face.

Anger ? Disappointment ? Humiliation ?

The room begins to spin as his lips tilt up in the faintest of smiles. “ What's the

matter? Cat got your tongue?”

EPILOGUE

HARRISON

A few hours earlier

I walk out of Central Park , clutching my phone tightly. Anger courses through my veins until all I can see is red. Seeing my father enjoy a cozy morning with his girlfriend, smiling as they stroll around the gardens, sipping their coffees, makes me feel sick.

He doesn't deserve a single bit of the happiness he has in his life.

He doesn't deserve anything .

I search through my contacts and call Maverick , my old friend from Eidelburg . Although , I suppose he's less of a friend and more of a past ally. He's a little unpredictable, but we always kept each other safe when it mattered. I haven't spoken to him in years since I left the lower basin.

“ To what do I owe this pleasure,” he answers with a gruff voice.

“ I was hoping you could help me out. For old times' sake.” I cut straight to the chase. “ Do you still have access to that warehouse out by the port?”

His chuckle is dark, but there isn't an ounce of humor in it. Reminding me that one of the best parts of our partnership was that no one dared to fuck with him. He doesn't

play around.

“ Yeah , it’s still there. Why ?”

“ I have a plan, and I need your help.”