

EVE NEWTON



FIER
DESIRE

HER DESIRE

BROKEN VOWS

BOOK ONE

EVE NEWTON

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

This is a DARK Whychoose Romance. Finn and Aidan are dark men. Please respect that if you continue down this path.

There are some TWs in this book/series.

Dub-con; violence; FMC being stabbed; blood play; knife play, birth control control.

Thanks

Eve

VALENTINA

I'm a legacy from a father whose Irish bloodlines are as tangled as the streets of Manchester. There's a spark in my soul that whispers of rebellion, a kind of warning that speaks to my nature—unyielding, fierce.

The weight of my heritage is a heavy cloak on my shoulders, a duality of fire and passion inherited from lands steeped in tradition and turmoil. My mother's Italian grace and poise are as much a part of me as the wildness of my father's Gaelic roots. She had tried to mould me, to soften the edges of my spirit with lullabies sung in her tongue, knowing the world I was growing up in, the sacrifices I would have to make in the name of being the daughter of one of the Manchester mafia bosses, but her death tore through that tapestry, leaving raw threads in its wake.

“Happy birthday, bitch,” I mutter to myself, flicking my dark hair, a silent waterfall against the pale canvas of my white blouse. My defiant green eyes, just like my father's, close briefly as I take a moment that should be joyous; instead, it's a curse.

Twenty-three years old.

My mother warned me this day would come, although the reason I should fear it was never spoken. Only to be told I should prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

In the silence of the room, I grapple with the clashing emotions tearing through me—the Italian devotion to family that demands sacrifice and the Irish stubbornness that refuses

to bend. It plays out like an old tune, one that's been part of me since I could remember, but now it feels more like a requiem than a ballad.

Tears spring to my eyes. Mom's absence is a chasm that echoes with every step I take, a reminder that even the strongest bonds can be severed. I feel it most acutely when I'm alone like this when the stillness allows me to hear the whispers of what was and the screams of what might have been—a life untouched by vendettas and debts, a path unmarred by the shadows of my father's dealings with the vicious underworld.

But here I am, the legacy: Valentina O'Shea. Caught between two worlds, belonging fully to neither. The pieces of who I am settle into a resolution. The fight in me—the part that rages against the roles I'm forced to play—stirs with the knowledge that whatever comes next, it will not find me submissive.

I vow to myself, a silent promise in the depths of my being, that no matter how fiercely the storm rages around me, I will not be swept away. My mother's blood may call for sacrifice, but my father's cries out for survival. And I *will* survive, even if the flames consume everything else in their wake.

Rising from the chair in my bedroom, I slowly make my way downstairs to my father's office. This is the day of reckoning. The fear that has been building inside me for years is about to come to a head, and I have two choices. Take it with grace or run screaming like a damsel.

Hopefully, I don't have to run.

The door to Seamus O'Shea's office is a towering slab of dark oak, carved with intricate patterns that would be more fitting for a grand cathedral than the shadowy lair of one of Manchester's most feared crime lords. It swings open silently as if even the hinges know better than to squeak under his watch.

I step inside, my high black boots sinking into the plush carpet that swallows up the sound of my arrival as my long

white skirt swishes around my ankles. My father sits behind his mahogany desk, a fortress of paperwork, cigars and whiskey tumblers, his silhouette outlined by the glow of the sunlight behind him. He doesn't look up immediately, and I take a moment to study him—Seamus O'Shea, the man whose name whispers through the city's underbelly like a cautionary tale.

His presence fills the room, an invisible force that seems to bend the air itself. The lines on his face are etched with iron resolve, each one a testament to battles fought in the name of family and power. His hair, once as dark as mine, now streaks with strands of dignified silver. This is no mere mortal; this is a king upon his throne, ruling over a kingdom built from shadows and secrets.

Only today, he looks beaten. Worn. Exhausted.

"Valentina," he finally says, voice deep and resonant, acknowledging my presence.

"Dad," I reply softly, bridging the gap between us with measured steps. I lean down, pressing my lips to his cheek in a daughterly kiss, feeling the stubble against my skin. The contact is fleeting, but within it lies the weight of our shared blood and history.

"Happy Birthday, girl," he murmurs, but it sounds like a death knell rather than a congratulations for making it another year.

"Thanks." I try for nonchalance, but we both know the hammer is about to fall.

Possibly on my head.

"Sit down," he commands, gesturing to the chair across from him. The words are simple, yet they carry the gravity of a sentence.

"It's time," I say, skipping more pleasantries. There's no point in dancing around the edges of whatever abyss we're teetering on the brink of.

Dad's expression hardens, his eyes darkening like storm clouds over the moors. "It is. Your mother told you about this

day.”

“She mentioned something...”

The scoff is harsh. “Something. There’s a debt,” he admits much sooner than I expected. I thought there would be a big song and dance about it, explanations and platitudes that things would be okay. But nope. Why expect anything less from my dad? Straightforward and never beats around the asshole bush. Folding his hands on the desk—a barrier as much as a bridge.

My stomach clenches as I sit, bracing for the impact of his next words. A debt in our world isn’t settled with a check and a handshake. It’s paid in blood, in loyalty, in lives. I’m about to be traded, and I don’t think my mother’s warning was strong enough.

“Who?” My voice is steady, trained to betray nothing, not even as fear coils around my spine.

“The Doyles,” he answers, and the name falls like a guillotine blade between us. Rivalry and bad blood run deep, and the Doyles are relentless in their pursuits of full power. The city is split up into so many factions that it sprawls out in a network of rival gangs, each run by its own leader. Some are more powerful than others. Dad ranks pretty high up, but the Doyles... they are higher.

“The price?” Even though I already know, I have to hear it spoken out loud.

“Enough to cost me everything.” There’s a weariness in his eyes that stuns me, a crack in the armour that reveals the burden he has carried with him for years.

Everything.

That doesn’t mean money or property. It means life—it means his life. If left unpaid, the debt will be a death sentence, signed and sealed by the unforgiving laws of his world.

Gripping the arms of the chair until my knuckles blanch, I wait for the other shoe.

“There is only one way out.” His voice is a low rumble of thunder, signalling the storm to come. “An arrangement.”

An *arrangement* is a term coated in sugar to mask the bitterness underneath. It spells out my fate in letters I don’t want to read. My freedom, my choices, my future—all dangling on the edge of his words.

Unable to sit still, I rise from my seat, pacing the length of the Persian rug beneath my feet, trying to outrun the sense of entrapment closing in.

But there is no running from this cage.

“Valentina,” Dad says, a warning wrapped in my name. He knows me—knows I’m about to rebel against the chains he’s prepared to wrap around me. But he also knows that I understand the stakes. We may live by the sword, but that means we die by it too, and I can’t have his blood on my conscience, not when I’ve already lost so much.

“I need details,” I croak. My mind races through every possible escape, every potential defiance, though I know the truth: this deal was sealed the moment the debt was made years ago.

“A marriage to combine our two families.”

Hissing as I spin back to him, I struggle to comprehend. However, it takes me less than two seconds to realise he isn’t talking about him but me.

The air in the room chokes me, thick with silent oaths and unspoken violence. I’ve grown up among shadows and secrets, but nothing could’ve prepared me for this—a marriage to a Doyle I didn’t arrange myself.

The words hang between us like a death sentence. My father’s eyes hold mine, his face carved from stone. I swear to God if he means Paddy Doyle, I’ll kill Dad myself. I won’t be shackled to a man old enough to be my father. The thought makes my insides squirm.

“Marriage?” The word is a bullet, and it ricochets around the opulent office, crashing against the walls lined with leather-bound books and the scent of aged whiskey and cigar

smoke. My hands tremble, not with fear, but with rage. A marriage isn't a union in our world; it is a transaction, the trading of flesh and blood for power and survival.

Seamus leans back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. "It's decided, Valentina. It's the only way."

I can feel the muscles in my jaw tighten as I clench my teeth. It's an effort to keep the venom shackled behind my lips. I'm no stranger to my father's authority, the iron fist in a velvet glove, but this is a different kind of imprisonment.

"Who?" The word is like poison.

"Finn Doyle."

My heart skips a beat. The Doyle family enforcer. I've only heard tales, and I'd rather take my chances with the old man.

I want to scream, to unleash the storm that's brewing inside me, but I press my lips together, letting silence speak volumes. He might control the chessboard, but he can't dictate how the pieces feel—how I feel, trapped in a game I never agreed to play.

"Valentina," Seamus—I can't even think of him as Dad now—says, his voice softer now, but the steel beneath it is unmistakable. "You know what's at stake."

I do. It's not just about him or me—it's about the delicate balance of power that keeps our world from spiralling into chaos. But knowing this doesn't make the chains any less real, any less constricting.

My gaze drifts to the window, where the quiet, exclusive suburb sprawls out around us, oblivious to the sacrifices made in the shadows. How many more pieces of myself will I have to surrender before there's nothing left?

But the line has been drawn. If I don't do this, I become an orphan. So there really is *no* choice.

"Fine," I say, the fire inside me banked but still burning.

Seamus stands. "You know if there was any other way..."

“Don’t.” Putting my hand up to stop the next words, I hold back the tears.

“I’m sorry. I tried, but Paddy wants you for his son.”

“How long?”

“Six years.”

I’m glad I haven’t eaten yet, or I would throw up my breakfast. I was seventeen when this deal was struck. Still a child. I suppose I should be grateful I wasn’t married off then, still a virgin, to one of the city’s, probably the country’s most ruthless killers.

“Why so long?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Paddy has a respect for...” He stops talking and looks like he wants to be sick.

“My age?”

Dad nods, and my stomach clenches in protest.

“Also, your experience.”

Dad’s cheeks go bright red, and he looks down.

“I see.” I hold my head high. I’m not ashamed of my past, nor should I be made to. I’m a grown woman, even if it feels the exact opposite right now.

As I turn to leave, each step feels like wading through quicksand. But I refuse to let it drag me under. Instead, I let the ember of rebellion glow brighter, a beacon in the darkness that promises one thing—I am more than a pawn, and I will forge my own path, even if it kills me.

Which it most likely will.

“Fuck!” The word explodes from me, a defiant whisper against the injustice of it all as I hurry to the kitchen, needing a drink even though it’s only nine o’clock. Valentina O’Shea doesn’t bend—doesn’t break—but even fire can be smothered when starved of air.

I can fight, yes. But sometimes, the battlefield chooses you, and this war demands a sacrifice I never thought I'd have to make. I press my palms flat against the counter, needing to feel something solid when everything else is spinning out of control.

The clock on the wall ticks mockingly, each second a reminder that time is a luxury I no longer possess. With every beat of my heart, the reality of the situation burrows deeper into my bones—I am the price to be paid, the olive branch extended in a peace offering coated in poison.

One thing is for sure: Finn Doyle may claim me as his wife, but he will never own my soul. I'll play their game, but I'll play it by my rules. The trouble is, I'm not sure what the game is or who the players are. I can't form a plan without knowledge of how to counterstrike. It's pointless even trying, especially when the stakes are so high.

But there is no getting away from it. I have a legacy to honour, a father to protect, and I never back down from a fight.

I just hope that remains true when I come face to face with Finn.

I guess time will tell.

VALENTINA

“This isn’t over yet,” Dad says, finding me in the kitchen.
“He’s on his way here.”

“Fantastic,” I mutter. They didn’t even give me enough time for this to sink in before thrusting me onto pure evil.

“Go and wait in the living room. He will be here shortly.”

It’s an order, and one I can’t refuse. Now that this is happening, one wrong move from me, and they will take my dad and do God only knows what to him before they take him from me forever. As disgusting as this whole thing is, I won’t have his blood on my hands.

Glaring at Dad as I leave the kitchen, not even having had a chance to take a swig of the fine whiskey I’d been hoping for, I push the door open to the living room in this enormous mansion that suddenly feels as small as a birdcage.

I pace, but when the door opens, my breath snags on a thorn of nerves and fear. He steps in, and suddenly, the room feels even smaller, the air too thick. Finn Doyle—more myth than man, cloaked in whispers of bloodshed and brutality—stands before me, an eclipse dressed in a black tailored suit that screams designer to my trained eye.

“Valentina,” he says, his voice a low rumble, like thunder promising a storm. His eyes, blue chips of arctic ice, lock onto mine. They don’t just see; they dissect, leaving me feeling exposed, vulnerable, as if naked and spreadeagled.

“Finn Doyle.” My voice wavers, a leaf caught in a breeze, and I hate myself for it. There’s power in a name, they say. But his feels like a bullet, loaded and aimed straight at my life as I know it.

He surveys the expanse of the sombre living room, his gaze lingering on the antique armchair and the ostentatious chandelier—trappings of wealth that seem to shrink under his scrutiny. When his attention returns to me, there’s a shift in the atmosphere, like the prelude to a cataclysm.

The manners my mother instilled in me come to the forefront automatically, and I gesture towards the couch. “Please, sit.”

“Thanks,” he replies, moving with a predator’s grace. Every step is measured, deliberate. He doesn’t sit so much as he claims territory—leaning back, legs parted, one arm draped over the back of the settee, an unspoken commandment etched in his posture.

His right-hand man, I assume, hovers near the door, eyes darting, taking everything in with laser precision.

I perch on the edge of an adjacent chair, trying to ignore my racing heart. He is good-looking, sure, with his black hair and piercing blue eyes, but the woman in me recoils from him, screaming at me to run.

If only that were an option.

“Is this how you imagined our first meeting?” The corner of his mouth twitches upward, not quite a smile, more a knowing smirk. It’s unsettling how he reads my unease like an open book.

“Can’t say I’ve had the pleasure of imagining it,” I retort, the words escaping before I can rein them in. It’s a dangerous game, baiting a man whose hands are stained with more blood than I can bear to think about. “This was rather sudden.”

He snorts softly. “Your father has told me a lot about you. You’re the jewel of his empire, aren’t you?” His tone is deceptively quiet, yet it carries the weight of chains being fastened around my wrists, invisible but palpable.

“Jewels can be replaced. Empires crumble.” My reply is a whisper of rebellion, a flicker of defiance in the face of such an overwhelming force.

“True,” he acknowledges, his eyes never leaving mine. “But some things are timeless.” The way he looks at me then, as if seeing beyond the flesh and bone to the very essence of who I am—or who he believes me to be—is disarming.

In this charged silence, it really drives home what this is. I am not a partner to be cherished but a debt to be collected, and however this twisted fairytale unfolds, I am irrevocably his.

The room suddenly feels colder, despite the lack of any change in temperature. It’s as if Finn Doyle’s entrance ushered in a chill that seeps into the bones of those present.

“Everyone pays their dues, one way or another,” Finn says, his voice slicing through the tension like a knife through silk. “Choice is a luxury, and you, my beautiful bird, are about to become a luxury I can afford.”

His declaration hits me like a punch to the gut. I’m caught between a visceral fear of the unknown and the suffocating realisation of my new reality. I’m going to be his wife—a term that is a sentence, a noose around my neck. I should be scared, perhaps even terrified, but part of me simmers with a dark curiosity about the man whose name is synonymous with danger. It terrifies me more than he does, right now, and I try to shove it aside to focus on not tripping up and causing my father’s death with a wrong word uttered.

“Everything is a transaction in this world.” He leans forward, his forearms resting on his knees, bringing his face closer to mine as he searches my eyes, almost like he can read my thoughts. “You’ll learn. You’ll adapt. And eventually, you’ll thrive.”

There’s something hauntingly prophetic in his words, a future painted in shades of black I never asked for. But there’s also a thrill, a twisted perversion that coils in my stomach. What kind of person does that make me?

“Thriving under duress is just surviving fancied up with a bow,” I murmur, trying to maintain some semblance of control over the conversation.

“Then we’ll make sure it’s the prettiest bow you’ve ever seen,” he promises—or threatens; I can’t quite tell which.

“Pretty bows don’t change what’s inside the package,” I whisper, my defiance faltering as the reality of my situation settles on me like a shroud.

Finn stands abruptly, and the room seems to hold its breath. He steps toward me, bridging the distance. My pulse races, a frantic drummer heralding the approach of an unstoppable march.

“Inside this package,” he murmurs, stopping mere inches from me and crouching down to glare into my eyes, his hand lifting to brush a wayward strand of hair from my face. The touch is possessive, a claim staked without permission. “Inside is everything you need to become a queen. Remember that, little bird.”

His words, spoken with an ironclad certainty, leave me reeling. I’ll be a queen in a kingdom ruled by shadows and blood—a pawn crowned for the benefit of others. And yet, as I look into Finn’s eyes, I wonder if there’s more to this enigmatic man than the cold-hearted monster everyone fears.

As he turns away, leaving me to grapple with the swirling chaos of my thoughts, the chilling reminder settles on my chest that I’m irreversibly bound to Finn Doyle, and my life will never be the same again.

“Will you fight me on this?” he asks, his voice a velvet threat as he stares out of the window.

“Would it make a difference if I did?”

“No. But it would amuse me.”

“I bet it would,” I mutter, hopefully not loud enough for him to hear me.

I’ll never know if he did or not because he turns to his guy near the door as he moves closer to me again. “This is Aidan.

You'll get to know him real well."

Aidan watches us with a practised nonchalance, leaning against the wall like he's at a cocktail party, not an arrangement of lives.

But I can't tear my eyes away from Finn, trying to get some idea to this player, to this *game*. Every movement is calculated, and every word is weighted with double meanings. He's a puzzle, a maze of contradictions that beckon me even as they warn me away.

"Is it true what they say about you?"

"Depends on what they say." He takes a step closer, invading my space with his presence.

"Murders. Torture. Extortion." The words taste like poison on my tongue, but I need to know who I'm dealing with. "Are you really the monster they paint you to be?"

"Monsters are merely creatures misunderstood by those too scared to see the necessity of their existence," he answers cryptically, his hand reaching out to tilt my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"Are you saying you're necessary?" My pulse races under his touch, equal parts fear and a disturbed fascination swirling around my soul.

"Absolutely," he murmurs, his thumb brushing my lower lip. "I do what must be done for survival—for power."

"Power at what cost?" I whisper, caught in the intensity of his stare.

"Whatever it takes." There's a finality to his words that leaves no room for argument.

They say he's a man who has stared into the abyss and didn't blink, a man shaped by violence and hardened by loss. But I've lost, too, and I'm not a killer. His choices are what made him who he is, not his past.

"Valentina," Aidan's voice breaks through the tension, surprising me as I'd forgotten he was even there. His tone is soft yet laced with an edge that sends the hairs on the back of

my neck standing on end. “You should know Finn’s loyalty is unwavering, but so is his wrath. Cross him, and you’ll learn why fear is a wise advisor.”

“Is that a threat?” I challenge, trying to sound braver than I am.

“Consider it friendly advice,” Aidan replies with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Or a warning,” Finn adds casually, his fingers trailing away from my face as he steps back, leaving a shockingly cold void in their wake.

“Warnings usually come too late.”

“Then let’s call it foresight,” he says, and there’s a darkness to his smile that suggests he knows things—terrible things—that I can only imagine in nightmares.

Finn circles me like a predator assessing his prey. I follow his movements, my heart thudding with a primal fear that he seems to feed off. “I will give you everything your heart desires, little bird.”

“Generous,” I manage to say, but the word tastes like ashes in my mouth. “But I already have everything.”

His laugh is soft, devoid of humour. “I’m many things, Valentina. But never generous.”

“Then what are you?” I ask, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

“Yours,” he states, sending a bolt of unwanted lust straight to my clit. The possessiveness in his voice increases tenfold when he adds, “And you are mine.”

I want to scoff, to rail against him and this archaic claim, but the icy calm in his eyes stops me. He doesn’t know me. Yet, here I am, already a chapter in his book, a piece on his chessboard.

“Is that how you see me? As something you own?” My voice is steadier than I feel, challenging him to deny it.

“Which part of ‘I’m owed a debt’ didn’t you understand?” His harsh reminder crushes any desire I was feeling for this savage killer.

He’s right. This is ownership, a transaction completed long before I had any say.

“But don’t worry, I’ll take good care of what’s mine.”

“Care?”

“Of course. I protect my assets. And you are my most precious yet.”

His lips brush against my temple in a mockery of tenderness, and I’m frozen, caught between the need to flee and the perverse desire to lean into his touch. It’s clear then, in the way he claims my space as his own, that my body, my future, belongs to him now. And as much as I want to deny it, fight it, escape it, there’s a twisted sense of security in the iron grip of his possession—one that terrifies me more than anything else because it’s wrong.

But this is my life now. A life of opulence shadowed by the darkness of the man who now holds the strings. As I look into Finn Doyle’s eyes, I realise the true depth of my entrapment. There’s no escaping the web I’ve been woven into—no escaping him. Not even death.

“Until death do us part,” he says, a dark promise that makes me shudder.

“Or until death becomes preferable,” I whisper back.

Finn’s eyes flash with an intensity that tells me I’ve crossed an invisible line, and I know our dance has only just begun.

FINN

The moment I step out of Valentina's sight, the air chills, like I've walked into the shadow of my old man's expectations. A dark cloud of an unavoidable binding looms ahead, and the weight of it presses down on me like a wet cloak. My steps are heavy with a sense of inevitability, making my gut twist. I should feel something more, shouldn't I? But there's only this cold sense of duty like I'm marching toward a war I never enlisted in.

But the façade never drops.

Never.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath as I shove my hands into the pockets of my jacket, feeling the crisp autumn wind bite at my skin. It's just me and the ghost of the choice I never had.

Valentina.

Jesus, she's something else. Like someone carved her out of sin itself, with curves that could make a saint weep and a mouth made for lies or pleasure—I can't quite decide which. I smirk at the thought of taming that wild beauty, bending her to my will. That's the game, isn't it? Control. And Valentina's no different. She's mine to claim, an object of desire wrapped in defiance.

"That was... interesting," Aidan says, his voice slicing through my thoughts as he falls into step beside me.

"Like staring down the barrel of a gun," I admit, my eyes scanning the horizon where the city blurs into shadows and

secrets. “That fire, though? That has to go.” It’s nothing but words. The challenge I know she is going to present to me is worth taking her shit over. She has a smart mouth, and while this little encounter was a dull version of the knife’s edge, that blade is sharper than a samurai’s sword.

“Fire can be enticing,” Aidan replies, as if he knows where my thoughts went. He probably does. This asshole knows me better than anyone. Sometimes, even myself. His eyes flash with an edge of the darkness we wade through daily.

“Enticing and dangerous,” I say, clapping him on the shoulder. “But I’ve played with fire before. Never been burned.”

“Yet.” The word hangs between us as a reminder of our world’s unforgiving nature.

Aidan chuckles, but it’s laced with the kind of tension that comes from knowing too well the life we lead. Reaching the car sitting on this red-bricked, circular driveway, the rhythm of our footsteps sync up as if we’re two sides of the same coin—bound by blood and brutality.

That’s what we are, though. Thirty years of friendship will do that to you. From the cradle to the grave, as they say.

“Got a job tonight,” I tell him, the words slipping out with ease as I push Valentina O’Shea and the impending doom of a marriage I never asked for away. It’s another day, another act of violence that keeps our empire standing strong. It’s not just business; it’s a statement.

Aidan nods, the unspoken language of our shared existence enough to convey what needs to be done.

“Let’s make it quick,” he says, and I can hear the eagerness in his voice to get this over with, to return to the shadows where we belong.

“Always.” I need this over with so I can go and yell at my dad for being an overbearing cunt that needs a good ass-kicking. Sadly, for all the men I would happily kill over less, my father, the inimitable Paddy Doyle, is not one of them. I’ll be six feet under within two seconds flat. A really sick part of

me has to wonder why he chose this debt for *me* and not for himself. I have no idea who my mother is; some drugged-up whore that was used and discarded, I'm sure, so it's not like he isn't available to take on Valentina for himself.

Although that thought repulses me now. The image of her squirming under him has me nearly losing my breakfast.

As much as I hate this shackling, I get the why of it. It's all about power. A Doyle taking something only an O'Shea can give them. It's mafia 101, for fuck's sake. She is fire to my ice, but soon she'll learn her place.

Right now, the streets call with a darker allure, and I answer, as always, with a heart ready to dominate the world that dares to stand against us.

As Aidan sets off, driving us away from the inevitable, my thoughts don't stray far from Valentina; as much as I try to push them away, they keep coming back.

The thought of her trying to fight me off on our wedding night sends a jolt straight to my cock. I can almost hear her panting, feel her nails digging into my skin as I pin her down and claim what's mine. It's not just about lust—it's about power, about ownership.

I hope she resists. I want the struggle, the conquest. I want to conquer every inch of her—body and soul.

Minutes later, Aidan pulls the car up to a modest-looking house.

Leaning over to the back seat, I grab a crowbar, the metal cold and solid in my grip.

"Who's the poor bastard?" Aidan asks, slipping on a brutal pair of knuckledusters.

"Some cunt skimming off the top." That's all anyone needs to know. Names are irrelevant.

"Stupid fucker."

Exiting the car in broad daylight, I shove the crowbar up the sleeve of my Hugo Boss jacket.

Rapping on the front door, it opens moments later, and I shove my boot into it, knocking the guy back who answered it.

He's all bravado until he sees the steel in my eyes and holds his hands up. He's dressed in an old dressing gown, a mug of coffee in his hands.

"Please, Finn, I swear—it wasn't me," he whimpers.

"What wasn't you?"

He blinks, terrified that he just ratted himself out. "Erm, nothin', nothin'."

"Save it for someone who gives a shit," I growl, stepping forward and letting the crowbar slip out into my waiting hand. Gripping it tightly, I swing back, then forward, and the crowbar collides with his knee. The crack is sickeningly satisfying.

"Jesus, Finn!" He screams, crumpling down as Aidan, quick as a cat, grabs the coffee mug.

He takes care to pour it over our guy, who screams as the scalding liquid hits his bare skin, exposed by the gaping dressing gown.

"Shut it," I bark, looming over him. I'm in control here, and he's nothing but a bug under my boot. Raising the crowbar again, I slam it into his gut before I smash it into his face.

"Let's make this clear," I say, my voice like jagged ice as it slices through his screams. "You skim, you pay. Got it?"

He can't do much more than groan and cough at this point, clutching at his stomach. Pathetic. But I don't have time for pathetic.

Aidan takes over, slamming his fist of metal in the guy's face over and over. Blood spatters out everywhere as the cries become less.

"Enough," I mutter. "Leave him conscious. I don't want this asshole getting the relief from passing out."

Aidan grins and steps back, following me out and kicking the door shut behind him. The thud is a harsh reminder of the

world we live in. One where control is everything and mercy isn't even a concept.

As we head back to the car, I feel a thrill of satisfaction running through my veins. This is my world—the ugly, merciless one that lives in the shadows—and it bends to my will.

VALENTINA

My gaze drifts across the rows of empty pews, each carved from dark oak and holding the silent prayers of the faithful. They stand like sentinels in the dim light, guarding secrets. The church is almost deserted, save for a few scattered souls seeking solace in the quiet. I'm searching for one person in particular.

The priest stands alone at the altar, his figure haloed by the multicoloured light filtering through the stained glass above. My heart doesn't just skip—it outright stumbles, missing a beat as if surprised by its own reaction.

“Father Ryan Gannon?” I call out, and he turns.

Our eyes lock, and the air between us thickens with an intensity I didn't think possible in such a holy place.

For a moment, the world stands still.

“Yes. Valentina O'Shea?” he replies, his voice resonating with a warmth that wraps around me like a blanket. It's the kind of voice that could make even the darkest confessions feel lighter somehow.

I nod as I approach him. It feels like walking through water, every step laden with the gravity of what I'm here to do—and what I'm feeling. This isn't the flutter of girlish fantasies; this is something raw, something real that I can't afford to indulge in.

His blue eyes are mesmerising, and I find myself thinking it's a real fucking shame this man is already taken.

But there again. I will be too... soon.

“Thank you for meeting me on such short notice,” I say, trying to steady my voice as I stop a respectful distance from the altar. I should be thinking about the wedding, about Finn, but all I can focus on is the man standing before me and how blindsided I am by his beauty, both outer and inner. I can see through to his soul, and he is kind and generous.

“Of course,” he answers, stepping down to meet me on equal ground. “Anything for the O’Shea’s and it’s important we get everything right for your big day.”

Part of my brain wonders why he didn’t say the Doyles, but maybe he doesn’t know. Maybe he is shielded from that side of life. My dad, on the other hand, is a staunch Irish Catholic despite his mafia life. He attends Father Ryan’s Mass every Sunday without fail.

I become acutely aware that Father Ryan’s gaze hasn’t wavered, and neither has mine. There’s an understanding there as if he knows this marriage is making me dead inside.

“Right,” I echo, forcing a smile. “The big day.”

“This way, Miss O’Shea,” he says, and it’s like he dips my name in velvet, soft but heavy with implication. I can’t pull away; it’s as though his irises have cast a net over me, trapping me in a dance of silent longing.

“Call me Valentina, please,” I murmur, following him through to the offices at the side of the church.

I watch as a candle’s flame flickers, casting a warm glow over his features, illuminating the flecks of grey in his eyes like the shards of a broken mirror. They reflect back my image—a woman caught in the chasm of something dangerous.

“Is everything all right?” His brow furrows ever so slightly, concern lacing his words. He steps closer, and I force myself not to reach out and hold him close.

“Fine,” I lie. “Just nerves, I guess.”

“Understandably so.” He nods, the gentle understanding in his tone only knots the tension tighter.

My heart races, a frantic drumbeat echoing through my veins as I fight to maintain control. It's forbidden, this errant pulse quickening at his proximity. My palms grow clammy, the sensation as foreign as the thoughts swirling in my head. Thoughts that have no place in the sanctity of this church in the presence of a man who has devoted himself to a higher calling.

I'm not a great believer in God. Or rather, I *believe*, I just don't care enough. It makes this encounter even more awkward as I'm a sinner standing in front of a saint.

"Let's focus on the ceremony details," I suggest, desperate to anchor myself to the reality I am bound to. The reality where Finn waits, where duty lies. Not here, not with the man whose gaze holds a promise that can never be.

"Of course," he replies, breaking our gaze for a moment to retrieve a notebook from the desk. I breathe easier, grateful for the respite, however fleeting, as he sits down and indicates I take the seat on the opposite side of the desk.

"Traditional vows, or would you like to write your own?" Father Ryan's voice is matter of fact, but I catch a hint of curiosity as he glances up at me, pen poised.

"Traditional," I answer too quickly, a flush creeping up my neck. Writing my own would mean pouring out truths better left unspoken, and desires better left unacknowledged.

He nods, scribbling a note. He looks back up at me, and the intensity of his gaze returns full force, an unspoken question lingering there.

"Is there anything else that concerns you?" His words are careful, measured, but they tug at something wild in my chest.

"Nothing I can voice," I admit, honesty slipping through the cracks of my resolve.

He studies me for a moment longer, his expression unreadable. Then, with a slow nod, he rises and closes the distance between us as he takes the seat next to me, reaching out to place a reassuring touch on my hand briefly. A simple

gesture, yet it sears through my skin, igniting every nerve ending in its wake.

“If there is something troubling you, I am here to listen.”

The weight of his words settles heavily on my shoulders. I withdraw slightly, needing space, needing air. “Thank you, Father, but everything is fine.”

He nods again. “If you’re sure?”

“Absolutely,” I chirp, brighter than I feel.

The chemistry is undeniable; it crackles like static before a storm. But this can’t happen. He’s a man of God, and I am to be a mafia bride. It’s typical that I find exactly what I’m looking for in a few seconds, but all the reasons why I can’t have him are stacked up in a messy pile, spilling out in front of me with stark reminders.

I feel sick.

“Let’s discuss the ceremony details,” I suggest briskly, desperate to steer us back to safer waters.

“Of course,” he complies, but there’s a slight falter in his composure, a ripple across the calm surface.

We talk dates, readings, and music—mundane anchors to keep me from being swept away by the current of forbidden thoughts. Yet, every word I speak feels weighted, heavy with the unspoken truths of my heart.

Minutes later, who knows how much time has passed, he sits back and closes his notebook. “Will that be all?” He folds his hands, the picture of priestly propriety, but his gaze betrays him again, holding mine with an intensity that says we’re anything but two souls discussing holy matrimony.

“Yes, thank you,” I stutter, cursing myself for the tremor in my voice. I need to leave, now, before I do something reckless—something that could burn down both our worlds.

“Take care, Valentina. I will see you in a few months,” He stands, and his voice carries a warmth that seeps into my soul.

Rising, I turn and walk away, each step an effort to distance myself from the pull of his presence. As I exit the church, I let out a shuddering breath, trying to shake off the electric charge that lingers on my skin. My mind whirls with what-ifs and maybes, but they're poison, sweet and deadly, and I can't afford to taste them—not when so much is at stake.

As I walk down the stone steps into the crisp autumn air, I'm haunted by the weight of his gaze still lingering on my back, a ghostly touch that ignites fires better left unkindled. I'm going to be Finn's wife, not a priest's secret sin. Still, the memory of Father Ryan's eyes holds me captive, and the terrible thought bounces around my fucked up head as I wonder if he's as seduced as I am.

“Get your shit together, Valentina,” I mutter. “He's a fucking *priest*.”

The last remnants of candlelight flicker out behind me as the church doors close with a finality that feels much like the end of an act in a tragic play. Ahead, the world is bleak, a stark contrast to the warmth I'm leaving behind. That warmth has a name, and it's one I'll recite like a silent prayer of penance: Father Ryan Gannon.

RYAN

The silence in the church claws at my insides like a caged animal trying to break free. Valentina O'Shea's scent, jasmine and something wild, still lingers in the air, taunting me with her invisible presence. All I can think about is how every cell in my body vibrates with something that's as forbidden as it is intense.

Automatically, I make the sign of the cross, but my faith feels like a thin veil I'm hiding behind right now. She's as untouchable as God himself. Her life is mapped out by bloodlines and brutal legacies. My mind understands the unspoken rules that bind her to Finn Doyle, a marriage arranged not by love but by strategic alliance, or something more sinister. The O'Sheas and the Doyles, two sides of the same tarnished coin, their union meant to solidify a power that feeds on darkness.

"Fuck." It's a curse thrown into the holy silence of the war raging inside me. The coldness of the rosary beneath my fingertips does nothing to quench the fire that Valentina has unwittingly stoked. She's caught in a web she didn't weave, and here I am, the one person who should be above such earthly concerns, trapped right alongside her.

This is unprecedented.

All of it.

My body, my mind... it doesn't work this way.

I was born into the same life that Valentina was, only I chose a different path, one that was as obvious to me as the

nose on my face.

My family's name is synonymous with fear and power. They are the underbelly of this city, their hands stained with sins I've spent a lifetime trying to absolve. The Gannons are brutal with spider legs across cities, countries even, at the root of the land we were born. Growing up in Dublin, my family moved here, along with several of my aunts and uncles, when I was five. Twenty-five years in Manchester, and I haven't lost my Irish lilt completely. Neither has any of my family. Some of them are regulars at Mass; the others, I barely see, but they are all as tainted as each other. My calling was a way to remove myself from the life, to get as far away from the bloodshed and violence as I could get. But there is more to it. More that pushed me towards God. Feelings that lacked, that I knew I should have and didn't, made me think I was broken. For more years than I can count, I tried to feel desire and attraction, but forcing it only made it worse. Becoming a man of God was a welcome relief, one that, up until today, was the right choice. There was no doubt in my mind.

But this fire burning through my veins is unfamiliar and unwanted. Valentina O'Shea has broken my already shattered soul just by her presence in my church.

My gaze drifts to the altar, heavy with the weight of my calling. Forcing myself to imagine Valentina walking down the aisle, her eyes searching for an escape I can't provide, the very thought of watching her surrender to a life without choice, without love, makes something primal in me want to roar in defiance. But it's not my place. I'm a priest, a man of the cloth; I took vows—vows that are now chains around my heart.

With every beat of my traitorous heart, I know I'm reaching a point from which there may be no return. The path of righteousness stretches before me, narrow and steep, while the temptation to stray beckons with a siren's call. My hands clasp together, not in prayer, but in a desperate attempt to hold onto the fragments of the man I'm supposed to be.

But as much as I try to push her image away, it lingers, a portrait of melancholy, a broken dove with clipped wings, and

it claws at my insides. I could feel the weight of her sadness, as tangible as the heavy air I'm breathing. There is an ache, deep and persistent, to promise her sanctuary from the storm that is her life. But I am a man of God, sworn to serve, not to covet.

With every breath, I feel the pull of two worlds—my sacred vows and the carnal desires she has unwittingly awakened. The knowledge that I could have been just like them—if not for the grace of God—lingers bitter on my tongue. I could have been a king among thieves, but I stand here a servant, cloaked in piety and now plagued by temptation.

A test.

This is a true test of my faith.

I understand that now.

God thinks I haven't proven my loyalty to Him by turning my back on my family to become His. He needs more from me, and I will happily give it just to be free from this trench that I'm currently sitting in, covered in filth and sin.

It is a test. I will bury the seed of longing that has taken root, and I will pray for both our salvations.

"Valentina," her name escapes my lips, a strangled prayer mingled with torment. She's touched something profound in my soul, a part of my being I thought wasn't there. She's breached every defence with a mere glance, and I'm left here in the silence, grappling with emotions that can't be confessed within these hallowed halls. One thing is clear—my path has turned into a mighty storm, and I am at its mercy.

FINN

The chill of the Manchester night cloaks the city in a shroud of whispered schemes and shadowed deals. I stride down the damp alley, my boots silent on the slick cobbles, Aidan at my side, both of us moving like spectres through the underworld we command.

“Word is, O’Donoghue is looking to expand his territory.”

“Not tonight,” Aidan mutters, looking preoccupied.

“Something on your mind?” I stop, grabbing his arm so he will look at me.

“Nothing you want to hear.”

“Try me.”

“Another time.”

“Your head needs to be here.” It’s a warning, and he knows it. He might be like a brother to me, but he isn’t above discipline if the need arises.

He focuses on my eyes. “It is.”

Nodding, I let go of him, taking him at his word. For now. But if I see this shit again, he’ll be pulled from active duty and benched to shuffle paper for the rest of the year.

We enter the back room of The Rusty Nail, a pub as grimy as the dealings it conceals. Its walls are steeped in secrets, and tonight, they’ll absorb a few more. Eyes flicker toward us, quickly averting out of respect and fear. I revel in it; the power that derives from me is an aura, untouchable and lethal.

“Ah, Finn Doyle. What brings you here?” O’Donoghue greets me, his eyes wary as he takes in my approach.

“O’Donoghue.” My nod is curt, dismissive. “Let’s cut the bullshit. You know why I’m here.”

“Always straight to business.” He attempts a greasy smile, but it falters under my gaze. “I’m only looking to make things more profitable for all parties involved.”

“Your profit is our loss. Not happening.”

“Come now, there’s plenty to go around,” he tries, desperation seeping into his tone.

“You forget your place,” I lean forward, my hands flat on the table, the threat implicit. “And you overestimate your worth.”

My eyes lock with O’Donoghue’s, and he knows. He knows he’s teetering on the edge of a knife.

“Look, how are any of us supposed to expand if there isn’t a bit of give?”

“You take from me, that means I gotta take from someone else, and quite frankly, an intercity gang war is the last thing I have the patience for.”

“You’re getting O’Shea’s territory. Why not share the spoils?”

Slamming my fist on the table, it takes me a few seconds to reign in my murderous intentions.

“Where did you hear that?”

“You’re marrying the girl, Valerie. We all know what that means.”

“Valentina,” I snap, weirdly bothered by his getting her name wrong. Leaning over the table, I grab him by his shirt and drag him over it, knocking pint glasses all over the floor. “Lesson one,” I spit, my eyes ablaze with a rage that makes every man in the room flinch, “you don’t speak her name. You understand me? You don’t know her; you don’t talk about her.”

“Okay! Okay!!” O’Donoghue stammers, his bravado slipping away like sand through fingers.

“Lesson two,” I continue, ignoring his pleas, “anything that comes from my union with her is my property. My territory. Try to grab a slice, and I’ll personally come down here and tear you apart. Or what’s left of you after tonight.” Bringing my head forward, I smash him in the face with it, breaking his nose. He squeals, but I’m not done with him yet. Bunching my fist, I punch him hard enough to floor him; only my hand in his shirt is holding him up. Then I hit him again and again before I drop him to the sticky floor and kick him in the ribs.

“Lesson three,” I say, my voice a cold, deadly hiss, “never assume you know the inner workings of my business. You ever try to anticipate my moves again, this will look like puppies and flowers.”

There’s a beat of silence, then a sharp gasp for air emanates from O’Donoghue’s battered face as blood pours from his shattered nose.

I straighten my suit jacket and turn my back on him, leaving the pub in a heavy silence broken only by O’Donoghue’s whimpering. Aidan falls in step beside me, handing me a handkerchief to wipe off the spatter of blood on my hands.

“Nice speech,” he approves as we walk out the back door into the cool night.

“I don’t like it when people think they can take what’s mine.”

He gives me a narrowed-eyed stare that would unnerve me if I had any concern about what is running through his head. As it happens, I don’t give a shit.

As we return to our car parked in a dark alley, the cold bites, but it’s nothing compared to the ice in my veins. This city, this life—it’s a chessboard, and I’m always three moves ahead.

Aidan drives us away from the dingy pub, and the phone rings through the speakers.

“Boss, everything’s ready for the shipment tonight,” Mick, one of my most trusted foot soldiers, informs me when I answer.

“Good. Make sure it’s done quietly. No loose ends.”

“Of course, Finn. You got it,” he replies.

“We can’t afford any fuck-ups.” Usually, I don’t need to say things twice, but tonight, things feel different.

Off.

Hanging up, I spit out, “Go to my dad’s. I need to speak to him.”

Aidan nods and heads to Paddy Doyle’s sanctuary on the outskirts of the city.

The drive is silent, and when we arrive, my dad is waiting for me as if he knows I am coming.

He probably did. Not much gets past the old geezer.

“Dad,” I clip out, gesturing for Aidan to stay in the car. “We need to talk.”

“About your prize?”

“Fuck that. This is a shitshow,” I growl, following him inside. “She had no fucking idea about any of this until yesterday.”

“And?”

“She is resistant.”

“So?”

Shaking my head, I breathe out. “I really don’t want to put up with her shit.”

“Too damn bad. This is the debt, and you are the one accepting it.”

“Why me? Why not you?” The second the words are out of my mouth, I regret them.

His eyes are alight with a fire that makes me sick to my stomach. “I was offering her to you as a present to my son for his thirtieth birthday, but if you don’t want her, I’ll take her for myself.”

Our gaze is like lighting flickering in the air. “I’ll take her,” I grit out because the thought of her anywhere but *my* bed infuriates me beyond comprehension.

“Break her in nicely. Maybe when you’re done with her, I’ll take her off your hands.”

“Don’t be a prick,” I snarl.

He chuckles. “Remember, son, it’s not just about breaking her—it’s about owning her soul.”

Something about his words shifts my anger at him for setting this up. Valentina’s spirit, fierce and untamed, is a challenge I relish, and when I’ve had my fill, when I’ve moulded her into the queen of my dark empire, only then will I truly possess everything.

“Her soul,” I mutter, a promise etched in the darkness. *And every inch of her body along with it.*

FINN

The phone feels like a block of ice against my ear, a stark contrast to the rage simmering in my veins that this shitshow isn't going to be over anytime soon. "This circus needs to end—yesterday."

Her voice, a soft tremble on the other end, only sharpens my impatience. "This takes time to—"

"Time is a luxury we don't have." I cut her off, glaring at the bright sun shining through the big window of my office as if it were an enemy. "I want you bound to me, with no fucking space for this to go sideways."

I can almost hear her swallow her fear. "It will be ready, Finn. I promise."

"Promises are just words, Valentina. I need actions." I hang up and slam the phone down on the desk, its clatter echoing my hammering pulse.

There is one reason and one reason only why I need this over with.

My dad.

His words have chilled me, and I know he will take her without a second thought and crush her. As much as I want to see her tamed and cowed, *I* want to be the one who does it. Not him. He will destroy her. I just want to... show her that the darkness can be enticing; that this doesn't have to be the end of her world.

Aidan leans against the doorframe, eyebrow raised. “Ready to light a fire under the priest?”

“Let’s go.” I snatch up the keys from the desk. I don’t need asking twice.

The drive is silent.

Aidan can sense my mood and is keeping his distance. But more than that, he’s got whatever shit is bothering him weighing him down, and he has got precisely two hours to tell me what the fuck it is, or I will beat it out of him.

The church looms ahead, its spire stabbing at the azure sky.

I push open the heavy doors, the scent of incense and old wood invading my nostrils. It smells like judgement, like secrets whispered in the confessional.

“Nice setting,” Aidan mutters, his eyes flickering with dark amusement.

“Fuck off.”

My voice echoes off the stone walls, footsteps resounding like a bell as we march down the aisle, the hushed silence broken by our entrance.

“Think the good Father will see it your way?” Aidan asks, hands casually tucked in his pockets as if we’re out for a leisurely stroll.

“He’ll see it, or he’ll feel it,” I reply. “One way or another, this wedding happens this fucking week.”

We reach the altar, and I pause, taking in the carved figures of saints and sinners. They watch me with sightless eyes; their marble faces frozen mid-prayer or mid-scream—I can’t tell which.

“Sinners and saints,” Aidan muses, following my gaze. “Not much between them sometimes.”

“Saints don’t survive in this world, and sinners get what they want. Let’s find Father Ryan.” I head toward the offices,

every step a declaration of war. The church may be God's house, but today, it'll answer to Finn Doyle.

Father Ryan stands there, his back to us, a figure swathed in quiet authority—until he turns and meets my gaze.

“Mr Doyle,” he says, with a nod that's more formality than respect. “I've been expecting you.”

Eyes narrowed, I take in his face and then they flick to the sign on the desk. *Gannon*. Shaking my head, I smile. This is probably going to be easier than I thought. Or possibly harder. Depends on how much he knows about his family.

“Cut the crap, Father.” My voice is a blade, sharp and ready. “If you know why I'm here, what are you prepared to do about it?”

“The wedding is scheduled three months from now.”

“Change of plans.” I step closer, invading his personal space, letting the threat simmer between us. “It's happening this week.”

“Or what?”

The defiance and lack of fear is interesting. So, the hard way it is.

“If this wedding isn't moved up to the end of this week, your face won't be as pretty by the time I'm finished with you.”

“Threats?” He scoffs, and it infuriates me at the same time as it impresses me. “And in a church, no less.”

“Not a threat.”

He doesn't give a flying shit. He is more like his family than I bet he is hoping he isn't.

So I appeal to the priestly, kind side I can see lurking under that icy glare. “Let's put it this way. If this wedding doesn't happen by the end of the week, Valentina will be in serious danger from someone bigger and badder than me. If you know who I am, you know I don't make that statement lightly. She

needs to be bound to me in the eyes of your God, or her life really does depend on it.”

His face goes rigid, his jaw clenched tightly. I’ve hit the nail on the head, and now we will get somewhere without me having to bleed him out in this most sacred of spaces. Not that it would stop me. God and me are not on good terms. I believe, because I know evil exists and one cannot be without the other.

“Very well,” he says stiffly. “Friday, twelve o’clock.”

“Good choice.” I straighten my cuffs, shooting Aidan a look that says it’s time to leave. “We’ll be seeing you on Friday, Father. We don’t need a rehearsal, just the main event.”

His glare is pure poison, and I wonder how he avoided following in his family’s path and ended up here.

As we exit the church, I can feel Aidan’s eyes on me, probing, questioning, but I don’t give him the satisfaction of looking back. The game is set, the pieces are in motion, and I’m one move closer to checkmate.

“Go to Seamus’s,” I murmur as we climb back into the car. “This is a conversation that will happen face to face.”

He nods and sets off.

Fifteen minutes later, we are standing in Seamus’s office, which smells of leather, cigars and whiskey, a shrine to power. But he has none here. He has been dismissed, as this is between me and his daughter now.

“Valentina,” I say, my voice echoing slightly off the mahogany walls as I lean against the desk, revelling in the power that courses through me. “Wedding’s been moved up. It’s this week.”

“I see.”

My grin stretches wide enough to feel like it might split my face as I watch her reaction. She betrays nothing.

Pushing off the desk, I step closer to her. Knowing she is being stalked, she retreats until her back meets the wall. I can

see it in her eyes—the way they dart around, looking for an escape she won't find.

“Finn...” she whispers, voice breaking. Her hands shake. She looks like she is about to bolt.

Grabbing her by her throat, my fingers dig into her flesh, and she winces. “Are you going to resist?”

“Finn, please...” Her plea is a sweet melody that only feeds my hunger.

“Shh,” I hush her, my other hand moving to the hem of her blouse. With one swift motion, I rip it open, buttons popping and skittering across the floor. She trembles against me, her breath hitching.

“No!” Valentina's cry bounces off the walls, but it doesn't reach my heart. Nothing does anymore except this—her fear, her submission.

“Never say no to me.” The words are a growl as I spin her around and press her into the wall, the cold surface making her gasp. “This is where you belong, Valentina.”

“Let go,” Valentina pants, her voice filled with anger and dread, struggling against me.

My fingers trail down her arms and tighten around her wrists like steel traps. “The more you fight, the worse it'll be.”

Her chest heaves as she takes in my words.

Aidan stands by the door, silent as a grave, his expression unreadable. I'm not even sure he's breathing. But he won't interfere; he knows his place.

“Please, Finn...” Her voice cracks, and that sound spikes my adrenaline. It's intoxicating—the power I have over her, the way she quivers and tries to shrink away from my grasp. But there's nowhere to hide, not from me.

Letting go of her left wrist, I slide my hand up her skirt, bunching it in my fist until I reach her pantyline.

She gasps, a strangled noise of protest, but I silence her, placing my other hand over her mouth as I press my body

closer, trapping her between me and the wall. Ruthless and unyielding, my fingers edge past the lacy fabric to find her pussy, shaved bare, making me stifle my groan of desire.

“Finn,” she whimpers against my palm.

“Only me,” I whisper in her ear. Thrusting two fingers inside her pussy, claiming, owning. “No other man will ever touch you again. You’re mine.”

Her sobs are muffled against my hand, wet from her tears. Her body trembles with each cruel thrust of my hand. But she can’t escape.

Aidan watches us; his only sign of life is his heavy breathing. He is turned on as fuck. He should look away, but he doesn’t. And I don’t care. Let him see the lengths I’ll go to, the depths of my possession.

“Say it,” I demand, my hand relentless. “Say this pussy is mine.”

“Yours,” she breathes out. Her defeat is intoxicating. The word is a knife to my soul, carving out a space for her that no one else can fill.

“Good girl.” I pull back, leaving her dishevelled and exposed. She turns as I step back, her gaze haunted and hollow. She knows now—there’s no escaping the darkness that is Finn Doyle. “See you, Friday, little bird.”

We stalk out, leaving an impression that will stay with her for a long time, and get back in the car. I’m fucking exhausted. I need to sleep, but I’m finding it elusive as ever.

As the car rolls forward, the power of the machine resonates with the predator inside me, I don’t look back; I don’t need to. Every part of me is focused on what lies ahead—the future I’m sculpting out for myself, for Valentina. She’s mine, body and soul, whether she accepts it or not.

Aidan watches the city blur by, his reflection in the window ghostly. “She’s strong,” he murmurs, almost to himself.

“Strength is irrelevant,” I say, my voice sharp as cut glass.
“In the end, they all bend. They all break.”

“Where to now?” Aidan asks after a stretch of silence, punctuated only by the rhythmic flick of the turn signal.

“Home,” I answer, my eyes fixed on the road that unfurls before us like a black ribbon. “We have preparations to make.” The wedding is just a piece in a much larger game—one I intend to win.

As the car speeds away, there’s no room for doubt, no space for weakness. Only the certainty of conquest and the thrill of the hunt. Valentina is the prize, and I am the victor. Everything else is just noise.

VALENTINA

My skin still tingles with the ghost of his touch, a vile reminder of Finn's claim stamped onto my flesh. He thinks he owns me; he believes his sins are invisible beneath the guise of power. I sit on the edge of my bed, wincing at the tenderness on my wrists that blooms. I never imagined fear could be so tangible, a bitter taste lingering on my tongue as thoughts of escape claw desperately for purchase in the chaos of my mind. But this is nothing. A mere blip on the radar of what I know is coming. Our wedding night is going to be a savage taking and as much as I wish I could refuse him, *no one* refuses him. I can only hope that when the time comes, I'm ready to give him what he wants, and I hope he gives me time to prepare, to *mentally* prepare.

Every instinct is telling me to run. But where to? And at what cost? They would kill my father without a second thought, an eye for an eye, blood for blood. It makes me wonder whose blood he spilt to demand such a high price. No. There is only this gilded cage, its bars as cold and unyielding as Finn's gaze.

I rise, legs trembling, a marionette pulled by strings of obligation and fear. My reflection in the mirror offers no solace, only the stark truth of my entrapment. The scars of last night's horrors might fade from my skin, but they've etched themselves into the marrow of my soul, a permanent brand of the life I am bound to.

But you can't outrun your blood. The weight of my family's name bears down on me, a crown made of thorns

rather than gold.

Yet, even as despair drowns me, that old spark of defiance ignites. I won't let Finn break me. I'll wear the mask, play the part, but he'll never truly have me. I have to believe that in the act of surrender, I'll find the strength to survive this hell.

"Survive," I repeat like a mantra. "That's what we do—we survive."

A knock at the door startles me, a sharp rap that echoes like a gunshot in the quiet. I freeze, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

"Package for you," my dad's voice calls out through the door before he walks away.

Curious, I open the door and see a huge white box at my feet. I know before I even catch sight of it what it is. My stomach roils with revulsion.

"Jesus Christ." I exhale sharply. "Fuck you, Finn." As I lift the box like it's a bomb about to detonate, I take a shaky breath and place it on the bed. Pulling the lid off, I'm not at all surprised by the contents—a white wedding dress. A symbol of purity and love twisted into a mockery by the hands that sent it.

Lifting it up, I inspect it for flaws. There are none. The dress is gorgeous—Finn wouldn't have anything less. Delicate lace overlays a bodice that promises to cinch and suppress, much like the life waiting for me at the altar.

It's a token of possession sent by the man who believes he owns me, and I feel the fight draining out of me again. It's exhausting. He is three steps ahead, always. He always will be. I don't have a strategic mind. The mafia life isn't mine to navigate. I'm just supposed to sit pretty and be married off to pay off debts.

What a life.

Perhaps I should've made more of an effort to learn, to flex my mind and my muscles.

“Too fucking late now, fucking idiot.” Inhaling deeply, I slowly release the breath. Survive. Survival means wearing the dress, walking down the aisle, smiling for my husband and the world. I know he will want to consummate this marriage in a way that shows he is dominant and has control over me. Well, I’m going to let him. I’m going to play his little game and let him think he is winning because survival is the name of the game.

Survive.

That’s all there is now.

That and Father Ryan Gannon, whose kind eyes are haunting me.

His soft smile lingers in my fantasy, and I close my eyes. In this fleeting daydream, he’s not in his priestly collar but in the casual attire of a man unburdened by sacred vows. It’s just Ryan and me, not the mafia princess or the priest—just two souls drawn to each other.

For a heartbeat, I indulge in the warmth of that fantasy, allowing it to wrap around me like warm water, shielding me from the frostbite of reality.

But the truth strikes, sharp and vicious.

He is a priest, sworn to God, while I have to marry the devil himself. My grip on the dress slackens, the fabric slipping through my fingers as if judging me for daring to dream.

How can I fantasise about the touch of a man whose soul is promised to heaven when mine is shackled to hell? Tears sting my eyes, again, unwelcome evidence of my weakness. I blink them away fiercely, refusing to let them fall.

I drop the dress, watching it crumple back in the box. I turn away from the fallen dress, knowing that each step forward is a step deeper into the abyss.

“Survive,” I repeat, though the word tastes more like a curse than a vow now.

VALENTINA

Friday came around too quickly, but at the same time, not quickly enough. The world outside the tinted windows of the black SUV blurs, a streak of reality racing past as we hurtle toward the church. My fingers curl tight around the delicate lace of my dress, the fabric a cold whisper against my skin. I can barely swallow over the fear lodged in my throat.

“Where is my dad?” I ask the driver, finding it odd that I haven’t seen him at all since first thing this morning. I’m alone in this rolling cage, save for my own spiralling thoughts.

“Somewhere safe until this is over.”

“What?” Sitting up straighter, my blood runs cooler. “What do you mean, somewhere safe?”

“Exactly that. His fate now rests on your head.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I’ll kill Finn with my bare hands if anything happens to my father. But then I shake my head. I understand this. He knows. Finn knows I’m ready to run and is preventing that the only way he can. Fucking asshole.

My hands are aching from being clenched into tight fists as we pull up to the church moments later, and the sight steals the little breath I have left.

Ryan.

The driver stops and gets out, opening my door for me, and I step out into the cool afternoon air, my heels clicking on the

ancient cobblestones as I move away from the car and settle my dress around me.

Aidan's there, at the top of the steps, his emerald gaze slicing through the space between us to find mine. He offers his arm, an unspoken command rather than a gentlemanly gesture.

"You here instead of my dad?" I bite out.

"Someone has to give you away. Let's not keep him waiting," Aidan murmurs as we ascend the steps together.

In another time, another place, I'd find him appealing with his boyish good looks and those deep, soulful eyes. As it is, I hate him as much as I do Finn.

The heavy doors open with a soft groan, revealing a sea of luxury inside. My eyes sweep over the baroque golds and marbles, the flickering candles casting dancing shadows that seem to mock my faltering steps. The pews are filled with strangers, their faces blurred and indistinct, their whispers like the rustling of leaves before a storm. God only knows where they all came from on such short notice. I didn't invite anyone. I'd hoped it would be a quiet affair, over and done with in a few minutes.

Guess someone had other ideas.

"Fuck," I breathe out, the single word encapsulating every shard of dread piercing through me. Nobody here gives a damn about me; they're just bystanders to the spectacle, the sacred joining of power and fear.

"You've got this," Aidan mutters, his voice a tether in the swell of silent expectation.

In shock at the moral support, I look at him. Really look, and I nod, seeing through the barrier that shields his soul. Despite the gravity of this situation, it intrigues me, but my attention is quickly drawn away from him.

The guests rise, a wave of rustled fabrics and muted murmurs, as I start down the aisle, each step calculated, betraying none of the terror clawing its way up my spine.

Ahead, the altar looms, and with it, the man who claims me as his without ever capturing my heart.

The fabric of the dress clings to me uncomfortably, barely covering my breasts, in a probably deliberate move by Finn. It's a beautiful prison, nonetheless, adorned with lace and pearls, each one a reminder of the price of my father's safety. The ache in my head throbs in time with my hesitant heartbeat as I stand still, the church's aisle stretching before me like a runway to damnation.

"You look like an angel," Aidan whispers, his voice rich with an irony that doesn't quite reach his eyes. His gaze lingers a moment too long, stirring an unexpected flutter in my stomach at the heated, forbidden desire, but it's masked quickly.

My hand trembles on Aidan's arm, and he clamps his over mine. It's warm and solid, and it feels like a false lifeline in this squall.

Then the organ sounds, and we're moving towards my doom.

With every step, I'm torn, shredded between the life I owe my family and the stolen moments with Ryan that haunt my dreams. I haven't even looked at him yet. I can't.

My gaze drifts anywhere but to the top of the aisle, searching for salvation. Or maybe absolution.

I let out a half-sob, and I choke it back, swallowing the tears pooling in my eyes. This isn't the time for weakness. Not when every eye is trained on me, judging the product of their underworld dealings—a bride traded for a life.

The altar looms like a guillotine, drawing me closer with each step. Finn stands there, tall and unyielding, a pillar of coldness wrapped in an elegant suit that does nothing to soften the hard lines of his body. His eyes are dark pools, voids that give nothing away, yet seem to devour everything around him.

I lift my chin, forcing myself to meet Finn's gaze, but as our eyes lock, something shifts within me, a silent plea for

freedom. His stare is unwavering, expecting submission, demanding it. But I'm not ready to give it—not yet.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, but I know he doesn't see me. He sees a deal struck, a promise of alliance, and a trophy wife.

The moment stretches, a thread pulled tight, ready to snap.

And then, it breaks.

My eyes, traitorous and hungry for a glimpse of hope, find Father Ryan. He stands solemnly by the pulpit, his presence like a lighthouse in a stormy sea. Our gazes collide, and in that instant, the world narrows down to the space between us, charged with silent confessions and desperate longing.

There's a promise there, in the way he holds my gaze—a promise of something more, something fiercely alive amidst the charade we're forced to play.

Finn extends his hand, and I place mine in his, a gesture that seals my fate.

“Welcome, *wife*,” he says, and his fingers tighten around mine, a vice that promises to never let go.

“Let's begin,” Ryan states.

Finn's grip is steel, remorseless, while Ryan's gaze is a whispered secret, a door left ajar to possibilities that might have been—or could still be.

The words are a blur, Ryan's voice a steady hum that seems to come from far away. He stands in front of us, the very picture of calm authority, but his eyes betray a storm I know all too well. They flicker to me, just once, and it's a silent scream in the vast silence of the church.

“Valentina,” he says, and my name on his lips is a caress. “Do you take Finn to be your lawfully wedded husband, to live together in marriage?”

I blink, and there's a sharp sting behind my lids. The vows are a string of syllables that tangle on my tongue. I'm supposed to repeat after him, to echo the promises that will chain me to a life I never chose. But my voice is a rebellious thing, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

“I do,” I whisper, but it’s a lie, and we all know it. My vision blurs, and for a heart-stopping moment, I think I might crumble right here on this spotless aisle.

Ryan’s lips move, reciting the words that bind me to another, but it’s his eyes that are speaking to me, saying everything he can’t out loud.

He feels what I feel.

Whatever that is in this twisted, fucked-up world where we stand.

“Repeat after me,” he instructs Finn, who looks every bit the king of his domain, unbothered by the tremors running through me.

Finn’s voice is clear, confident, and so damn sure as he says, “I take you, Valentina, to be my wife...”

My hands are cold, and my fingers are barely able to straighten. I’m caught between the pull of two worlds—the one where duty reigns supreme and the one where whispered ‘what-ifs’ linger in the air long after they’re spoken.

“Rings,” Ryan commands gently, and Aidan hands them over, his green eyes locked on mine with an intensity that rivals the inferno burning inside me.

The ring is heavy in my hand, a circle of metal that feels like a shackle. I slide it onto Finn’s finger, and the weight in my chest grows heavier, a physical ache that spreads like wildfire. Finn’s eyes are on me, dark and unfathomable, and I wonder if he sees the tears threatening to spill over.

Finn grips my fingers tightly, too tightly, and slips not only a gold band onto my finger but an enormous pink diamond after it. Both are slightly too big, but that could be because my hands are like ice. The dress fits like a glove, so I refuse to believe Finn didn’t get this bit right. Not that it matters.

“By the power vested in me,” Ryan’s voice cracks ever so slightly, and it’s the most beautiful flaw. “I now pronounce you man and wife.”

Finn turns to me, his hand reaching up to tilt my chin toward him. His kiss is possessive, a brand that stakes his claim.

“Mine,” he murmurs against my lips, and the word is a final nail in the coffin of my freedom.

But even as the ceremony concludes and the guests rise in a standing ovation, my gaze goes back to Ryan, and I know exactly how he feels in that moment because I do, too.

We are damned.

As I turn to face my future, I can feel the weight of every eye upon us. Finn’s arm is tight around my waist, a chain that holds me to him, to this life I never wanted. Ryan’s gaze burns into my back, a reminder of everything I’m leaving behind.

My smile is carved from ice, but inside, I’m fracturing, splintering into a thousand shards of pain and longing.

“There’s no turning back now.”

No turning back.

Finn’s muttered words almost have me believing he has regret over this. Almost. The phrase reverberates in my mind, a noise that drowns out everything else.

With a possessive glint in his eye, Finn ushers me into the sleek blackness of the waiting car and helps me inside, following me closely.

The door shuts with a soft thud, encasing us in silence. Finn’s gaze is steely, a challenge and a promise entwined. I look past him, through the tinted windows, to the world outside, where freedom is just a cruel illusion.

“Welcome to forever, Valentina,” he murmurs, and my name in his mouth feels like a prison sentence.

“Forever,” I echo, gazing into the abyss that stretches out before us.

FINN

Sunlight flickers over us, casting shadows that play hide and seek across Valentina's face—my wife, my possession.

“Time to make this official,” I state, grabbing her wrist and dragging her across the expanse of the back seat towards me.

Valentina's gaze is fixed out the window, her body tensing, sensing the storm that's about to hit. “Finn, not here—” she whispers.

“Right here, right now.” My hand clamps around her thigh, yanking her toward me. Her dress, an expensive swath of silk and lace, is nothing but a barrier I'm hell-bent on tearing down. There can be absolutely no room for technicalities.

“Please, Finn—not now,” she begs, but despite the outlying reasons for this, her plea fuels the fire in my blood. My hand travels higher, roughly gripping her so she can't escape. Not that there is anywhere to go.

My fingers crawl up her dress, claiming what I've been promised. My breath is hot and heavy, tasting the fear that mingles with the faint scent of her floral perfume.

Aidan's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror for a split second—holding a world of silent conversations—but he looks away. He's seen this side of me more times than either of us can count.

Pushing her back to the seat, I loom over her, shoving her dress up her thighs and forcing her legs apart with an ease that

speaks of entitlement.

“Please, Finn,” she whimpers, each word trembling as much as her body under my touch. “I’ll give you what you want, but not now!”

“Right now. You’re my wife, and you will give it to me now.”

She squirms, so I clamp my hands around her wrists as she writhes underneath me, getting my cock hard enough to do real damage.

“You’re hurting me,” she chokes out, but pain is just another shade of pleasure—it’s a lesson I’m all too eager to teach her.

“Good,” I hiss, relishing the control that courses through my veins like a drug. “That’s what you get for fighting me.”

She struggles underneath me, trying to get me off her, but she’s too weak.

“You will open your legs for me whenever I want. You’re mine. Do you understand?”

She bucks under me, a wild thing trying to break free. “Finn!” Her breath is hot and panicked. “Can’t you wait until we are alone?” There’s a tremor of fear in her plea that should give me pause, but instead, it fuels me.

“No,” I spit out, pinning her wrists above her head with one hand, but it tells me everything. She is outside of her comfort zone with Aidan watching. The muscles in my arm strain, physical evidence of the battle of wills.

“Please...” Her eyes dart to Aidan at the wheel, but he doesn’t turn, doesn’t acknowledge anything happening in his rearview mirror.

“Look at me,” I demand her attention, dominance dripping from every syllable. Her gaze flickers back to mine.

“Fuck you,” she hisses, defiance sparking despite the tears that glisten on her lashes, and it makes me groan with longing.

Gripping the side of her lacy panties, I pull them down, exposing that perfect pussy to me. Grappling with her as she twists and turns, I flick open my fly and pull out my painfully erect cock, wedging myself further between her open legs.

With a low growl, I waste no more time. Ramming into her pussy, I thrust deep, up to my balls.

She growls with defiance, but it's too late.

It's done.

She is mine in every way there is, and my father cannot find any loophole to tear her away from me.

The car's suspension creaks under the violence of our struggle. "You're mine, Valentina," I growl. "Truly mine."

"Fuck you!" she spits again, the fire in her tone only adding to the sheer hedonism of this exchange.

I am relentless; each pound into her cunt is calculated to break her down, to make her understand there is no escape from me, from this life.

As I fuck her on the back seat with Aidan bearing witness to this claiming, I possess her with every stroke of my cock. This is just the beginning, and there will be no end to the darkness I'll drag her into.

Valentina's resistance dwindles to a whisper, frail and fluttering like the wings of a dying butterfly caught in a spider's web. The fight ebbs from her limbs, her struggles succumbing to the inescapable force of my body bearing down on hers.

There's no pretence of gentleness, no illusion of love—just raw, primal conquest.

But then I feel it. Her body betrays her, responding to me despite the terror and pain that flicker across her face. Her eyes, wide and glistening with unshed tears, meet mine for a fleeting moment before they glaze over, and her mouth goes slack.

"Fuck," I hiss, a dark satisfaction coiling in my gut as I feel her pussy squeeze me tight.

She's broken, her spirit bent beneath the weight of my dominance.

My grip tightens, fingers digging into her flesh, and with a few final, brutal strokes of my cock, I come with a guttural groan, releasing my hot cum inside her. The rush of satisfaction floods through me as I collapse onto her heaving chest, my heart racing with the thrill of this conquest.

"Mine," I whisper, letting go of her wrists and stroking the wayward hair off her face. "You know it now, don't you, little bird? You get off on it."

In this fucked-up moment, I've marked her in the most intimate way possible, and though she remains silent, her body tells me all I need to know.

Aidan's eyes are fixed on the road ahead, his jaw clenched so hard I can see the muscle ticking. He doesn't look at us through the rearview mirror, doesn't acknowledge the ragged breathing or the stifled sniffing from my wife.

Straightening up, the air between us crackles with something far darker than desire. I zip up my pants with a swift tug, the sound jarring in the quiet. My fingers linger for a moment on the buckle, the cold metal grounding me.

"Listen to me, Valentina." My voice is ice, every syllable a razor blade. She flinches as she pushes her dress down in a false sense of modesty. "You're my wife now. That means your body is mine. Whenever I want, wherever I want." There's a warning in my words, a promise of pain if she dares to defy me again. "Understand?" I demand, locking my gaze with hers in the rearview mirror. Her eyes are wide and wet, but she nods, a tiny jerk of her head that's barely perceptible. Good. She's learning.

"Good, because we aren't doing this again. Next time I want you, you will open your legs like a good little wife and take my cock until you come all over me." I settle back into the leather seat and ram it home. "Next time, you won't fight me. Because if you do, I'll slit your fucking throat."

Aidan finally gives a brief glance in the mirror, his hard eyes meeting mine before flicking away. There's a question there, maybe even a challenge, but he knows better than to voice it. He's bound by loyalty, by the unspoken rules of our world.

He wants her. He wants what's mine, and even though he won't admit that is what is bothering him, I can see it written all over his face now. He has betrayed himself. That made this encounter an event. Three birds with one stone. That's a record, even for me. He lied to me the other day and tried to deflect his concerns about retribution from the O'Shea's, and I knew then. This was just the proof I needed.

The question remains now: what am I going to do about it?

The city streaks past us, blurs of colour that mirror the chaos raging inside me. But I shove it down, bury it deep. Finn Doyle doesn't break. Not for anyone.

VALENTINA

Humiliated doesn't entirely cover how I'm feeling right now as we pull up to a fancy hotel somewhere in the city. It has less to do with Finn than it does with Aidan. I knew my first time with Finn would be... interesting, brutal, even. I did *not* expect a witness to it. That pushed me too far out of my comfort zone, and I think that is why Finn did it. Either that or he is just a horny beast who couldn't wait to get some from his new wife. Maybe both.

"What's this?" I ask.

"The reception," Finn replies.

"I didn't..."

"No, I know."

Giving him a curious look as he suddenly rears back and gives me an almost fearful stare, I swallow.

"What?"

"That dress... where did you get it?"

"You sent it to me... didn't you?" Now I'm feeling even more at odds with this situation.

"No." His jaw is clenched as he grinds out the word. Grabbing my hand, he opens the back door. Aidan has already got out and wandered off, thankfully, so I don't have to face him after what he witnessed earlier.

"Finn, what is going on?"

“Nothing you need to be concerned about,” he snaps, but I don’t feel his anger is directed towards me. I think that there is something bigger going on here, and I’m not sure I want to be a part of it.

We march into the hotel reception and are pulled up immediately by Paddy Doyle. Even if I didn’t already know him by sight, I would know just by looking at him that he is Finn’s dad. They have the same features; only Paddy is older and more heavysset than his son.

“Ah, the happy couple,” Paddy says.

“Dad,” Finn mutters.

He ignores Finn in favour of giving me a raking once-over with his eyes, lingering of the low cut neckline that practically exposes my breasts. It makes my skin crawl. He grips my chin, and Finn’s hand tightens around mine.

“You are a pretty thing, aren’t you? I hope my son is pleased with you.”

“She’s great,” Finn states coldly.

Blinking as I sense the tension rising, I lower my gaze as Paddy lets go of my chin and walks away without another word.

“I need to freshen up,” I murmur.

Finn nods and walks me over to the ladies’ room.

“I’ll see you inside,” I mutter, not really wanting him hovering outside while I cry and finally process what the fuck has happened today.

His eyes bore into mine, but eventually, he nods stiffly and strides off in the direction his father went. Shoving open the door, I breathe out and hurriedly check to see if all the stalls are free. When I know they are, I move across to lock the door and I turn to the mirror to let out a sob. This is not how I expected my wedding to go. Not that I’d thought about it much, but this is like something out of my worst nightmare. My hair is a bit of a mess from the struggle in the car, and my eyes are watery from trying not to cry. Breathing in, I hike my

dress up and wiggle out of my panties, still feeling Finn's cock battering my pussy while Aidan watched.

My cheeks flame with humiliation again as I reach for the tissues on the counter and pull a few out of the box. Wiping away the cum, I dump it in the bin and then bunch the white lace panties in my fist. Straightening my back and throwing my shoulders back, I throw the cum-soaked panties in the bin as well, in a gesture of... something. Smoothing my dress down, I turn to the door as there is a hard rap. My heart skips a beat.

“Valentina?”

It's Aidan.

Frowning, I cross over and slide the bolt across, opening the door a crack. “What?”

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine.”

“Finn has his reasons for being an asshole.”

“That's nice.”

He snorts at my nonchalance. “You are a strong woman. Most would be crying in a corner.”

“I'm not most woman.”

“No, you aren't.” His quiet words and the softening of his gaze makes my mouth go dry.

I flinch when his fingers brush my arm, his touch a whisper against my skin that belies the danger of his presence. His hand feels warm, too warm like the heat of a flame promising both light and destruction.

Aidan's lips twitch in sudden amusement, but his eyes remain cold, green pools of calculation. “Finn has been generous,” he murmurs, his breath brushing my earlobe, sending a shiver down my spine despite myself. “He's given me permission to do whatever I please with you.”

My stomach churns at his words, a violent blend of fury and disbelief. Finn thinks he can pass me around like a prize?

My hands ball into fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms.

But then I narrow my eyes and purse my lips. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

“Cut the bullshit, Aidan,” I snap. “Finn wouldn’t pawn me off to you or anyone else. He’s too possessive for that.”

His green eyes hold a shadow that sends a shudder down my spine.

“Ah, Valentina, you sound so certain,” he murmurs, his finger tracing a path down my arm before dropping away. “But what if you’re wrong?”

“Then let him tell me himself.” My words are daggers, sharp and pointed. “Until then, don’t fucking touch me.”

Aidan studies me, his gaze piercing as if he’s trying to unravel my thoughts, thread by thread. But I’m not some damsel locked in a tower; I am iron forged in fire, hammered by life’s brutal fists, and Finn’s savage consummation of our union has made me even stronger. He might have meant for it to tame me, to break me, but he has the wrong fucking woman for that. He showed his hand in my dad’s office, fingering me while I was helpless to stop him, but the fucking... I can’t say I didn’t expect it.

“Noted,” Aidan murmurs and backs away.

Slamming the door shut again, I inhale slowly. This is a baptism of fire, but I’m learning quickly.

Washing my hands methodically, as I stare at my reflection, I see the change go over me. Two can play at this twisted game, and I have to catch up or be left behind.

Turning off the taps and drying my hands, I step out of the ladies’ room, every inch the queen of this sordid chessboard, ready to make my next move.

And I have a feeling it’s going to blow Finn’s socks off.

He won’t know what fucking hit him. I’m going to make sure of it.

My heels click with authority, punctuating each thought that races through my head. Finn Doyle, my husband, the man who thinks he can own me—his grip is about to be tested. I'm not the little wounded bird he believes he's ensnared; I'm the storm he never saw brewing on his horizon.

I don't slow down when I enter the lavish ballroom, not even when the murmur of the crowd swells around me. Eyes flicker in my direction, taking in the sight of me—chin up, spine straight, every inch the mafia princess.

“Watch closely, assholes,” I mutter. The next move I make will have Finn reeling, grasping for pieces he didn't even realise were in play. “Let's see if you're ready to play this game by *my* rules.”

VALENTINA

The world dims to a blur as I lock eyes on Finn. He's a dark star in this glittering universe, the centre of gravity that pulls me through the sea of hollow laughter and clinking glasses. He is the only thing that matters right now. He needs to see, to be shown, that if he wanted a wife who fears his touch, then he'd better make other arrangements. I breathe, steel my nerves, and start cutting a path toward him.

"Valentina," he says, but I don't let him finish. My fingers curl around his hand as I tug him away from the circling sharks, his lackeys who thrive on blood and power.

"What—" His surprise is a melody to my ears.

My voice might be a whisper, but it's laced with iron. "We need to talk. Now."

"What about?" His surprise is over, and he's back to the hardcore mafia enforcer as he yanks on my arm to get me to stop.

Turning to him, I don't show him anything. No one else exists for me right now; they're all just shadows flickering at the edge of my vision. I'm focused on the man whose hand is gripping mine too tightly.

"Not here." I move away, and he follows, unwilling to let go of my hand nor cause a huge scene by wrestling with me to stop. I'm a freight train he never expected and doesn't know how to halt.

I lead him into an empty room, probably used for conferences or small events, away from prying eyes and probing ears. The music becomes a distant echo, the laughter a fading memory. It's just Finn and me, alone in a world crafted from secrets and silence.

“You’d better have a good reason for this, *wife*.”

I turn to face him, my hand still gripping his.

“Did you tell Aidan he could do whatever he wanted to me? Did you give him permission?” The words cut through the tension, sharp and unyielding. My voice doesn’t falter.

Finn’s laugh is a flash of lightning in the gloom, sudden and jarring. “Oh, Valentina,” he murmurs. “That was a test.” He leans in, close enough for me to feel the heat from his body. “Did you let him?”

His question hangs in the air, a challenge wrapped in casual cruelty.

“What will you do if I say yes?”

The challenge is laid bare, and the anger flashes in his eyes, so I know this is all a load of bullshit. Finn is a master at manipulation, but I won’t be manoeuvred so easily.

“You had better hope to fuck that you’re screwing with me.”

“I don’t like being treated like an asset,” I hiss. “I am not yours to hand out as a party favour to whoever the fuck you like. I am your *wife*, and you will treat me with respect.”

“You *are* my wife, and I need to know you understand what that means.”

“Oh, I understand. Do you?”

He searches my eyes and steps closer, forcing me back against the wall. “Did you let him touch you?”

I stand my ground. “I didn’t let him lay a finger on me,” I declare, my voice slicing through the space between us. “Because I am married, Finn, and only my husband has that right.”

His eyes darken, lust brewing in their depths as he registers my defiance. He was not expecting that, and now the playing field is even. A slow smile crosses my lips as I want to shout in triumph, but I try to remain calm as this isn't over yet. Not by a long shot.

“Is that so?”

“I am always yours. But don't forget that you are also mine.”

With deliberate intent, I graze my hand over the front of his pants. My fingers dance across the fabric. His body betrays him, responding despite the arrogance that clings to him as part of his DNA.

“Valentina...” His warning is a growl, but there's a flicker of something else there – he's stunned over his layer of desire.

My touch grows bolder, tracing the outline of his arousal. This is a dangerous game, one where the stakes are higher than either of us can afford.

A rasp tears from Finn's throat, his chest rising sharply beneath the crisp lines of his suit. He is hard against my palm. My triumph gives me the courage to keep going.

“Jesus, Valentina,” he bites out, voice strained as if every muscle in him is coiled tight, fighting the urge to give in to the sensation. His eyes glint with danger, irritation and arousal, a silent battle raging behind those icy blues. He's not used to being the one on edge, the one squirming under someone else's control.

The power I feel is overwhelming.

I have one shot at this. One. Because next time, he will see me coming a mile away. This has to count.

“Earlier, in the car,” I murmur, leaning in so close I can see the subtle twitch in his jaw, “I wasn't prepared for you. Aidan's presence unnerved me. I've never...” I lower my gaze bashfully, and it reels him like a fish to bait.

Finn's hand hovers at his side, clenched into a fist, and then slowly, it uncurls. His breaths come heavier now; each

exhales brushing hot against my face.

“Valentina...” It’s a plea, a curse, a prayer all wrapped together, and it sounds like victory.

“Slide your hand under my dress. You’ll find me prepared this time,” I murmur against his lips.

There’s a beat, a single moment suspended in time, where I wonder if he will push me away, if he’ll retreat back into that shell of calculated calm. But then, his fingers move, bunching up my dress, grazing the bare skin of my inner thigh.

“Fuck,” he groans, voice ragged when he finds me unencumbered. His touch is fire, and I’m ice, melting and reforming under his hands. This time, I’m ready for him, and he will never be able to get enough.

His eyes darken, the blue turning thundery with a need that mirrors the chaos he’s known for wielding. I’m betting he’s always been this impenetrable fortress, but as my hand strokes him through his pants, I see the first brick crumble and wonder if any woman has unravelled him, even this far before.

“Does it feel good, Finn? Feeling my hand on you like this?”

“Christ.” His curse is strangled, barely more than a rasp. The fire I’ve stoked in him flares brighter, consuming his anger and leaving only raw hunger in its wake.

Knowing I have him where I want him, at the precipice of surrender, is something that will see me through the bad days and the worst days that will undoubtedly follow.

“Valentina.” There’s a warning there, somewhere, but it’s lost, drowned by the rough edge of desire in his tone.

“Shh,” I soothe as my fingers fumble with the button of his pants and pop it open. The sound is deafening in its significance, a line crossed, a point of no return. My hand slips inside to find hot, pulsing flesh.

“Fuck,” he hisses, his head reclining back as my hand wraps around him. His length, still coated with my reluctant cum, throbs in my grasp, and I can’t help the rush of power

that floods me—power over the man who is used to commanding everyone around him.

“Tell me you want this,” I demand, beginning a slow, deliberate stroke that draws a ragged groan from deep in his soul.

“I want—”

“Show me,” I cut him off, increasing the pressure, the speed. I watch, fascinated, as every shred of restraint left in him shatters.

His hands grip my hips with a force that will leave marks to match those on my wrists, but I don't care. It's worth it to see the mighty god brought to his knees by need. His eyes lock onto mine, a silent plea etched within their depths, and I know I've won this round.

“Good boy,” I purr, a victorious sneer tugging at my lips. As my fingers continue to tug on him, coaxing moans from him, I realise this is just the beginning.

As he wedges himself between my legs, guiding his cock into me, I get it now.

This is power—the kind that intoxicates, the kind that corrupts.

And I am drunk on it.

VALENTINA

“Harder,” I whisper.

The words are a catalyst; they ignite something primal in Finn. His grip on my hips tightens, his fingers digging into my flesh as if trying to anchor himself in the hurricane I’ve unleashed.

“Fuck,” he growls, the sound guttural, almost animalistic. It’s a warning, a plea, a surrender all at once.

Then suddenly, Finn Doyle, the enforcer, returns, and he’s all action—no hesitation. His mouth crashes onto mine, hungry, demanding. His lips move with a desperation that speaks of unspoken needs; desires buried deep.

“Need you,” he pants against my lips, the confession tearing from somewhere vulnerable, somewhere untouched by the callousness of his world.

The roughness of the wall scratches against my skin, but it’s nothing compared to the sensation of Finn’s body moulded to mine. Our kiss is a chaotic clash, a battle for dominance where both of us are winning.

“Mine,” he snarls, the single word a possessive brand seared into my consciousness as he pounds into me.

My eyes flutter shut, not in pleasure, but to conjure the image of someone else—Ryan Gannon. His chiselled face, and those deep-set eyes full of secrets and piety shield me from the reality of Finn’s touch.

“Mine.” Finn’s voice is rough, gravel mixed with sinful intent.

“Yours,” I murmur, the lie rolling off my tongue as easily as my thoughts continue to revolve around Ryan—his solemn vow of celibacy, the way his collar sits against his throat, a barrier between desire and duty.

Finn’s breaths are heavy, like the beat of a drum, as he thrusts deep into my pussy. He’s doing things to me, but it’s Ryan’s image that I see. His rhythm is relentless, and I match it with practised moans.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he groans, and I can taste the satisfaction dripping from every syllable.

Inside, I’m ice, detached from the act that’s supposed to be the most intimate. Finn doesn’t notice; he’s lost in his own release, believing he’s claimed another victory in our twisted game.

“God, Valentina,” he pants, thinking he’s broken me, shaped me into the wife he wants—a willing participant in his dark world.

Slipping my hand between us, I rub my clit, needing to give him what he wants.

Panting, he takes over, shoving my hand away as he pinches and rolls my clit, teasing me to the edge of the cliff. This isn’t surrender—it’s strategy. In giving him what he believes I want; I’m carving a space for myself within the chaos. A place where I can breathe, where I can wait for my moment to turn the tables.

The orgasm hits me, and I pulsate under his fingers, my pussy clenching around his cock.

“Good girl,” Finn whispers, burying his head into the crook of my neck as he pounds me against the wall, his cock thrusting in and out in a merciless fucking.

My eyes fix on a spot over his shoulder. Somewhere beyond this room, beyond Finn’s grasp, lies the life I want—a life where choices are mine to make.

For now, I'll wear the mask of the dutiful wife; let him think he's tamed me.

Finn's groan rips through the charged silence of the room, a primal sound marking his release. His body shudders against mine, and I can feel the heat flooding inside my wet pussy. He leans forward to kiss me, his lips grazing mine in a possessive claiming that's meant to brand me as his.

"You're a good girl," he murmurs against my mouth. "A good wife."

His thumb traces my jawline, and a small part of me wonders whether he senses the lie. Does he see past the mask to the plotting that simmers underneath? Or is his vision clouded by arrogance, convinced that he has me exactly where he wants me?

"And you've decided to play nice," he continues, a warning underlying the gentle cadence of his voice. "I'm glad, Valentina. Because I don't want to hurt you."

"Of course," I reply, my tone subdued, giving nothing away. "I'm yours."

He pulls back to study my face, searching for sincerity. What he sees satisfies him, and he nods with a self-assured smirk.

As he pulls away, fixing his pants, his back momentarily turned, I allow myself a single moment of vulnerability. A silent scream echoes within the hollows of my chest, for the life I'm trapped in, for the touch I endure, for the helplessness that claws at me with each encounter. But then I shove it all down, burying it deep where it can't weaken me.

When Finn looks back at me, I'm composed again, the perfect image of acquiescence. He kisses my forehead, a gesture meant to be tender but one that feels more like the stamp of ownership.

I let him take my hand and lead me out of the room, the perfect picture of a happy couple; but one day, Finn will learn just how fiercely a caged bird fights when it finally tastes freedom.

RYAN

The silence of the church is a stark contrast to the chaos of yesterday. I sit alone in an empty pew, the echo of Valentina's vows haunting me like a ghost of what could've been. It's unsettling, how her eyes were searching for something more, something not found at the altar.

"God," I start, knowing I need guidance. "I don't know what to do." It's a dangerous confession, even here, in the supposed safety of God's house.

I trace the wooden backrest in front of me, the lines worn smooth by years of penitents seeking comfort. Comfort I'm supposed to provide, not seek. But Valentina, with her soft curves and softer smiles, she's turning my world upside down. She's making me question everything.

Standing abruptly, my fingers grip the back of the pew. Every line I've drawn, every vow I've taken, blurs when she enters my mind—and she's always there, lurking in the shadows of my thoughts, waiting to pounce.

"Protect her, please," I mutter.

Turning when I hear the rustle of the confessional, I push Valentina aside and focus on my duty.

As I sit enveloped in darkness, the fabric of the priest's garb clings to my skin like an unwelcome reminder of the vows I've taken—vows that now bind me tighter than the chains of any penitent sinner.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” a voice trembles through the lattice, a soft breeze that carries with it the scent of her perfume, disrupting the air of the confessional.

Gripping the wooden edges of my seat, I close my eyes. It’s her. A surge of something forbidden rushes through me—anticipation, longing, fear—all tangled together in a knot that tightens with every beat of my treacherous heart.

My collar feels tight, suffocating, a noose around my neck. Her presence here is a test—one I’m terrified of failing.

“Valentina?” The name slips out, an accidental prayer, and I mentally chastise myself. This isn’t just any woman; she’s a lamb lost within the lion’s den of Finn Doyle’s world, and now, caught in my confessional—a sanctuary that feels more like a battlefield with every second.

“Uhm, yes, Father,” she stutters, knowing I’ve crossed a line, her vulnerability a sharp blade twisting in my chest. “It’s been too long since my last confession.”

“Go on,” I coax, each word heavy with a burden I can’t name. My fingers clutch the fabric of my cassock, betraying my emotions. I’m supposed to guide her, to be her rock, yet here I am, crumbling like ash.

She exhales a sigh that carries the weight of her sorrows and begins to speak. Her words are rain drops against the parched earth of my soul, stirring a hunger I cannot feed. Laced with pain, her voice draws me in, leaving no room for the divine.

“Father, I’m trapped. A bird in a gilded cage.” Her confession tugs at me, her metaphor too close to the truth. Trapped—aren’t we both? She in a marriage devoid of love, and I in the chains of my consecration.

“God sees all his children,” I murmur, desperate to steer my thoughts back to safer waters. “He knows your suffering, your heart.”

But do I know mine?

I push the question away, locking it where it belongs in the darkest corner of my mind. It’s her salvation I should be

seeking, not the damnation that beckons with each syllable she utters.

“Father, I fear what my life has become.” The quiver in her confession resonates through the lattice, and it hits me where it hurts.

“Your path may be fraught with trials,” I reply, my voice a lifeline, I throw both to her and to myself, “but you are never alone. God walks with you.”

Lies.

It’s me who wants to walk with her, stand beside her, shield her from the storm. I want to be the one she turns to, not an invisible deity. The thought is blasphemy, yet it burns up my soul, a fire I can’t extinguish.

“Thank you, Father.” Relief softens her voice, and I imagine her smile.

“Is there anything else, my child?” Though I dread her answer, I ask, afraid of what more she might reveal, of the truths I might uncover about myself in her words.

“Father, I’ve sinned,” she murmurs.

“Speak freely; you are in a place of forgiveness,” I manage, my voice steadier than I feel.

There’s a hesitation, a rustling of fabric as if she’s wringing her hands or clutching at the edge of her dress. “I let him touch me, Father. My husband. I let him claim me.”

Each word is a bolt of lightning scorching through my veins. Claim. The term brands itself onto my consciousness, vivid and violent in its implications. I swallow hard against the bile rising in my throat.

“Marriage is a sacred bond, one of mutual respect and—”

“I don’t love him,” she cuts in, quick and desperate, “not like he demands. Not like I should.”

“Love can be complicated,” I say, but it’s automatic, hollow. My mind races, images unbidden: Finn’s hands on her, where mine long to be. It’s a sin, this jealousy, this

covetousness, yet it coils inside me, a serpent with fangs sunk deep.

“Complicated doesn’t begin to cover it,” she whispers, and there’s a shiver in her voice that mirrors the tremor in my soul. “I’m lying to him. I feel as if every part of me he’s touched is tarnished, but he thinks otherwise.”

The words taint the air, and I fight back the urge to leap to her defence, to wash away her doubts and fears with more than just words. But all I have are these prayers, these empty verses that do nothing to shield her from the darkness of her own marriage bed.

“No one can diminish your worth, not even in marriage.”

“Is it wrong to wish it were otherwise?” Her question hangs between us, ripe with meaning.

“Wrong?” I echo, stalling for time, for composure. My hands tremble, hidden from her sight. “To wish for love is never wrong. But to act against your vows is.”

“I haven’t,” she’s quick to assure me. “But I’ve thought about it. Fantasised about being with someone else. Someone kind.”

“Fantasies are not sins. They’re windows to our deepest desires, our truest selves.”

“Even if they lead us into temptation?” Her inquiry is a whisper, but it echoes like a scream inside the cramped booth.

“Even then,” I reply, wrestling with the knowledge that we are speaking of the same thing without saying it outright. “It is what we do with those desires that define us.”

“Thank you, Father.” The gratitude in her voice is a blade twisting in my gut.

“Go in peace, Valentina,” I murmur, hoping she walks out of here and never comes back.

“Thank you,” she repeats, and then she’s gone, leaving me with the echo of her confession and the raging storm of my heretical wants.

As silence settles like dust, I remain seated, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, my cock grows hard, and I groan, closing my eyes as I slip my hand into my pants and grip it loosely.

It's a betrayal, a mockery of my holy vows, yet I can't deny the raw desire that pulses through my body. She haunts my waking hours and infiltrates the sanctity of my dreams.

"Lord, have mercy," I whisper as I tug my cock gently, unable to stop it, even if I wanted to.

As guilt clashes with need, I cling to the slim thread of justification—the understanding that she is as trapped as I am.

My mind spirals into fantasies unbecoming of a man of God. I imagine the softness of her skin under my calloused hands, the taste of her lips on mine. My cock throbs as I picture myself as more than just her confessor: her protector, her comforter, her lover.

Increasing my speed, I grow harder in my hand. It's happening, and I can't stop it.

"God forgive me," I breathe out, choking on the words. Each stroke of my hand is a new sin.

My heart pounds against my ribcage in desperation, its rhythm echoing in my ears. There is no glory here, no divine power or heavenly grace—only earthly desire which threatens to unravel me.

I imagine her touch replacing mine, delicate fingers wrapping around me with trepidation as I guide her.

The tension ripples through me, reaching its peak as beads of sweat trickle down my temple. Heat floods every vein and sinew, setting my senses ablaze with self-inflicted torment and pleasure alike.

With a shuddering sigh, I surrender myself to the climax; it wrecks me in its wave— an unholy sacrament in this holy space. Each spurt is a searing brand on my conscience—a testament to my corruption, a vivid reminder of my failings.

“Forgive me,” I gasp, whispering fervent prayers between ragged breaths. The aftershocks of my release still coursing through me, lacing the hollow words with a profane undercurrent.

The silence that follows is deafening.

I withdraw my hand and tuck myself back into my pants with trembling fingers. Shame bears down on me as I stare at the sticky evidence of my sin smeared across my palm. I reach for the small bottle of holy water beside the Bible and douse my hands, rubbing them together in a futile attempt to cleanse the physical remnants of my transgression.

I close my eyes and lean back against the worn wooden bench, fully clothed yet feeling stark naked in front of my judgement.

Services will resume, and parishioners will flood in and out of this sacred space soon. Masked by their faith, they won't see how much this holy place has been soiled by the sins of the flesh and by me.

VALENTINA

My eyelids flutter open to a high ceiling, which might as well be the sky. The chandelier above me is a tangle of crystals and gold, dripping opulence like a too-rich dessert. For a moment, I can't remember where I am, then it hits me like a sucker punch—I'm in Finn Doyle's mansion, in his bed, his ring cold on my finger.

“Jesus,” I mutter, pushing back the silk sheets that feel more like shackles than luxury. My feet hit the plush carpet, and I notice his side of the bed hasn't been slept in.

Again.

Since we got married, he hasn't touched me, barely even looked at me.

I suppose I should be grateful. It's a day of peace, after all, but I feel this is the calm before the hurricane.

Sighing as I think of Ryan and how he knew it was me in the confessional yesterday gives me a warm feeling. These emotions are unwanted, but I also crave them just to feel something positive. This game with Finn is exhausting, and I've only been playing it for two days. A lifetime of strategic movement, always thinking, constantly alert, has me shaking in my proverbial boots. I wonder if it will ever get any easier or if, by some miracle, I grow to love him, or at least *like* him. As much as I wish I didn't, I do find him attractive. That dark, dangerous side is alluring, enticing. He does whatever the fuck he wants, and there are no consequences... for him. My body is a traitor to my mind, but deep down, I'm glad. If I found

him as repulsive as I find his father, fucking him would be a lot harder. At least he gets me off, even if he is being a savage asshole who enjoys the struggle and enjoys having people watch him.

Glancing at my wrists, the bruises are there, but not as bad as I thought.

Having spent as much of yesterday out as I could, under the pretence of packing up some of my stuff to move to this mansion, not that far from my own home in this exclusive suburb of Manchester, I think Finn gave me the time. Today will be different, so I'd better get used to this place and finding my way around.

After a quick shower, where I fear to linger too long, I get dressed in a long black dress with a low back but plenty of fabric at the front to cover up my assets. Finn will want his wife to look good for him, and I intend to deliver to keep him sweet and unaware of my true feelings for him.

With each step down the grand staircase, in my high black heels, I steel myself, remembering the woman I am underneath all this—a survivor, a fighter.

“Valentina,” Finn greets me, appearing as if by magic at the foot of the stairs, his voice smooth as the scotch I know he favours. “You look...” He trails off, that intense gaze roving over me like I'm territory he's claimed.

“Look what?”

“Like my wife.” His smirk is sharp enough to cut glass.

“I am your wife,” I murmur, tilting my head back for an expected kiss.

With a curious look, he obliges, making my stomach clench. Am I playing the part too well?

“Go and get some breakfast,” he orders. “I expect you on your leash today.”

Grimacing, I turn it into a stiff smile. “I had no plans today.”

“Good.” He stalks off, and I let the façade drop slightly, but I can never let it go completely. He has eyes and ears everywhere.

Before I’ve even reached the kitchen, I hear muffled voices seep through the half-open doorway of his office, laced with danger and dripping with command. I pause, cursing myself for eavesdropping but needing knowledge. All the knowledge. Knowledge is power, as they say, and I want power.

“Half now, half when it’s done,” Finn’s voice is like gravel, grating against the plush silence of the mansion.

“Understood, Mr Doyle,” comes the reply, shaky, submissive. It’s one of his underlings—I can’t see them, but I know the type. Eager to please, desperate to survive. My father has dozens of them.

The reminder of my father makes me frown. He was back at home yesterday but locked away in his office. He barely spoke to me, and I’m still too angry with him to care much.

“Make sure there are no fuck-ups,” Aidan adds, his tone light, conversational, but it carries the weight of a death sentence. “We wouldn’t want to complicate our relationship.”

“Of course not, Mr Quinn.”

I inch closer, peering around the corner discreetly. They stand in the office, which looks much like my father’s. Finn, leaning back against the mahogany desk, exudes a ruthless calm as he examines the man before him. Aidan lounges by the bookshelf, an amused tilt to his lips that doesn’t quite mask the predator I know he is.

“Remember, the Doyles don’t take kindly to disappointments,” Finn states, even though it’s not necessary. This underling is shitting himself already.

“Yes, sir.” The poor bastard is sweating bullets, his eyes darting between Finn and Aidan, a trapped rat seeking an exit.

“Good,” Aidan claps his hands together with a sound that echoes like a gunshot, sending the underling scurrying off past me. He doesn’t even notice I’m there.

“Pathetic,” Finn mutters.

“Yep,” Aidan agrees. “But useful.”

“Like all tools,” Finn says, and I feel that word ‘tools’ like a hook in my gut. I’m just another one of their instruments, aren’t I?

Aidan shifts suddenly, those green eyes boring into mine with an intensity that scorches my soul. He doesn’t call out, doesn’t expose my spying—instead, he offers a slight nod, a silent acknowledgement of my presence in their twisted world.

I have no doubt Finn knows I’m here, but he doesn’t react.

Retreating, I press my back against the cool wall, taking a moment to collect myself. My chest tightens—not with fear, but with a reluctant respect for the way Finn and Aidan command their domain. This isn’t just about wealth or power; it’s about control and these men have it coursing through their veins like bloodline royalty.

Pushing away from the wall. I need to move, to breathe, to escape the suffocating grip of this life I’ve been thrust into.

As I slip away from Finn and Aidan’s chilling display of power, I wander through the hallways of the mansion, forgetting all about breakfast.

I wander into a small corridor lined with doors that promise secrets. One door stands slightly ajar, and I nudge it open, propelled by curiosity.

The room is a stark contrast to the rest of the house—no lavish furniture or priceless art, just cold functionality. Shelves brimming with firearms, sleek blades that glint menacingly under the harsh light, and stacks of cash bundled with ruthless precision. This is the heart of Finn’s empire, the ugly truth behind the opulent facade.

“Jesus Christ.” The words tumble out before I can stop them, a prayer in a temple of sin. My fingers brush against the textured grip of a pistol, and I snatch my hand back as if burned.

“Exploring, are we?” The voice slices through the stillness, and I spin around to find Aidan leaning casually against the doorframe, an eyebrow raised in amusement.

“It’s my home now.”

“That it is.” Aidan circles me, predator to my prey, and there’s a moment where I’m sure he’ll reach out, touch me, and try to claim another piece of the autonomy I’m rapidly losing. But he doesn’t. Instead, he picks up a wad of cash, flipping through it with a callous flick of his wrist.

“If Finn didn’t want me to see this, he should’ve hidden it better.”

“He doesn’t care if you see it. You are as much a part of this life as he is, as I am. Your father made sure of it.”

His ominous words make me tremble. “What does that mean?”

He tosses the cash back onto the pile, and it lands with a soft thud, a sentence pronounced and executed.

“Not for me to tell. You’ll find out soon enough. Besides, I think you’re on a mission here, Valentina.”

“A mission?” My blood runs cold as my palms go clammy.

“A mission to find out everything you can about the Doyle business. Knowledge is power, is it not?”

How the fuck did he take the thoughts directly from my head like that?

“Is that what you tell yourself to sleep at night?” I challenge, but even as the words leave my lips, I wonder if they sleep at all, if men like Finn and Aidan ever truly *can* rest.

“Sleep is for the weak,” he replies smoothly, moving past me to exit the room. “And we are anything but weak.”

My hand hovers over a gun’s sleek, black surface, my fingers skirting the metal. My breath catches at the gravity of its purpose and the unexpected weight in my palm when I pick it up. The barrel gleams under this room’s harsh lighting.

“Have you ever held one before?”

I shake my head.

“Feels different when it’s real, doesn’t it?”

“Very,” I admit, placing the gun back on the table with a clatter that seems too loud in the silence. “It’s not like the movies.”

“Nothing ever is.” His smile doesn’t reach his eyes, but it’s magnetic all the same, pulling me into his orbit despite the darkness surrounding him.

He steps closer, the air between us charged with an energy I’m wary of. “They’ll follow you now.” He nods toward the door, where I notice two men standing at attention, their gazes averted respectfully.

“Oh?”

“Of course. You’re Finn’s wife. That makes you royalty here.” He gestures grandly, a mocking bow in his stance, though his tone remains solemn.

“You mean a target?”

He chuckles. “Maybe that, too.”

Aidan’s charm is a weapon I’m beginning to realise might be more dangerous than the gun I just held. He is the one who can disarm you without a second thought, make you think it’s *your* idea, even, and then slaughter you where you stand.

“Will you teach me?” I ask before I can stop myself.

The question hangs there, suspended between us.

“Teach you?” His eyebrow arches, a silent challenge.

“To use this.” My hand waves at the gun.

“Survival is instinct,” he says slowly, stepping forward, each word deliberate. “But thriving here? That takes skill.”

“Which you have in spades, right?” I retort, my defences rising despite the flutter in my stomach.

“Something like that.” Aidan’s tone is self-assured, and he leans in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “But

it's not just about the show of force. It's knowing when to wield it and when to hold back. I'll show you how to fire a gun, Valentina, but the rest is up to you."

"Sounds complicated."

"Life often is." His gaze lingers on me a moment longer, and then he steps back.

"Let's give you a proper tour. Follow me," he says, turning on his heel, confident I'll fall into step behind him.

As I cross the threshold, leaving the cold embrace of the war room behind, I know I'm walking deeper into the labyrinth, but I need this to understand the man who moves through it as if born to its shadows.

Aidan escorts me to a room further along the hallway, and it suddenly feels like a lesson is going to be laid out.

Gulping back my fear, I see a man on his knees sputtering excuses to a couple of men standing over him.

"Watch and learn, fledgling," Aidan mutters, chilling me.

"I'm sorry, Aidan!" the man on his knees calls out when he sees Aidan stalking towards him. "It was a mistake, honest!"

"Sorry doesn't cut it." Aidan's tone is ice. His hand moves swiftly to the back of his pants as he pulls out a gun, similar in looks to the one I held. "You know the rules."

"Please, Aidan! I've got a family," the man begs, desperation lacing his words. His plea is cut off as Aidan places the gun to the man's forehead and pulls the trigger without hesitation. Blood blooms across the grey carpet as the man slumps to the side, dead.

I swallow back bile, the taste of metal invading my mouth. It's an execution, plain and simple. And nobody bats an eye.

Aidan's ruthlessness is definitely a lesson, one I must learn quickly.

No hesitation. That is the key. You hesitate, you lose.

Noted.

With a locked and loaded glare at Finn's right-hand man, I nod once and leave the room, heading back to my bedroom to throw up whatever is left of the last meal I ate, which was some time ago.

VALENTINA

When the door clicks open, I don't need to turn around to know it's him; Finn has a presence that fills a room like smoke, impossible to ignore.

"Valentina." His voice is low, a dark melody that plays on my nerves.

I school my features into neutrality and pivot slowly, my heart a silent drum of defiance.

His steps are measured as he closes the distance between us, his eyes never leaving mine. A hunger lurks, one that speaks of possession. He reaches out, his fingers tracing the line of my jaw with proprietary ease. "You're thinking too much."

"Am I?" I retort, though my voice betrays none of the storm inside me.

"Thinking won't change what is," he says, pulling me closer, his touch insistent. "It's time you accepted your place here."

"I do."

"All of it."

"You know." It's a statement, and it doesn't surprise me. Aidan has no secrets from Finn.

"I know. I also know you didn't flinch. That is fucking delicious, wife."

His lips descend on mine, demanding surrender.

As Finn kisses me, I can almost forget the reality of who he is—almost. But then his hands roam, and the illusion shatters. I'm not a partner to be cherished but a trophy to be claimed. He lifts me effortlessly, carrying me toward the bed, his intentions clear.

“Let go, Valentina,” he murmurs against my skin as he undresses me. “I will give you everything. Let me take care of you.”

His words shock me, but what stuns me more is that my body responds to them. I throw my head back as he parts my legs and sucks my clit into his mouth before thrusting his tongue into my pussy.

“Fuck,” I moan, shoving my hands into his hair. Why won't my body align with my mind? Why is it being a traitor?

“Good girl,” Finn purrs as I coat his tongue with my juices, unable to stop it, even if I wanted to.

His fingers join his tongue, and he feels me deeply, seeking out a rhythm that sets my body aflame. My gaze captures his; his eyes are dark and possessive. He has me exactly where he wants me, pliable and needy in his hands.

“Let go. Let go for me,” he murmurs again, the whisper of a command threaded through his voice. His tongue licks a fiery trail up my stomach to my breasts, where he sucks a hard nipple into his mouth and gives it a gentle tug with his teeth.

My body coils tighter, teetering on the edge. “Finn...”

His answering smile is ferocious. He lifts himself onto his knees between my thighs, never ceasing the relentless movement of his fingers.

My climax hits me like a tidal wave, leaving me gasping and clawing at Finn's shoulders as he holds himself over me, watching my pleasure unfold with an unsettling hunger in his eyes. He steps back and withdraws his fingers, licking them salaciously before he strips off his clothes, revealing a hard body that has me panting for more.

His hands caress my naked body, tracing every curve and dip with dedication. He's slow, taking his time to learn the

terrain as if it holds the secret to some divine truth.

“Tell me you want me,” he commands, gripping my thighs and positioning himself at my entrance. “Beg for me.”

I take a deep breath, meeting his gaze. His dark eyes hold an intensity that threatens to consume me. The words that tumble from my lips are no longer a lie. “Finn, please. I need you.”

His blue eyes glaze over with pure lust as he ducks his head again to flick my clit with his tongue, making me writhe on the bed under him.

A gasp of pleasure escapes my lips as I jerk up into his mouth, my hands tangling in his hair, tugging him closer. He groans against me, the vibration causing sparks of desire to shoot through my body. The way he devours me, like he’s never tasted anything so sweet, has me questioning my sanity.

He pulls back slightly. “That’s it, wife, scream for me,” he murmurs before plunging two fingers inside me again.

I moan loudly at the sudden invasion, my nails digging into his scalp as he curls his fingers just right.

“Finn...” My voice comes out shaky and desperate. “Please...”

He chuckles darkly before pulling away and positioning himself at my entrance. His gaze flickers with a predatory glint as he pushes inside me slowly, causing an exquisite friction that has me crying out in pleasure.

“That’s it... tell me how good it feels,” he whispers huskily in my ear as he begins to inch his way into my pussy in slow, deliberate strokes. Each thrust of his cock is a new revelation of pleasure and pain.

The opulent room blurs, my senses narrowing to the man who drives into me with relentless precision. I bite down on my lip to keep from crying out, from giving him the satisfaction of hearing my weakness again.

“Fuck, Valentina. You were made for this, for me,” Finn grunts, his rhythm unyielding.

A shadow moves in the periphery, and my gaze flickers to the doorway, where Aidan leans against the frame, those all-seeing emerald eyes are dark pools of intensity. Shame heats my cheeks, and I reach for the sheet, trying to shield myself from his invasive stare.

“Leave it,” Finn commands, batting my hand away. “He’s going to watch how well you serve your husband.”

“Please, Finn—,” I shake my head, but he silences me with a kiss, cruel and consuming.

“Watch,” Finn directs Aidan, his voice laced with triumph. “Watch how she yields to me.”

Aidan doesn’t move, doesn’t speak. He just stands there, his gaze on us, his expression unreadable, as Finn pounds into me, rolling us over, so I’m on top, riding him to seek my climax, desperate for it.

In the stillness that follows, under their dual gazes, I understand that nothing about this life will be gentle. Finn will push my limits until I have none left. In this moment of raw exposure, where every pretence falls away, I find a spark of something fierce, something wild.

“Good girl,” Finn pants as I cum all over his dick with a scream, cupping my bouncing breasts and pinching the nipples hard enough for me to squirm.

Finn’s rhythm is relentless, his grip on my hips unyielding. “Fuck, you’re tight,” he grunts, each word punctuated by a deep thrust up as he holds me still, which sends tremors through me.

Finn lifts me off his rock-hard cock, dripping with my traitorous cum and gets to his knees. He turns me over and pulls on my hips to lift my ass in the air.

Aidan comes closer, standing in front of me, his cock bulging in his pants as he watches Finn rail me in every position he can.

I’m a vessel for his lust and power plays, but when Finn murmurs, “Show her what you feel about her,” something shifts. There’s a tension between them that goes beyond mere

camaraderie. It's a silent struggle, a play for dominance even here, in their most private moments.

My gaze is fixed on Aidan as Finn slides into my soaking pussy from behind, gripping my hips tightly. Aidan unzips his pants, and my breath hitches. My skin goes cold, and my blood freezes in my veins. I didn't agree to this. I don't want this.

"Beautiful," Aidan murmurs, his eyes never leave mine, and in them, I see the hunger, the raw need for control as he grips his stiff shaft tightly.

He tugs gently, a soft groan escaping his lips.

I'm frozen in place as Finn pounds into me, and Aidan continues to stroke himself, his gaze intent, full of dark promises that send a shudder crawling up my spine.

"Stop," I gasp out suddenly, the word pulled from me like a plea. Finn's rhythm falters for a moment, but Aidan's hand stills completely.

"No more," I whisper weakly, trying to pull away from Finn as tears well up in my eyes. Their game has gone on long enough. I'm not a pawn to be used in their silent war.

A slow grin spreads across Aidan's face as he reaches out and trails his fingers across my lips. He watches as I part them, struggling for breath as my fear has swept me up in its wave.

Finn laughs, a sound of pure evil as he leans forward and grabs my wrists, pulling my arms back, straining the muscles of my shoulders as he yanks me up, exposing my breasts to Aidan as he starts his rampant thrusting again his fingers digging into my skin, grinding my bones painfully.

Aidan wraps his hand around his cock again before he places his hand on my head.

"Please," I whimper, but it falls on deaf ears.

Aidan presses his cock against my mouth.

"Open up, wife," Finn orders, roughly fucking me, shifting so that one foot is resting on the bed so he can drive deeper into me.

Aidan thrusts once, slow and deliberate, invading my mouth with a quiet sigh that echoes in the silent room.

Finn grunts at the sight of his best friend with his cock in his wife's mouth, his thrusts growing faster in their intensity.

The air is thick with their arousal, the heady scent of power and lust intoxicating. I close my eyes, shutting out the sight of them, losing myself in the sensation of being split apart, used.

Finn's grip on my wrists tightens as he drives himself deeper inside my aching pussy with each thrust, his voice rasping in my ear, "That's it, little bird. Take it all." His words are a litany of depravity, whispered praises that do nothing to soothe the raw vulnerability that has been bared.

Aidan's cock slides deeper into my mouth, the taste of him spreading over my tongue. His hand tightens in my hair, guiding me rhythmically as Finn sets a brutal pace from behind. The room resonates with grunts and groans, punctuated by my whimpers of surrender.

I choke back a sob, the reality of what I've become crashing down on me. Their pleasure overrides my protests until all I can do is submit.

Despite the degradation, despite my humiliation, I can't stop the sudden rush of heated blood to my pussy. Pleasure rips through me like wildfire, consuming every ounce of my dignity as I come around Finn's cock and spill onto the sheets beneath us.

"She is a good girl," Aidan murmurs as he pulls his cock out of my mouth, his gaze lingering on my tear-streak cheeks.

"Show her what she's good for," Finn urges, and Aidan complies, crossing that final line as he jerks off roughly before Finn pulls me back higher and Aidan splashes his cum over my face, my breasts, marking me with a humiliation that sears hotter than any physical pain.

"Fuck." Finn's orgasm follows, a hot rush inside my cunt that brands their ownership deeper into my flesh. My body is their playground. My dignity is the price of their admission.

Finn lets me go and I slump with aching muscles to the bed, smearing cum all over the black satin sheets.

But as I lie there, splattered, exhausted and used, something stirs in my soul, crying out for more. It's a plea for degradation that has my clit twitching with the thought of what else they can do to me.

I wanted to stay strong.

I wanted to play the game.

But in this moment, as Finn parts my legs and licks my clit again and Aidan retreats back to the shadows, I know they've broken me.

AIDAN

“Ross, the perimeter cams need checking. Twice a night, no excuses,” I command, leaning against the cold marble countertop of the kitchen. Ross nods, his brow furrowed in concentration, but my mind is anywhere but here. It’s wrapped up in Valentina—her gasps, the flush of her skin, and the way she looked covered in my cum with Finn’s cock buried deep in her cunt.

No, I can’t afford this distraction.

“Something on your mind, Aidan?” Ross’s voice cuts through my thoughts, sharp as a blade.

“Focus on security. Finn wants her protected. That’s all that matters,” I mutter, though it’s me who needs the damn reminder. My blood still simmers with the memory of her beneath Finn, on top of him, in front of him, his name branded on her lips while mine remains a silent scream in her chest.

“Her room is secure,” Ross presses on, oblivious to the chaos inside me.

“Good.”

The image sears into my brain again—their bodies entwined, the rhythm almost savage, relentless. Valentina’s cries pierced the thick veil of my self-control, tearing it to shreds. She was exhausted, overwhelmed by Finn’s intensity, yet something in her eyes beckoned me, whispered secrets only I could hear.

“Nothing gets past us. Especially not tonight,” I say, squaring my shoulders. The determination masks the storm beneath, the downpour that will spill over and drown us all in its fall.

“Right.” He doesn’t buy it, but he doesn’t push either. We’re soldiers in a world where questions are bullets best left unfired.

“I’m heading to bed,” I announce abruptly and stride down the hallway, each step echoing like a drumbeat of war within the mansion walls.

Behind one of these doors lies Valentina, a siren in a sea of blood and violence. But I don’t dare look at their door as I pass; it’s a threshold I’m not permitted to cross without Finn’s express say-so. I know better than to push him, especially with this. He already suspects, and my involvement in their fucking tonight was probably a test.

Definitely a test.

He will come for me all guns blazing when he has worn out his new bride. Yet every honed instinct I have wants to break the door down, to claim what my soul screams is mine.

In the darkness of my room, the silence is a living thing, a beast with Valentina’s face that haunts my every thought. I pace like a caged animal, cornered by desire and loyalty, each step another lash against the conscience that should have kept me from wanting her.

But it was inevitable.

The air is stifling. The memories of her beneath Finn, her cries entwining with the grunts of a man I’d take a bullet for without flinching, is insanity, this gnawing hunger that tears at my insides. I’m betraying him with every breath that aches for her touch, for the taste of her skin that I’ve only stolen in the shadows of my mind.

“Fuck.”

I strip away my blood-stained clothes and climb into the shower. The water burns my skin as I turn the temperature up, but it’s nothing compared to the heat that Valentina ignites in

my soul. My hand wraps around my cock again, an act as natural as drawing a gun, when it comes to her. Countless nights, seeing her gorgeous green eyes, her pouty red lips, and tonight, her breasts, heavy and ripe with pink nipples that begged me to bite them and her pussy, filled with Finn's cock, dripping wet and perfect.

She's there behind my closed eyelids, her body writhing, not in pain, but in pleasure—pleasure I give her. Her nails digging into my back, marking me as hers while I thrust into her, claiming her mouth in a kiss that silences everything but our shared breaths. I picture her legs wrapped around my waist, urging me deeper, harder. She's mine in these moments, and I'm lost to the fantasy.

I stroke myself, rough and unforgiving, chasing the edge as if it could lead me to some semblance of peace. But there's no peace in the vivid image of her beneath me, looking up with those eyes full of fire and defiance that say she sees me—really sees me.

“God, Valentina,” my voice breaks on a ragged moan as I climax quickly, hot streams splashing the tiles like a sinner's confession. I lean against the wall, breathing hard, letting the water wash away the evidence of my betrayal. But it can't cleanse me of this obsession or drown out the whispers that demand to take her as mine.

In the steam and the solitude, I am both saviour and destroyer—a man torn between the brotherhood that made me and the dark romance that seeks to destroy me.

I need a plan, a goddamn good one. Finn had no clue she even existed before he was bound to her by that sham of a marriage contract, but me? I knew. I've hungered for her from the moment she unwittingly became the star of my darkest desires.

I rake a hand through my wet hair, slicking it back as I wonder what Finn's grand plan is here. Asking me to witness their consummation was one thing. It had to be done. Paddy cannot have any reason to take her. She will not survive the brutality of the elder Doyle. But this tonight was different. I

know it was a test for *me*, but was it a test for her as well? She is inhibited when it comes to someone other than her lover watching her. She feels shy and ashamed. Is Finn trying to bust down her walls, or is he punishing her for something she had no control over?

I shut off the water, stepping out of the shower with a towel wrapped around my waist. Droplets trail down my skin, paths of temptation I'll follow to hell if it leads to her. The mirror is fogged, my reflection obscured—a fitting metaphor for the man I've become. Clear cut lines blurred by a woman who isn't mine to take.

But I will take her. Make no mistake about that.

VALENTINA

Morning light slithers in, a silent accomplice to the dawn, as I blink away the remnants of a night spent under Finn's crushing embrace. His breath is hot against my neck, a dichotomy to the chill seeping through the bones of our bedroom—a mausoleum of passion where love and violence become one and the same.

“Fuck,” I murmur, feeling the throb between my thighs, the echo of his ferocity still lingering on my skin. It's the first time he's stayed the night beside me since we exchanged those hollow vows, a pair of marionettes dangling from the strings of mafia meddling.

Careful not to rouse him, I slide out from under the sheets, each movement a wince as soreness grips my body. The carpet beneath my feet feels like gravel after the storm he's left inside me. I need a shower more than anything else right now. I'm still covered in Aidan's cum, not to mention Finn's. I feel like a dirty whore, which is unsurprising, seeing as they used me like one.

Finn, the embodiment of my tormented desires, lies still, a statue carved from darkness and danger. His chest rises and falls with the rhythm of a predator at rest. His face is peaceful while he sleeps. If I didn't know better, I'd call him sweet in repose. I have no doubt that if I touched him, brushed back that lock of hair from his forehead, he would slap my hand away and be fully alert in two seconds flat.

Turning away, I pad across the room to the bathroom. My reflection in the mirror is a stranger—hair tousled, eyes hollow, lips swollen from his devouring kisses. The woman staring back at me is no longer the carefree woman I once was; I am now the wife of a devil who wears his sins as proudly as his designer suits.

Stepping into the spray of water, it does little to wash away the stain of last night's brutality, as the steam rises, so do the memories, relentless waves crashing against the fragile shore of my mind. Finn's touch, though unwelcome, ignites a fire in my sullied soul.

This is some fucked-up kind of marriage we are involved in, and it's throwing me off balance. Somehow, I have to find that power again that I had at the reception. That part of me was strong, capable of playing Finn's game and beating him at it.

But here I am, alone with the sting of water on bruised flesh, wondering if there will ever come a day when I wake up without the weight of his possession marking me, body and soul.

Relishing the cascade of water which drowns out the world, even though it can't silence the pounding in my head. I'm slick with soap and self-loathing when the bathroom door swings open. Finn stands there, eyes half-lidded, holding something in his hand. He flicks it open to reveal a wickedly sharp, jagged blade that the sight of is so incongruous, so menacingly sexy, it sends goosebumps skittering over my skin that has nothing to do with the cold air he lets in.

"Morning, wife," he drawls, taking in every soap-covered inch of me.

"Didn't mean to wake you," I say, my voice steady despite the tremors running through me.

"Can't sleep when you're not beside me." He doesn't look at me as he speaks, focusing instead on the blade in his hand.

"Isn't that sweet," I mutter as inside, something tightens. It's ridiculous. I should be terrified, not whatever this tangled

mess of emotions is.

Finn leans in and places the switchblade on the soap dish before turning away to the cabinet above the basin. He opens the doors and searches for something. When he finds it, he lifts it, and I watch him warily.

He turns the taps on in the basin and starts to methodically pop pills out of the foil packet to be washed away down the drain.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice quivering as I recognise the packet instantly.

“Getting rid of your birth control.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I just did.”

“Finn...” Terror has frozen me to the spot. The idea of being impregnated by this monster has left me reeling, yet unable to move a muscle.

Finn turns the taps off and drops the empty packet in the bin. He moves closer, and I find movement to press back against the cool tiles. My skin prickles with more than just the chill.

His gaze flicks to the knife as he steps into the shower with me before boring into my eyes with an intensity that frightens me.

“Always be prepared,” he says, and there’s an edge to his voice that wasn’t there before. A warning.

He steps close enough now that I can feel his erect cock digging into me.

“Why did you do that?”

“The sooner you are knocked up, the better this will be for everyone. Trust me. I’m doing you a favour.”

“What? That’s not your decision to make.”

“You are my wife, and you will do as I wish. And my wish is to have you completely stripped bare so that when I fuck

you in future, you will give me an heir.”

“Jesus, Finn. What is this?”

Finn picks up the knife and trails it between my breasts, not hard enough to leave a mark, but it’s threatening enough for me not to move or speak again.

“You will obey me, Valentina, I’ll make sure of it.”

I swallow hard, trying to ignore the knife, trying to ignore the way my body responds to his proximity.

His lips twitch in a semblance of a smile, but it’s as sharp as the blade he sets back down.

Water cascades around us, the sound deafening in its monotony. The cold tiles press into my back as Finn’s hands grip my waist with a possessive strength that leaves no room for doubt of his plans or resistance on my part. I’m still aching from last night, bruises hidden under the surface of my skin, but there’s an inevitability to his touch that I can’t deny.

I gasp out as he lifts me, my feet leaving the security of the floor. His cock, hard and stiff, finds me sore yet wet, and he doesn’t hesitate to shove it into me. Each thrust is a reminder of the savage need he harboured last night—a need he didn’t bother to tame.

Closing my eyes, I try not to think about getting pregnant by him. It will be something to fear, not be happy about. If that day ever comes, *when* it comes, I will have to run. There is no other option.

He pounds into me. He wants me—this way, hard and fast, our bodies slamming together with a force that feels like it could shatter me. His movements are brutal, and I brace myself against the cold wall, enduring each punishing drive of his hips.

His grip tightens, fingers digging into my flesh, and I wonder if I’ll bruise again, wear the marks of his possession like a twisted wedding present.

“Be here with me,” he commands, his hand leaving my hip to wrap around my throat. “Look at me, little bird.”

Opening my eyes, I fix on his heated gaze. His lips part, and he thrusts deeper.

“Come on my dick, wife. I need to feel your possession.”

His words light something profound within me. It’s a spark, smouldering from last night, that burns brighter with each hard thrust.

“Mine,” I pant, gripping his shoulders tightly.

“Always yours,” he grunts. “Let me feel your cunt soak me.”

Throwing my head back, I succumb. The orgasm crashes through me, and he growls as my pussy clutches desperately at his cock as if it never wants to let go.

“That’s it, little bird. Fuck me like you mean it.”

As the heat rises between us, so does my internal battle—a struggle between the desire to submit to him and this marriage completely and the will to assert some semblance of my autonomy. This is not love; it’s a power play, pure and simple.

With a ragged rasp that tears from his throat like a feral animal, he pumps out his cum, his body tensed, his eyes closed in bliss.

“You’re a good fuck, little bird.”

His words ruin the moment more than him letting me go to stand under the torrent to wash himself.

“Happy to please you,” I whisper. “Are you done with me?”

“For now.” His back is to me now, muscles shifting under his skin as he cleans himself thoroughly.

When he’s done, he ignores me, stepping out of the shower with that silence that envelops him like a cloak. It’s a silence that leaves me trembling, cum dripping down my thighs, a visceral reminder of my role here. Trophy wife and now a broodmare. He doesn’t look back, and I’m left alone with only my sobs to comfort me.

The chill sets in as the water continues to pour over me, washing away the evidence but not the memory. I'm raw, exposed, and I've never felt more alone. The knife sits where he left it, silent and sinister—a constant companion in this darkness that I can't seem to escape.

VALENTINA

The water finally runs clear, washing away the last traces of last night's brutality. My skin is tender to the touch, each droplet a sharp reminder of what my body has endured. I shut off the shower with a shaky hand and step out onto the cold floor.

Reaching for the towel, I pat my skin dry, but the plush fabric does little to comfort the ache inside me—the pain that isn't just physical. Silent tears mix with the remnants of water on my cheeks as I wrap the towel around my trembling body.

The sobs hitch in my throat, and I stifle them, fearing Finn might hear. I'm not sure why I care if he hears me cry. It's not like he'd comfort me. But this marriage—this prison of convenience—has already stripped me of so much; I can't let it take my pride, too.

Stiffening my back and wiping my face on the towel, I return to the bedroom; the cool air hits me harder than the reality of my solitude. The window is wide open on this chilly autumn morning, and part of me wonders if he has done that on purpose to make me uncomfortable. Finn is already dressed in his designer suit, looking every bit the untouchable mafia enforcer he is. His back is to me as he adjusts his cufflinks, a mundane act that somehow feels like an assertion of power.

“Get dressed,” he murmurs, turning towards me, his eyes giving nothing away. “And make yourself scarce. If you leave the grounds, Ross and Lee will accompany you anywhere you want to go.”

“Bodyguards.”

“A necessity.”

“I thought you wanted me on a leash.”

He strides over, and I lift my chin defiantly. He places a hand lightly around my throat. “That was yesterday. After last night, I believe we have come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“And what would that be?”

“You get my dick wet, and I make you come like you never have before.”

“Last night was more than getting your dick wet, and we both know it.”

His eyes darken with something scary and arousing. “That is was, wife. But until I’m happy with your submission, we won’t stick a label on it.”

“You don’t think I’ve submitted to you?”

“Not entirely.”

“I didn’t fight you, not even when you threw my pills down the drain.”

“True submission isn’t about accepting what is inevitable, Valentina. It’s about *wanting* it.”

The silence that follows is oppressive, as if even the air waits for Finn’s next move. He lets me go and crosses over to the door, immaculate in a suit that looks like it was tailored to intimidate.

“Carry that knife with you everywhere, even in these hallways.”

Spinning to him in surprise, I tilt my head. “Why?”

“You are precious to me, little bird. Your safety is paramount.”

“I don’t know the first thing about using it,” I mutter.

“Then learn,” he commands, his gaze unwavering.

The click of the door shutting behind him echoes through the space ominously.

Huffing out a frustrated breath, I whip off the towel and get dressed in a pair of black pants and a white blouse. Brushing out my hair, I give it a quick blow dry and then tie it up in a bun on top of my head. There is no way I'm setting foot outside this house now, but Finn doesn't want me downstairs. I wonder briefly why that is, but then I realise I don't fucking care.

There is a knock at the door, and I answer quickly to find a breakfast tray left for me with hot coffee and an assortment of pastries.

My stomach growls at the sight, and I bend down to scoop it up. Kicking the door closed, I place the tray on the dresser and grab a muffin, stuffing it into my half-starved face and making short work of it.

Gulping back the hot coffee, my eyes wander around the room and then land on the laptop. Chewing my lip, I glance over my shoulder at the closed door.

It doesn't take me long to make a decision about how the next hour is going to go.

"Let's see who you really are, Father Ryan Gannon," I mutter as I open the laptop and sit in a comfy armchair near the open window. Remembering, I scowl at it, but I can't be bothered getting back up to shut it. That was definitely deliberate on Finn's part. Asshole.

The screen blinks awake, and I type in his name, wondering what I'll find.

"Fuck," I exhale as pages upon pages fill with hits—not all of them to do with the good priest. Most of them have picked up on the surname: Gannon. There are links to the underworlds of Manchester, Dublin and beyond. There are pictures, articles, whispers of rumours turned into headlines. Each member of the Gannon clan seems more entrenched in this life than the last. Their faces are all too familiar: hard jawlines, eyes glinting with cunning and cruelty.

“Son of a bitch,” I say, scrolling through an article about a warehouse raid—a Gannon warehouse, no less. It’s all there, the signs of organised crime dressed up in legitimate business fronts. As my father’s daughter, I know how to read between the lines, to see the truth that lurks beneath the surface.

The deeper I dive, the darker the waters become. Gunrunning, extortion, drugs—there’s no vice the Gannons haven’t touched.

And then there’s the black sheep. Or should that be *white* sheep? Father Ryan.

The man is a modern-day saint. There isn’t a single cause in this city that he hasn’t helped, and the articles about him in the religious magazines are glowing. He is the golden boy.

A saint amongst a family of sinners as bad as Finn.

Hours slip by unnoticed, each minute drawing me deeper into the labyrinth of the city’s underbelly. I read about turf wars, alliances, and betrayals. It’s a chess game played with human lives as pawns, and the Gannons apparently are grandmasters. I try to think back if I’ve ever heard my dad mention them, but to be honest, I wasn’t interested.

Well, I am now.

My head spins with names and faces, crimes and consequences, power plays and politics.

“How the fuck did you manage to escape this life, hmm?” The question remains unanswered, but not for long. It’s one I intend to find an answer to. Father Ryan is remarkable, stronger even than the worst enforcer, the worst mafia don. To remain pious and good when you are surrounded by, no doubt haunted every day by, a family like his requires a strength that I can’t even fathom. Part of me wishes I hadn’t gone down this rabbit hole, but the other half is eager to learn more. Desperate, even.

Needing to move now, stiff from the cold draught and being still for so long, I close the laptop and rise. Pausing by the bathroom door, I push it open and snatch up the knife from

the shower, closing my hand over the edge of the blade to close it before I tuck it into my pants pocket.

The house is too quiet as I make my way downstairs, each step heavy with dread at what I might find. The knife's presence is a constant whisper, urging me toward something dark and desperate.

The rich scent of coffee hits me as I reach the bottom of the stairs, but it does little to soothe the raw edges of my nerves.

A burst of laughter spills from behind the closed door of Finn's office, high-pitched and flirtatious. It slices through me sharper than any blade could.

I didn't think I had it in me, this searing spike of jealousy, but there it is—a wildfire spreading through my chest. I pause, hand pressed flat against the wall as if I could push away this unwelcome and, quite frankly, startling emotion.

My curiosity over who this bitch is flirting with my husband is a live wire zapping straight to my heart. The laughter comes again, this time accompanied by his dark chuckle that speaks of promises best left unsaid.

I'm not sure when I started thinking of Finn as anything remotely close to mine. But the thought of another woman touching him, laughing with him... it burns. It burns so fucking bright I want to show this woman who she's messing with.

Without thinking, I shove the door open and stride in, a woman on a mission.

“Valentina?” Finn's voice, laced with surprise and the faintest hint of annoyance, doesn't miss a beat as I enter the room. He's sitting in his high-backed office chair, the embodiment of power, while she sits on the other side of the desk, leaning too far forward, her fingers skating across the low-cut neckline of her 'top'.

“What the fuck is this?”

The words strike like flint, igniting the tension that crackles all around.

“Business,” Finn replies, his eyes never leaving mine but giving nothing away. “This is Greta. She works for me. She’s just dropping off last night’s earnings.”

“*Works* for you?” The disdain in my tone gets Greta’s hackles up.

She turns to me with a vicious glare on her overly made-up face.

I sneer at her, watching her through narrowed eyes. Her beauty is undeniable. A sharp pang twists in my chest as I take in her long blonde hair, her long legs and full lips—a golden angel in the shadows of our world.

“As what? A fucking whore?” The words tumble out, acid and scorn woven through them as no one else says a word. I’m poised on the razor’s edge of madness, whispering sweet seductions.

Suddenly, Greta’s laugh cuts through the silence like a shard of glass scraping across my skin; her eyes, alight with interest, linger on me before they drift over to Finn in a way that makes my blood boil.

“A fucking stripper, darling,” she purrs, flicking her gaze back to me. “But I’m not averse to a happy ending lap dance if the price is right.”

The words hang between us, thick with implication, and something snaps. My fingers curl around the cool metal of the knife in my pocket, its presence a sinister promise. Clutching it tightly, I step forward, the blade glinting as I snap it open.

Pressing the jagged edge to Greta’s throat, I hiss, “If you even look at him again, I will gouge your fucking eyes out with a spoon and shove them so far up your ass, you won’t be able to find them. Do you understand me?”

“Valentina.” Finn’s voice cuts through the tension, sharp enough to draw blood, but it’s neither a warning nor an encouragement.

Greta’s eyes dart between the knife and Finn, a flicker of fear crossing her features before she regains her composure. “Seems like the little wife has some claws.”

“Get out, Greta,” Finn says, his gaze never leaving mine. “Aidan will make the collections in-house from now on.”

Greta straightens up, her facade of nonchalance cracking just enough to reveal a glimmer of resentment. She is fuming that Finn has taken my side and not hers. She doesn't say another word as she gathers her things and leaves, the click of her heels a countdown to the silence that follows.

The moment the door clicks shut, Finn rises, and his hand is on my throat, not squeezing—just a firm, unshakeable presence that pins me to the spot. His eyes are a storm I can't weather, dark and relentless.

“Never,” he growls, his voice low and dangerous, “interfere in my business again.”

He is hot and alive with a fury that doesn't reach his eyes. It's all a fucking show for the lackeys in the room, of which there are several, I note now that Greta has fucked off. But there's something else there instead. Satisfaction.

“I didn't know you had it in you, little bird. Your jealousy is arousing.”

The vague mention of sex sends a bolt of fear coursing through me. If he demands to take me now in front of all these men, I might have to stab him and pay the consequences later.

Possibly with my life.

“Not jealousy. But I won't be made a fool of, Finn. Are we clear?”

Finn's gaze, cold and calculating, bores into mine as he tightens his hold on my throat.

He shoves his hand between my legs and squeezes roughly. “I won't stray, wife. Why would I when I have this cunt right here that fits my cock like it was made for me, waiting for me to pound anytime, anywhere?”

My blood boils, a heat crawling up my neck as his words hit me like a slap. He moves closer, his breath hot on my face.

I wrench my gaze away from his, breaking the invisible chains that tether me to him. I need distance, air, something to

dilute the toxicity that emanates from his being.

“Do you trust me?” The question holds a vulnerability that I’m not sure he meant to betray.

Locking gazes with him again, I breathe out. “Do I have a reason not to?”

“Never. I’m yours, Valentina. How many times do we need to go over this?”

He lets me go, his expression conveying his disappointment in me. It makes me want to throw up. Not because this game he’s playing is sick, but because the thought of upsetting him holds the weight of misery that will haunt me until I can make it right. Now, isn’t that time. He has pulled away and sat back down, waving his hand to me in dismissal.

With each step I take towards the door, it’s as if I’m peeling off layers of his armour, but I’m scared of what I’ll find next.

Once I’m out of the office, the coolness of the corridor greets me like a much-needed embrace. My fingers tremble as I pocket the switchblade, a reminder of the dangerous world I’m now part of—whether I like it or not.

The gleam of stainless steel and marble countertops in the kitchen offers no comfort. I move mechanically, reaching for a bottle of whiskey—the burn will be a welcome sensation, something real and grounding. The glass makes a soft clink as I set it on the counter, the sound oddly reassuring in its normalcy.

Pouring the amber liquid, I watch it swirl, catching the light like liquid fire. The first sip scorches my throat, and I welcome the pain, a tangible thing to focus on in the middle of the chaos of my thoughts.

Glancing at the clock, I grimace. It’s only 11 AM.

As the whiskey floods my system, offering a fleeting respite from the reality of my situation, I don’t even care.

Another sip and the room spins slightly. Good. Let it spin; let it turn upside down for all I care. Maybe then I’ll find my

footing in this upside-down world where desire and danger
dance together, each step leading me further into darkness.

AIDAN

The moment Valentina's shadow vanishes behind the heavy oak door, I know it's time to strike. The air in Finn's office clings to my skin, thick with tension and the musky scent of old books as he dismisses everyone else, leaving us alone with his mood as a third companion. I lean against the polished desk, nonchalant yet determined to have this out with him. It's driving me fucking crazy.

"You're smitten with her," I state with a smirk as I watch Finn, his back rigid, staring out the enormous window.

"Like hell I am," he snaps without turning, his voice slicing through the sunlight like that very impressive switchblade Valentina had in her grip. A present from her husband, for sure.

"Come on, Finn," I push, circling him like a shark scenting blood. "I've seen the way you look at her—like she's a puzzle you're dying to solve."

Finn whirls around, the veins in his neck bulging with suppressed fury. "You think you know everything, don't you, Aidan?" His words are a growl, low and menacing.

"Enough to see the game she's playing." I cross my arms, meeting his glare with cool defiance.

He scoffs and shakes his head. "You think I don't know that? You think I'm so fucking oblivious that I can't tell she is playing me? Humouring me? A woman who has been fucked against her will in the back of a car with a witness to the crime

doesn't suddenly seduce her attacker in the next hour. Husband or not."

His jaw clenches. The statement hangs there between us, an unspoken accusation.

"You did what you had to do," I mutter, seeing how torn up he is about this. Paddy has done a number on him, and it's got him twisting. He has one hand to play, and if it's not full of aces, Valentina is screwed.

That alone shows me how deeply he's fallen for her. I just need him to admit it so that we can talk about me. About my cock coming all over his wife's tits and how much I want my dick buried inside her wet pussy while he watches me take her.

"Or maybe," I venture, watching the storm build behind his eyes, "you're just unwilling to admit you're falling right into her trap because it feels too damn good."

"Shut your fucking mouth." Finn rises and steps closer, invading my space, a dangerous gleam in his gaze. "Don't forget who you're talking to."

"Never do. But you shouldn't either."

He growls and turns from me, standing at the window to glare at the garden stretching out in front of him.

This is going nowhere fast.

Time to up the ante.

I storm out of Finn's office to find Valentina alone in the kitchen, hunched over the counter, clutching a bottle of whiskey like it's the only thing keeping her anchored in this world.

"Bit early, isn't it," I say, leaning against the doorframe as she takes a swig straight from the bottle.

Her bold blue gaze meets mine with a sneer buoyed by booze. "Go to hell, Aidan."

She is pissed. And I don't mean just in the booze sense. She is livid. With me. With Finn. With herself. With life.

Before she can react, I snatch the bottle from her grasp and set it aside with a clatter. Her eyes flare with anger as I grab her arm, my fingers wrapping around her wrist with an iron grip. I drag her out of the kitchen, ignoring her protests and curses.

“Let go of me, you asshole,” Valentina snarls, struggling, trying to wriggle free, but I’m not having any of it.

“Shut it. We are ending this farce one way or another today. We’re going to see how much Finn really cares about his wife,” I snarl, pulling her along as I’ve finally snapped and had enough of this shit.

We burst back into Finn’s office, and I shove Valentina forward. She stumbles slightly before regaining her balance, shooting daggers at me with her gaze. Without a word, I press her against the edge of Finn’s desk, my body caging hers.

“Look at us, Finn,” I taunt. “Isn’t this what you want? To see her like this?”

Finn’s eyes are twin infernos, locked onto the scene before him. My hand slides to the buttons on Valentina’s pants, flicking them open. She tries to push me away, but I’m relentless, my touch deliberate, designed to incite.

“Stop!” Valentina’s voice cracks. I can feel her body tremble beneath my hands, but whether it’s from booze, fear or fury, I can’t tell. Maybe all three.

“Does this bother you, Finn?” I ask, my voice laced with venom. “Seeing her with someone else? Tell me, brother, does it burn?”

Valentina squirms, trying desperately to escape my hold. “Aidan, you’re sick,” she hisses, her breath quickening.

“Am I? Or am I just exposing the truth?” I lean in close, whispering in her ear, feeling the heat of her skin against mine.

“Get the fuck away from her,” Finn growls, his voice dangerous and low.

“Or what?” I challenge, meeting his gaze, knowing I’m playing with fire. But that’s just it—I want to see the fucking

flames.

I never even see it coming.

The door splinters with the force of Finn's shove, my back slamming against it hard enough to rattle my teeth. I barely register the sting because in the next breath, cold steel whispers past my cheek, and the zombie knife he carries always, burrows into the wood millimetres from my face.

"Fucking knew it," I breathe out, cockiness curling around each word like smoke. My pulse thrums beneath my skin—not from fear, but from the exhilaration of the moment. This is the game, and damn if I don't love it.

"Touch her again, and I'll carve that smug grin right off your pretty boy face," Finn snarls, his arm a rigid line pinning me to the spot.

"Wouldn't be the first time you've tried," I shoot back, my voice a low drawl. The threat hangs between us, tangible as the tension coiling in the air.

His eyes are dark tunnels, endless and unfathomable, but I'm no stranger to what brews in their depths. Anger. Possession. Jealousy. Maybe even something dangerously close to what I suggested earlier. It amuses me, this dance of denial he's caught in.

But it also pisses me off. There is room for three of us here, but he has to admit it first.

"Go ahead, Finn," I taunt, leaning into the blade just enough to feel its edge graze my skin. "Make your mark."

"Fuck you, fucking prick." His words are a growl, guttural and primal.

I can't help the laugh that bursts free, the sound like thunder. "You're losing it over a woman—a woman who's playing you like a damn fiddle."

"What?" Valentina's cry is pure fear, and it sobers me instantly. In trying to get to Finn, I'm hurting her, and that makes me feel sick.

Finn pushes off from the door, creating a sliver of space between us, but the fury rolling off him is a living thing, wrapping around my throat. It's intoxicating, and I'd savour every goddamn second of it if I weren't suddenly consumed with thoughts of the woman caught between us.

The moment's frozen in fury and fear. Valentina's wide eyes flit from Finn's clenched jaw to the knife now part of his office door, and then to me—smug devil that I am. She trembles like a leaf in a storm, a delicate thing about to be torn from its branch.

“Finn... I...”

“Save it,” he growls, gripping my shirt and hauling me away from the door. It shocks me that he did that so she could escape. I'm seeing a side of him that has never been revealed before, and it's unnerving, to say the least.

Valentina bolts, a flash of dark hair and pale skin, her heels clicking against the floor in a staccato rhythm, punctuating the silence left in the wake of our confrontation. The tension doesn't follow her out—no, it stays, thick as molasses, hanging between Finn and me.

“What is it you're trying to break here?”

I give him a scrutinising glare. “Nothing. I am *trying* to get you to pull your head out of your ass.”

“It's out.”

“Yeah, not so much.”

He rounds on me. “Do you want me to beat you into the ground for having feelings for my wife? Is that what this is? Guilt? Because I'm fucked if I know what game you're playing here.”

Finally. Fucking finally, it's out there.

“Yeah, I have feelings for your wife. I've lusted after her for months. Ever since I overheard Paddy and Seamus talking about the arrangement. I went looking for her. Needing to see who was lined up for you. I feel like a fucking chump the second I laid eyes on her, but she doesn't even know I exist.”

“Oh, but she does. She washed your cum off her tits this morning.”

“Fuck you,” I snarl, all guns blazing now. “You won’t admit that you’ve fallen for her either. You continue to play this fucked-up game with her. If you told her how you felt, she’d admit it too, and we could all move on.”

“Move on? And where would you like us to move to? Someplace where you fall into our marriage bed and ride my wife like your own personal whore while I watch?”

“You didn’t fucking mind watching her with my dick in her mouth, did you?”

He growls, having no comeback because it’s true. I know it, he knows it, hell, Valentina even probably knows it.

Finn is breaking, and Valentina is the crack in his armour.

“You need to get your shit together, brother, or this is going to end badly.”

“What are you saying?” The crack in his voice is all I need to bulldoze my way in. “Two to protect her is better than one, and you know I’m right.”

“And how do you propose I even begin to explain this to Valentina?”

“Firstly, you tell her that you’re falling in love with her, she’ll admit the same, and then you declare that your best bud is going to join you in this relationship.”

“You’re a fucking cock.”

“But I don’t feel your fist in my face, so you know you’ve thought about it.”

“Last night was a test. One you failed, I might add.” His hardcore enforcer mask is back, and now I need to watch my words or end up six feet under.

“I love her. What more can I say? I want to see her protected, not beaten down and squirming under your father while he uses her until she is nothing but a ragdoll on his cock.”

“Fuck’s sake,” Finn growls. “Do you mind?”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

Silence fills the air, his temper simmering under the surface.

When he turns from me, he whispers, “You’re not.”

Nodding with satisfaction, I know I have to leave him now to think about this. I can’t push him any more than I already have or risk losing my head.

Turning to leave, I see Valentina hurrying out of the front door, so I follow. My gut churns, an unfamiliar feeling worming its way through my insides.

This confrontation has left us all reeling, but Valentina is vulnerable.

Following her quickly, I see her shooting off down the driveway in her sleek black Mercedes, hopefully after a couple of cups of coffee after that whiskey.

Climbing into the Range Rover, I grab the keys from behind the visor and set off before Ross and Lee even get their asses out the front door to accompany her.

Fucking fat lot of good they are.

Heads will roll when Finn hears about this, and maybe that’s a good thing. He needs to vent after this shitshow of a day.

Unfortunately, I feel it’s only going to get worse as the minutes tick by.

FINN

Aidan's words haunt the silence of my office. I try to shake them off, to scatter them like ash from a cigarette, but they cling with an infuriating persistence.

The truth is a bullet, and no amount of denial can stop its penetration. I push back the chair, the sound a whisper in the hush of the room, and stand up. My body moves on its own accord through the mansion, drawn by a force I can't—and don't want to—resist. I need to find Valentina.

There is only one thing left to do here. Aidan has forced my hand, made me admit things I wasn't ready for. Not just for myself but for her. She isn't ready for this. She isn't ready for me to love her. But the thing that scares me the most about this is if she doesn't love me back.

As I step into the kitchen, the sharp scent of whiskey slices through the air, stinging my nostrils. Glaring at the open bottle on the counter, the empty glass next to it with a smear of Valentina's lipstick on it is like a dagger to the heart.

"Dammit, Valentina," I mutter.

What the hell is she playing at?

The clock above the stove ticks mockingly, not yet striking noon. She is so fucking miserable that she is using alcohol to dim the pain. I'm not sure why this is a shock to me, or maybe it's not really. She has been forced into this marriage with me, the world's biggest asshole, apparently, and now she wants to drown her sorrows at the bottom of the bottle.

Part of me, deep down, doesn't blame her. For a fleeting moment, I wish that I could lose control and do the same. But that loss would get me killed. One way or another.

“Valentina!” The name rips from my throat, but there's only silence, a gaping void where her reply should be.

Aidan's right. I'm a fool if I think I can keep lying to myself. But admitting it out loud to her? That's a different game altogether—one I'm not sure I'm ready to play, but it's becoming increasingly apparent that I have no choice. The chess pieces on this fucked up board are aligned, and it's time for the king to make his move.

Racing up the stairs, I push past the threshold of the bedroom door. The room is cold from the chill of the open window. It's an intrusion, this cold—it's meant to be, hoping to unsettle her. A window meant to discomfort her, to remind her who controls the elements in this house.

“Valentina?” My voice doesn't carry the same command as before; it's threaded with a worry that tastes bitter on my tongue. The bed is still unmade from this morning, the silk sheets tangled from our fucking. All night I pounded into her, edging my orgasms for as long as I could until the cum spilt from my cock, needing to give it time until my cock grew hard again. But I didn't stop my relentless seduction. Lips, tongue, fingers... my wife came for me more times than I can count. Her pussy contracting with the strength of her orgasms is a picture still vivid in my mind and will probably never leave.

My gaze lands on the laptop on the table near the window.

“Fuck,” I hiss, stalking over to the laptop. “Where the fuck are you, wife?”

I flip the laptop open, the screen coming alive with a bluish glow. Pulling up her history, I'm not at all surprised by what I find. I saw the fleeting glances between them at the ceremony. The way the good priest was so eager to make sure Valentina was safe by moving up the wedding. I don't know how I knew, but I knew.

“Ryan Gannon...” With a frown, I scan through all the pages she searched. Each click a descent further into a rabbit hole I’m not sure I want to see the bottom of. Pages upon pages about the Gannon family.

But is this some kind of betrayal or a search for absolution? My hands hover over the keys, itching to rip this mystery apart piece by piece until there’s nothing left but truth.

“Damn you, Valentina. What are you looking for?” My words dissolve into the sterile air, unanswered. She’s seeking something in this man of God—or is it the man beneath the collar that’s drawing her in? The thought unleashes something primal in me, a possessiveness of the woman I call my wife, which up until now has been a mild form of control. Now, it’s a beast about to run rampant.

“Shit.” The word is a grenade, blowing holes through my defences. I rake a hand through my hair, pulling at the roots, trying to anchor myself to something other than the chaos spiralling inside me. If I thought allowing Aidan into this relationship was something to worry about, this is more profound, more freak-the-fuck-out than acceptance.

The question isn’t how she feels about him but what *he* feels for *her*. Are they embarking on something so forbidden even the angels daren’t look in case they’re damned as well?

This isn’t just about finding Valentina anymore—it’s about unravelling the thread she’s pulling.

“Fuck!” The word explodes, and with a feral snarl, my hand lashes out. The laptop sails across the room in an arc of silver and black, a pathetic missile launched by jealousy and rage.

A shattering crash fractures my composure as the laptop collides with the dresser mirror. Glass rains down like diamond tears, reflecting my broken reflection—a man coming apart at the seams. I stand there, chest heaving, watching the destruction settle around me.

Moving swiftly, with every step, the need to find her, to confront this headiness of love, fear and anger, pulls me

forward. I storm out of the bedroom, my heart a maelstrom of emotions—I want to shake her, to kiss her, to understand why she’s pushing me to the brink, why she’s testing me. Is this all part of the game she is playing, or is it more? I was prepared to humour her, considering the savage brutality of our consummation, which I wonder now if she expected all along. Did she fight me out of fear or out of control?

The question hangs there unanswered because I have no idea. And that frightens me more than anything else. I don’t know *her*. Not really. There is only a mask in place and only flitting sights of the woman underneath, but it’s enough. Enough to hook me and reel me in like no one ever has before.

I’m a force of nature unleashed, driven by a love so deep and dark it scares me, and I’m going to claim what’s mine, one way or another.

The cold air rushes in as I wrench the front door open, an unwelcome distinction to the stifling tension that’s been choking me. My gaze snaps to the driveway, a silent, empty stretch of red bricks.

“Fucking fuck,” I mutter, the words slicing through the morning’s tranquillity. Valentina’s Mercedes is gone; Aidan’s Range Rover is missing too, and so is the SUV that those fucking pricks Ross and Lee use.

My eyes burn with the raw edge of panic. The emptiness of the driveway highlights the cavity inside me, a hollow chasm where certainty used to be and where Valentina has ripped open to bleed out unpredictability and fear. Two things Finn Doyle doesn’t experience.

Striding towards the last car—a nondescript sedan meant for times when shadows are more valuable than flash, I open the door and snatch the keys from behind the visor.

“Come on, come on,” I urge the engine as I jam the key into the ignition and twist. It roars to life, a beast awakened similar to the turmoil clawing its way through my gut. My hands grip the steering wheel, the leather groaning under the pressure like it knows what’s coming.

Slamming the accelerator down, tyres screech their protest as I tear away from the mansion. The world outside blurs, trees and buildings reduced to smudges of colour against the backdrop of my singular purpose—to find her, to reclaim the chaos that she’s turned into my order and to make her my wife in more than name only. If that means including these other assholes panting after her, then so be it. But she is my wife, and my wife doesn’t run out on me drunk to confess all our sins to the good priest.

It’s the quickest way to get us all killed in our sleep.

My only hope is that Aidan followed her and can talk her out of whatever secrets will pour out of her mouth, damning us in the eyes of more than the church.

“Valentina. I’m coming for you.” The words are a vow, a warning and a plea.

RYAN

A rhythmic pound echoes through the crisp air as the ball slams against the asphalt. Laughter skitters across the church grounds like wayward sparks. “C’mon, Ryan! No mercy!” a kid taunts, his eyes alight with the pure joy of the game.

“Careful what you wish for, Harry,” I chuckle, dribbling past him with ease born from years of avoiding far more than youthful jabs. The orange sphere sails from my fingertips, arcing towards the hoop. Nothing but net. A chorus of groans and cheers erupts around me, the simplicity of the moment a welcome relief from the intensity of the past few days.

For a second, I let myself bask in it.

Then it all comes crashing back down, and reality strikes like a snake in a tree.

Valentina.

Her appearance hits like a sucker punch to the gut, a vivid reminder that innocence is just a fleeting guest in our world.

Noticing the way her shoulders hunch, as if she’s carrying more than just the weight of her slender frame, her eyes are glazed over and dim. Her steps are tentative as she makes her way across the court.

“Time out!” I call, ignoring the collective groan from the kids. “Take five, guys.”

“Damn, Ryan, we’re on a roll here!”

“Life’s got its own game plan,” I say, a half-hearted attempt at humour, but my gaze stays locked on Valentina. As she nears, I see the dark circles haunting her porcelain skin, the way her lips press into a thin line, sealing away secrets I can only guess at.

“Valentina.”

There are no more words after this. Her name is everything and nothing all at the same time.

She forces a smile as brittle as dry autumn leaves. “Father Ryan.”

We remain quiet for a few seconds, the sound of the ball hitting the court the only sound puncturing the silence.

“Do you want to sit?” I gesture towards a bench overlooking the graveyard a few metres away.

“Sure.”

She follows me, moving with the kind of grace that hasn’t been tamed despite everything.

“Ryan, I...” She trails off, biting her lip. It’s clear she’s wrestling with words too heavy to carry alone.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything.” I offer her a reassuring smile, though inside, my thoughts race with what is on her mind.

“Ryan, I—” She chokes on her words, the tremble in her voice a tightrope about to snap.

We sit next to each other on the bench, and her shoulders sag as she drops her head into her hands.

“What’s on your mind?” Usually, I wouldn’t press, but I have a feeling time is running out, and her husband will be along shortly to find her.

“Nothing... Everything...” She hesitates, and then she crumbles. “He’s suffocating me. Every day, it’s like I’m drowning in a life I never chose, marrying a monster I don’t love.”

Running a hand through my sweaty hair, I wish I could yank her out of that abyss. “I know you’re tangled up in some messed-up crap, but if you need a way out, I can help you find one.” The risk is immense; the weight of what I’m offering her will start a war that will tear her apart, but the sour scent of whiskey on her breath just after noon, masked by coffee, sends daggers through my heart. She is desperately unhappy, and I will do whatever it takes to pull her from this prison and see her happy.

Her eyes dart around, searching for unseen threats. “It’s not that simple, Father. You know how this world works. It’s not just Finn; it’s his whole damn empire. I’m trapped.”

“I know.”

Her unsteady gaze meets mine, and she smiles knowingly.

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask though it feels like offering a Band-Aid to someone bleeding out.

“Pray for me?” A bitter laugh escapes her.

“Always.” The promise falls heavy between us, an oath that tastes like cinders.

She nods, a silent acknowledgement of the unspoken bond that’s simmering away just beneath the surface.

“Thank you, Father Ryan. For listening,” she says. “I just don’t know who to trust anymore. I’ve always been a bit of a loner because of my dad and the life, but I was happy doing my thing. Now...”

“Hey.” My voice is a low rumble, coaxing her gaze onto mine. “You can trust me. You’re not alone in this world, even if it feels like you are.”

She offers a small, quivering smile, but it doesn’t reach those haunted eyes of hers. “I know you know what I mean. Your family... they’re part of the same darkness that Finn is, that my father is. But you, you’re different. You walked away from that life. How did you do it?”

Her question hangs between us, an unspoken plea for an answer I’m not sure I have. The shadows of my past cling to

my skin, a reminder of the bloodline I've tried to sever.

"That's a loaded question."

She snorts. "Sorry, it's invasive."

"No, it's fine. But there is no easy answer. I told myself that someone had to atone for their sins, but there is more to it than that. Things that drove me to turn my back on a lot of things, not just my family. It took every ounce of courage I had to step out of that shadow to be something more than what was expected of me."

"Courage," she echoes, and there's this flicker of something like hope in her eyes. "Maybe that's what I need. Maybe that's what I'm trying to find through you. You have it in spades."

"Grab a shovel if you like, and start digging."

She giggles. "I knew coming here would help me find some kind of peace. Things with Finn aren't bad."

"No? You could've fooled me."

"No, really. We are compatible in some areas, but he is aggressive and..." She shakes her head before I can say anything. "He doesn't hurt me. Not in that way. It's weird. One minute, I hate him, and the next, I feel like we could build something, given enough time."

"The question is, which one outweighs the other?"

"Depends on the moment."

"That's no way to live."

"Don't I know it. There's something bigger here. I can feel it under my skin, like prickly heat that I can't get rid of."

Narrowing my eyes, I chew the inside of my lip. "What do you mean 'bigger'?"

"Just some vibes and things he's said. Not to mention how this whole thing started. Paddy Doyle and my dad made this arrangement six years ago. They waited. Why? For Finn's thirtieth birthday? Nah, I'm not buying it."

“Are you thinking too much?”

The question makes her laugh, a genuine laugh, and she relaxes. I feel blessed and honoured that I did that to her. She sits back against the bench. “Maybe. Finn said the same. It’s not in my nature to go digging. I’m the good little mafia princess. Looking the other way and not speaking until I’m spoken to. But this... I don’t know. There is something...”

“Bigger.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you asked him?”

She gives me a look of utter disbelief. “Are you nuts?”

“Maybe?”

She snorts prettily. “No, I won’t. We aren’t in a place where we share secrets.”

“You’re his wife.”

“In name only.”

“That’s a sweeping declaration,” I murmur. In the eyes of the mafia world, she’d better hope they’ve consummated this marriage or things could turn ugly - fast. But then I remember her words in the confessional and shudder at the horrific thought of Finn’s hands on her.

“Meaning?” Her shrewd gaze is clearer now. The haze of alcohol seems to be shifting in the crisp autumn air.

“I think you know.” The thought of discussing her sex life has me squirming on the wooden bench.

“We’ve consummated the marriage,” she declares. “If that’s what you’re worried about. And there was a witness, so there’s that.”

“What?” Outrage courses through my body.

She shrugs. “It’s fine. It’s done. I was expecting something. Maybe not that exactly. Finn is a dark man. He doesn’t ‘make love’.”

Gulping back the vomit that rises in my throat at the thought of them tangled up in the sheets, I know I'm hopelessly lost to her.

"Sorry, Father. I don't mean to shock you."

"Not many shocks me," I murmur. There are skeletons buried deep down in the old Gannon closet that would give her fucking nightmares if she knew the things I'd seen and heard.

"Good to know." She smiles, and I believe that this conversation, this visit with me, has given her some strength to go back and fight another day. "Thank you, Ryan," she adds.

My name on her lips, uncoupled from my priestly title, has me almost weeping with a longing so forbidden; I'm damned for the thought alone.

"Anytime. Come on," I murmur, nodding toward the church's heavy oak doors. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

Valentina hesitates for a moment, her gaze flitting to the doors like they're the gates to some decision she isn't sure she's ready to make. But she nods, and together, we cross the threshold into the hushed sanctity of the church.

The air inside is cooler than the gentle warmth outside. We move past rows of polished pews, our footsteps echoing softly in the cavernous space. The stained glass windows paint the interior with muted colours, turning everything ethereal.

My fingers graze hers, and something electric surges through me, the contact lighting a fire down my spine.

"Ryan..." She says my name like it's a lifeline.

"Valentina," I breathe back, allowing myself this one moment of weakness, this one point of connection in a world where everything else is chaos and uncertainty.

In the silence of the church, with only the flickering of candlelight to witness our hands still pressed together, speaks volumes. There's a promise in our touch, one that rips through me, yet there's also an acknowledgement of something deeper, something neither of us has the luxury to explore.

And then chaos erupts.

The church doors slam open, the sound echoing like a gunshot through the hallowed hall. Two masked men burst in, their presence a black cloud of hostility as they lock onto Valentina and move forward.

VALENTINA

Ryan's face goes pale as he grabs my hand and drags me behind him. I stumble, not expecting the sharp movement.

Peering over his shoulder, I see two men approaching, black balaclavas over their faces as the church doors bounce shut behind them.

Jumping as hands grab me from behind, I scream as one of them clamps over my mouth, and Ryan spins, not having expected a stealth attack.

Struggling in the man's grip, a blade presses against my throat, and I go still as it digs in, nicking me enough to draw blood.

"Make a sound, and you'll be confessing to God in person," my attacker sneers, his breath a foul whisper across my cheek.

I can't scream—fear locks it tight in my chest—but Ryan's voice roars through the church, "Let her go!"

Panic claws at my insides, shredding any illusions of safety. My pulse is a frantic drumbeat; I'm a rabbit cornered by wolves, but deep inside, the instinct to survive ignites like a struck match.

"Back off, padre. This has fuck all to do with you." The man's knife digs deeper, a fiery line etched into my skin, staining my white jacket crimson.

Ryan advances, anger radiating from him like heat from a fire.

The man who has me skitters back as Ryan is jumped by the two men who came in the double doors.

I shriek behind the hand covering my mouth as Ryan goes down. I can't let fear paralyse me. I need to act; I need to do something.

The switchblade.

It's in my pants pocket, where I returned it after threatening Greta with it. I grapple with my long jacket, thrashing in the man's arms to reach it.

It's an impossible task and one he is wise to as he clamps his free hand around my wrist, hauling me off my feet as he lifts me higher with his other arm wrapped around me, the knife still pressed to my throat.

"Ryan!" My voice breaks through from behind the sweaty hand as I kick and fight.

When Ryan manages to get out from under the two assailants, like some kind of god, his fists flying like he was born for this, I quit struggling for just a moment to watch him.

I guess you can take the Gannon out of the mafia but not the mafia out of the Gannon.

He is wrathful, swinging and ducking, kicking and headbutting.

"Get off her!" Ryan shouts, spinning towards us as my attacker is trying to drag me out of the back of the church, but I'm not making it easy for him. I hook my legs around an enormous, ornate, golden candlestick that appears to be screwed to the floor and towers over us. My thighs are screaming from the workout, but I'm not letting this thug abduct me and leave Ryan to be killed. But he's not going down easy this time, either. Throwing punches with righteous fury, his every move is skilled and graceful.

"Ryan!" I manage to bite down hard on the hand over my mouth, tasting salt and copper as the man recoils with a curse, freeing me to call out. But even as I do, the chaos blurs around me as my attacker catches me as I fall and stabs me, his blade

slicing through my flesh with a hot sting that makes me gasp for my next breath.

The doors to the church slam open again with reckless fury, and I see them before I feel anything else—Finn and Aidan, storming in like avenging angels clad in designer suits with cold intentions. Their eyes scan, locking onto the threat in a heartbeat.

“Valentina!” Finn’s almost panicked roar as he sees me scrabbling to get a foothold on the ground as my side yells with pain, slipping on my own blood as my attacker drags me backwards. The other two are still being kept busy by Ryan, and I wonder if there are more outside.

Finn and Aidan move with lethal precision, twin forces of destruction hellbent on safeguarding what’s theirs.

Finn goes after one of the guys that Ryan has kicked away from him by a foot to the gut. He pulls out that wicked jagged knife and slices the guy’s throat without a second thought.

Ryan launches at me and my would-be abductor, taking a swing that lands on his temple and forces him to crumple to the ground, dragging me down with him.

“Gack!” I scream as he lands on top of me, his body unconscious and a dead weight on my stab wound.

Ryan hauls him off his feet and practically throws him to Aidan, who catches him and slits his throat before I can catch my next breath.

“Keep pressure on it,” Ryan says, his hands trembling as he rips off his black tee and bunches it up to press against the wound, trying to stem the flow that seeks to pull me into the darkness.

“Mo...”

“What?”

Gesturing with a vague hand at the three guys infiltrating the church behind him through the back, this is clearly the B-team come to check why the A-team is taking so damn long.

They didn't expect a priest in fucking hot shape to dive into the battle to protect me.

My cloudy gaze lingers on Ryan's abs as he rises and spins, fists already up.

"Valentina," Finn grits out as he drops to his knees. "Shit. Fuck."

"Not over..."

He doesn't need telling twice. This hit team is expanding with each second. In a swift motion, he rises and yanks the gun out of the back of his pants, hidden beneath his black cashmere coat that is stained with blood.

"Shit, shit, shit," I curse under my breath, the pain lancing through me with every thudding heartbeat, but there is something almost hypnotic in watching them work together. Finn moves left, Aidan right, their coordination born of years of trust and battles fought side by side.

"Your last mistake, bastards!" Aidan snarls, his charm swallowed by the menace that now drips from every syllable. He fires his own weapon, and one of the masked men drops, his body crumpling to the floor.

An attacker lunges toward Finn with a desperate viciousness, who sidesteps with a grace born of deadly dance rehearsals. There's a flash of metal, the sound of flesh yielding to force, and then nothing but a thud as the second body joins the first at the same time as he raises his gun and fires it over the top of me, making me shriek. The soft *ping* from the silencer is deafening as the guy who was trying to get to me drops like a rock, face first next to me.

Panic claws its way up my throat, but I swallow it down. Now's not the time to fall apart. I'm not dying.

I'm not.

"Let's get her out of here," Finn says, shoving his gun back in his pants with a fluid motion that belies the adrenaline pumping through him. He stashes the knife in a hidden holster that seems to make it vanish like magic.

“Can you stand?” Ryan asks, dropping to his knees again.

“Have to try,” I answer, though my knees feel like they’re made of something fragile—glass or maybe just fear.

“Easy,” Finn cautions, stepping closer.

“Fuck easy,” I spit back because even now, vulnerability feels like a betrayal of myself. But as I rise, the church spins, and it’s only their steadying hands that keep me upright—a lifeline amidst the tempest.

“Got you,” Finn murmurs, as he sweeps me up into his muscular arms, cradling me carefully as he strides out of the church. “You, Father. You’re coming with us.”

“I can’t leave, this...”

“Now.”

The tone is one only a fool would disobey, and Ryan is no fool.

Finn’s arms are a strange comfort, and I slump against him, closing my eyes against the pain.

VALENTINA

A metallic tang floods my mouth as I press my hand to the searing pain in my side. The world spins. My vision swims with crimson and grey, the aftermath of blind panic and the slice of steel.

“Valentina!” Finn’s voice cuts through the chaos, urgent, commanding. “Do not close your eyes, little bird.”

I look up at him, his blue eyes scanning the area with razor-sharp focus. The tension in his body is ready to spring into action, prepared to defend, to run, to fight.

“They won’t stop after this,” Aidan mutters as we hurry towards the black Range Rover at the curb.

“Who are they?” My mind is a whirlwind of fear and confusion.

“Dead men walking,” Finn says.

Aidan’s presence looms beside us, his green eyes flickering intensely. He scans the area like a predator, coiled and ready.

Aidan opens up the back door, and Finn ducks to place me gently on the seat, which brings back the reminder of a less kind grip he had on me in here only days ago.

“Where are we going?” I manage between shallow breaths as he slides in next to me.

“You, get in.” He points to Ryan, who looks back at the church with a sigh and climbs in the passenger seat as Aidan

takes the wheel.

Screeching off from the curb to the symphony of sirens coming in the opposite direction, I duck down lower but remember the windows are tinted. Maybe that's a bad thing, though. It *looks* gangster. We're fucked.

"Safehouse," Finn replies tersely. "Won't be followed there."

"Switch out..." I mutter as the adrenaline wears off and my nausea wells up.

Finn's hand grips mine tightly with a soft smile that completely changes his face. "Stay with me, wife, and yes, I know."

Letting out a soft snort, I close my eyes, but in the next second, Finn jars me awake.

"Do not close your eyes, or I will spank your ass so hard, you'll be bruised for a week."

Annnnd, he's back.

I find comfort in it. Right now, we need his level head, controlled and in control.

Everything in me wants to collapse, give in to the darkness nibbling at the edges of my consciousness, but Finn's determination to keep me awake is a contagious force. It propels me forward, even as every jolt of the car sends a bolt of agony through my body.

"Stay with me, Valentina," Finn murmurs close to my ear as we turn another corner. "You're not dying today."

"Wasn't planning on it," I say, trying for bravado, but it comes out as a choked whisper.

"Good," he says with a grim smile. "Because I'm not done with you yet."

"Nor I with you," I retort, letting the heat flood my words.

His gaze on mine is questioning, but I see things there that I didn't before. He cares. He isn't worried because his asset,

his *possession*, has been threatened. He's worried because of me.

It changes *everything*.

In this one moment when the rest of the world fades away, I lace our fingers together and grip him as tightly as my weakening body can. "Thank you."

"Don't be an idiot," he snarls, fear driving his aggression. "You never thank me for protecting you."

"I'm sorry for running out."

"I'm sorry for making you run."

We share a secret smile.

"Please let me close my eyes."

"No."

"Where are Ross and Lee?" Aidan grits out, cutting through our moment.

"If they haven't killed each other for being useless fucking assholes, then they'd better run and keep running. My wife was nearly abducted and killed on their watch. This shit is unforgivable."

I gulp. He is furious.

"Gannon," he barks suddenly, and Ryan turns around, still half naked, to glare at Finn.

"What, Doyle?"

Finn snickers. "Apologies. Force of habit. Your cousins are close allies."

"I'm aware."

"You're a tough son of a bitch. Maybe you're in the wrong calling."

"Nope."

"Thank you."

My closing eyes snap open at the sincerity in Finn's tone.

Ryan narrows his eyes and huffs out a breath through his nose. “No need to thank me, but you will make a hefty donation to the church to clean up the mess you made.”

“Noted. It will be paid in full by the dickcunts who decided to pick a fight with my new bride. They will wish their daddy had pulled out before I’m through with them.”

“Any ideas who ‘they’ are?” Ryan asks, turning to face the front again.

“Not yet,” Finn mutters. “But give me time.”

Blood seeps between my fingers, hot and insistent as the world spins in the fallen silence, a carousel of shadows and threats, but Finn’s grip on my fingers is comforting.

“Here.” Aidan pulls up in an underground car park of a shopping mall in the city. He doesn’t acknowledge my blood, my fear. Instead, he offers a nod, a simple acknowledgement of the hell we’ve stepped into, as he climbs out and opens the back door.

“Can’t move,” I murmur, my limbs like lead.

“Have to switch, fledgling. You said it yourself.”

Groaning with agony as I’m half dragged, half carried out of the Range Rover and thrust onto the back seat of a dark blue sedan, I close my eyes, and not even Finn’s growl will get me to open them.

“Safe for now,” Aidan says as we set off again, this time at a steadier pace. “But not for long.”

VALENTINA

G rowling as Finn shakes me awake for the hundredth time, I eventually snap my eyes open and give him a death stare. “I’m *not* sleeping.”

“Then keep your eyes open.”

“Fuck you.”

“I would, but you’re injured. I’m not *that* savage.”

“Bet you are,” I mutter, but he hears me anyway and narrows his eyes. “Eyes open, little bird. End of story.”

Doing a long blink to annoy the shit out of him, I turn my head to look out of the window. We are in the countryside, which admittedly is not that difficult to achieve in the North of England, but in which direction is unknown. “Where are we?”

“Not far from our destination,” Aidan replies tersely, which offers no light on the matter.

Inhaling deeply, I fix on the back of Ryan’s head. “You okay, Father?”

He turns to give me a secretive smile. “I’m fine. I’m worried about you.”

“Does anyone have a spare shirt for Ryan?” I ask to deflect.

“Boot. But it’ll have to wait until we stop,” Finn replies.

Shifting uncomfortably, I press down on the wound harder with Ryan’s balled-up shirt and wince.

“We’ll take a proper look when we land,” Finn murmurs.

Nodding, I give up talking again. It’s too much effort.

Roughly five minutes later, we pull up to a cottage set back off the beaten track. Finn helps me out of the car and scoops me up as Aidan grabs a couple of bags from the boot and then scoops up a hideaway stone near the door for the key.

The walls are bare, the furniture is sparse, and it’s freezing but it’s a place that isn’t moving and where Finn will hopefully let me get some rest.

“I’ll get the heating on,” Aidan mutters as Finn carries me to a bedroom near the back of the one-floor cottage.

He lays me gently on the bed as Ryan arrives behind him, pulling a white shirt on and doing up the buttons. It fits him like a glove and must belong to Finn because Aidan is slightly more broad-chested, from what I’ve seen.

“How cute,” I murmur. “You can share clothes.”

Finn rolls his eyes but doesn’t say anything as he steadily pulls the blood-drenched tee away and examines my wound. But his expression betrays him, flashing with something fierce, something protective.

“This is going to hurt,” he mutters.

“Already does,” I reply, steeling myself for the pain. “Fuck,” I hiss as he works, his fingers deft, his touch a paradox of gentleness and urgency.

“Sorry.”

“Here,” Aidan joins us with a first aid box the size of a toolbox. Actually, it *is* a toolbox. That does not give me hope for what’s inside.

“Stay awake,” Finn orders, and I fight the darkness, clawing at the edges of my consciousness, clinging to the sound of his voice, the intensity of his presence.

“I’ve never been good at following orders,” I joke, trying to mask the fear, the uncertainty that coils tight in my stomach.

“Learn,” Finn counters, and there’s no mistaking the command.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll make you.” There’s a thrill in the threat, a promise of something that transcends the pain, the danger, the blood.

“Now you’re making it easy to defy you,” I whisper, and for a moment, the world falls away, leaving only the two of us.

But it quickly is swept away as Aidan presses a wad drenched in antiseptic on the wound.

“Ahhh!” I scream as blood oozes between Aidan’s fingers as he dabs gently.

After a few seconds of agony, Finn peers at it. “I don’t think it’s that bad. A few steristrips should hold it for now, but we need to keep an eye on it.”

“Steristrips?” I gape at him. “I’ve been *stabbed*.”

“I’ve seen worse. I’ve *had* worse. You’ll be fine.”

“Fuck.”

He sets to work while I close my eyes against the nausea, wincing every time he pulls the wound together to tape it up. He wraps a makeshift bandage tight around my waist. I bite back a scream, focusing on his clenched jaw and the way his eyes never stray from the task at hand.

“What is the plan here?” Ryan’s voice cuts through the haze of pain. “I can’t stay here for long. I’ve got questions to answer about what happened at the church.”

“About that,” Finn says, rising from my bedside and turning to face Ryan as he pulls the sterile gloves off and balls them up. “Things were brutal back there but necessary. You understand how this works.”

It’s not a question.

The silence is tense as Ryan searches Finn’s eyes. “I do. But you slaughtered in the House of God.”

“If we hadn’t, Valentina would be abducted or dead.”

“I’m aware. If you are asking whether I will mention names when I inevitably have to explain what the hell happened, I won’t. I *do* know how this game is played. I’m not a snitch, but neither am I a pushover. Do not ever come into my house again and pull that shit. Are we clear?”

“Perfectly,” Finn grits out.

“So, what’s the plan?” Ryan asks again.

“We stay here the night and try to figure out who the fuck is behind this. We can trust no one right now except the four of us.”

“Can I sleep?” I interrupt.

“Yes, you can now. After some painkillers,” he adds with a frown.

Aidan wordlessly hands me some and a bottle of water. Swallowing them down even though my stomach is empty, I’d rather just get on with the sleeping, and Finn is a harsh master.

His way or the highway.

Before my eyes close, I see him root through the first aid box and pull out two guns. He tosses one to Aidan and then another to Ryan, who holds it up like it’s a rotting dead fish.

“Ever used one of these?” he asks me, eyebrow cocked.

“No.”

“Point and shoot,” Finn instructs, “and don’t hesitate.” He slips another one under the pillow.

Then the darkness pulls me under, and with relief, I surrender.

The silence is a living thing, pulsing in the small room with an intensity that makes my already shallow breaths feel like I’m inhaling knives. I shift uncomfortably but keep my eyes closed in case Finn decides to go on another stay-awake bender.

His whisper is steel wrapped in velvet a few seconds later. “We need supplies—weapons, cash, fake IDs.”

“Risky,” I murmur, pressing a hand against the bandage on my side, feeling the stickiness beneath. The pain is a reminder that vulnerability isn’t just a feeling—it’s a bullet waiting to be fired.

Not realising I said it out loud, I’m startled when Aidan’s voice cuts through the dark room. “Everything’s risky now, Valentina. There are no easy routes.”

“Can you handle it?” Finn asks him, ignoring me.

Aidan nods, jaw set. “This stash house is well equipped. We should find everything we need right here. But the priest...”

A loaded silence tells me Ryan isn’t in the room.

“He’s a Gannon. He knows the deal,” Finn states.

“You sure we can trust him?”

“We can,” I say softly. “He won’t betray me.”

Sensing Finn’s eyes on me, I keep mine closed, not willing to elaborate.

“We can’t stay in one place too long. We’ll move tomorrow night. Valentina needs to rest a bit longer,” Finn says, and his concern touches me. “Drop Gannon off so he can do clean up, and then we disappear like smoke.”

“Rest,” I echo hollowly, because what else is there to do but play along with the charade of safety?

The precariousness of our situation is like a noose tightening around my neck. But as I crack my eyes to glance at the silhouettes of these men—my protectors—I wonder if things have truly changed between Finn and me or if the adrenaline and fight of flight mode have marred my emotions.

VALENTINA

Jolting awake, the pain is a sharp reminder that this isn't some twisted nightmare. My hair is soaked with cold sweat and stuck to my face, and I gasp, my hand flying to the bandage wrapped tight around my torso. Stabbed, but not out. I push through the hurt because lying here, in the half-light of dawn, isn't an option—not when every breath feels like being trapped between walls closing in.

“Fuck,” I hiss under my breath, each movement sending shots of agony through my side. But it's nothing compared to the turmoil brewing inside me. My emotions are a wreck. Or maybe a wrecking ball. Finn and I are becoming something more, something dark and love adjacent, but Ryan is the light of my soul. I need him like I need air.

Discovering I'm alone, I let myself wallow in self-pity and pain for a few moments, knowing that as soon as I face the men, I have to pull it together. I won't be the actual wounded bird Finn thinks I am. Not a fucking chance. This is my opportunity to show him I'm better than that. Stronger. More capable. Also, I won't be the reason we are slowed down and slaughtered in our sleep by whoever these fuckers are who tried to take me.

They have to be either desperate or incredibly stupid to take on Finn Doyle's wife while she's with the Gannon family's cousin.

Dragging myself out of bed, ignoring the throbbing in my side, which is dulled with the pain meds, the safe house is

silent, but I know they're all here—the weight of their presence lingers heavy in the air. With shaky legs, I go to the living room, where tension hangs thick enough to choke on.

“Morning, Valentina,” Aidan greets me with a softness that doesn't belong in our world of blood and shadows. His forest green eyes hold something I can't quite name, something dangerous for both of us.

“Morning,” I reply, my voice coming out steadier than I feel. Every glance we share is a silent conversation laden with words we can't afford to speak out loud.

The room feels smaller with the three of them in it, their bodies coiled tight with unspoken desires and secrets. It's like we're all pieces of a puzzle forced together, edges sharpened by longing and fear.

“Did you get some rest?” Finn approaches me and kisses the top of my head. He smells fresh and clean, and I baulk, rearing back from him and jarring my wound.

“Oh, my God. I must reek!” I exclaim and lift my arm to give a deep sniff, which I recoil from. “Jesus.”

Ryan snorts and shakes his head.

“Sorry!” I bleat. “Sorry!”

Finn chuckles. “Do you? I hadn't noticed.”

“Oh, fuck you, but thanks. I need to clean up.”

It's weird. The intensity of our relationships seems to have mellowed into something more natural. It makes me hide my smile, but then I grimace at the thought of trying to bathe without getting the wound wet.

“You can shower; the sticky bandage underneath is waterproof. Need some help?” Finn asks, his eyes dark with lust.

“To shower, yes. But don't expect it to end the way the last one did,” I add with a whisper.

“You need anything?” Aidan starts, hesitation lacing his tone, and I brace myself for whatever comes next.

“Peace,” I say with a chuckle that doesn’t reach my eyes. “But I’ll settle for coffee.”

“Coming right up,” he replies, moving towards the kitchen.

“Thanks,” I murmur, watching him go. The pull I feel toward him is as suddenly undeniable as it is forbidden. The memory of his cock thrusting into my mouth, his cum splashing on my bare skin, has me going dizzy with the heat coursing through me.

What is this? Why am I thinking these things?

Turning away, I catch Ryan’s gaze. He offers a small, sad smile that speaks volumes of the war raging within him—a man of faith caught in the devil’s den.

“Come,” Finn says, placing his hand on the small of my back and leading back towards the bedroom.

“I have no other clothes.”

“We can wash most of yours; your top is ruined, though. You can wear one of my shirts in the meantime.” His look of desire at that thought makes my clit twitch unexpectedly.

“Shower,” I murmur and struggle to get out of my clothes, minding the wound on my side.

Finn sets the shower running and gathers up my things. “I’ll get these on and then come back to help you.”

“You know how to do laundry?” My shock is evident, and he chuckles.

“Okay, okay. I’ll get Aidan to do it.”

Snorting, I wait patiently for him to return, and by the time he does, the small bathroom is steaming up nicely.

Finn undresses, his body lithe and toned, and something I’ve seen before, but this time I look. Really *look*. I find the faded line of a scar from a stab wound on his lower abdomen. His gaze is intent on me, desire heavy in his sapphire eyes. He steps into the shower first, wincing at the hot spray hitting his skin but adjusting it quickly.

“Is it okay?” he asks, extending a hand for me to join him. I take a cautious step towards him, my bare body bathed in the humid mist of the bathroom.

As soon as the water hits my skin, the world fades away. There is only him and me. And the pain. That’s there. A constant reminder of what happened. But right now, with Finn’s attentive gaze on me, the pain seems bearable.

His hands are gentle as they work to clean my body, careful not to jostle my side too much. I’m surprised he doesn’t try to take advantage of me, but it also worries me. Why didn’t he?

When he’s done, he helps me out of the shower and gently dries me off with a soft towel. My chest tightens at his tenderness.

“Didn’t know you had it in you,” I murmur.

He smirks but says nothing, leading me back into the bedroom and handing me a black shirt out of the handy bag. He helps me into it and moves close to do up the buttons. It drops to my mid-thigh, so at least it covers up my tits and ass. The last thing I need is to be parading around here, flaunting my assets to a priest and my husband’s right-hand man.

Finn’s hand comes up to cup my cheek, smooth and warm. Our lips meet, a collision of need and possession, and I melt into him, forgetting for a moment the pain, the danger, the complications of a heart drawn in different directions.

As we break apart, I catch Aidan’s gaze on us from the doorway, something flickering there—admiration, desire, conflict. My breath catches at the intensity, and my heart aches with a longing I can’t quite quell and have no idea what to do with. There’s a promise in those depths, a silent vow that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Get some rest now, proper rest,” Finn commands, flinging back the bed covers. “The gun still under the pillow?”

I nod, having forgotten all about that. Sliding into the soft, warm haven, I settle back as Aidan hands me a mug of steaming coffee.

“Thanks.” I smile up at him, and he bends to give me a quick kiss on top of my head, much like Finn did earlier.

Narrowing my eyes at the gesture, I cast a glance at Finn, but he is looking everywhere but at us as he gets dressed.

When Aidan leaves, I blurt out to my husband, “Don’t go.”

He freezes, his expression quizzical.

“Please stay.”

He nods once and sits on the bed next to me, eyes ablaze.

“We can’t...”

“We can.”

He moves the covers aside and lifts the shirt, goosebumps skittering over my skin at the chill.

His mouth finds my flesh just above the bandage, his tongue drawing a slow, searing path upward. My breath hitches, and I fight to keep my composure. But then, his fingers trail down, slipping between my legs, and composure is a ship that’s already sailed.

“Fuck, Finn...” My words dissolve into a sharp intake of breath as he explores me, his fingers insistent on my clit, whispering dark nothings that make me wetter.

“Tell me to stop,” he challenges, even as he dips a finger inside me, coaxing a moan from my lips.

“Can’t.” It’s a confession torn from the depths of my wanton soul. His thumb finds my clit again, circling, pressing, driving me towards the edge I know all too well.

“Good girl,” Finn growls, his voice a rough caress against my senses. I lean back, caught in the storm of his touch, the sharp pain from my wound blurring into pleasure as he brings me closer to a climax.

“Please, Finn.” My body is on fire, every nerve ending screaming for release.

He ducks his head lower, lips skating over the wound before he pushes my legs further open and settles between

them. He flicks my clit with his tongue, driving me wild. He thrusts his fingers inside me again, and I clutch my side, trying not to wreck the wound as he drives me to an orgasm that is going to rip through me.

He licks and sucks greedily. His free hand comes up to grip my thigh, holding me open for him, and I buck against him. The tension inside coils tighter, desperate for sweet release.

“Come for me, Valentina.” His whisper is my undoing. Waves of ecstasy crash over me, and I shatter, my climax tearing through me in a series of pulses that leave me shaking, gasping, clinging to him like he’s the only solid thing in a world gone mad as pain shoots through me from the movement to the wound.

I breathe out, the aftershocks rippling through me as he slowly withdraws his fingers, bringing them to his lips. He tastes me, his eyes never leaving mine, and it’s in that moment, I realise this dark passion we share is a poison I will willingly drink.

AIDAN

“You okay, Father?” I lean against the wall as I stare at the priest, who, in turn, is staring out of the window.

He leans his forehead on the cool pane and sighs. “Just great.”

“I know it must’ve been difficult, what happened in the church. What you saw...”

He spins to face me. “You think that was bad? I’ve seen way worse, trust me.”

“Hmm, wondered why you didn’t flinch.”

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head, turning back to lean against the window.

“You fought to save her. Why?”

The question doesn’t catch him off guard. He’s been expecting it, I’m sure. I’m also sure he thought it would be Finn who asked him.

“You are an observant man, Quinn. Why do you think?”

“You don’t want to say the words out loud.”

“Doesn’t that make them true?”

I snort. “That’s the thought. Can I ask you something?”

“Why not?” He sighs, resigned.

“How do you believe in something you can’t see?”

He tilts his head and turns it, so his cheek is pressed against the window. “You’re not a believer?”

I don’t answer.

“It’s a difficult question to answer. More so now than ever.”

Moving closer, I stand next to him to stare out of the window as well. “When I was a child, my parents were staunch Irish Catholic. God-fearing people. They attended Mass every week. My mother did church bake sales and preached purity and good and the dangers of burning in hell to anyone who would listen. We’d sit there in the pews, and she’d make notes that she would then pour over for hours on a Sunday. Then, one day, she and my father were slaughtered in their own home in front of their son, who was kidnapped and abused. So, no, Father. I don’t believe. I don’t believe that anything can exist that makes that okay and is fine with having two grown men hold a seven-year-old boy down while they carved their name into his back like a name tag for school clothes. To signify property. Nothing good, anyway. Only pure evil.”

He catches his breath. I don’t think the man of the cloth is shocked easily, and maybe shocked is too strong of a word, but he feels something disturbing, and so he should. I turn and lift my tee, showing him the name imprinted on my back for all eternity.

“Doyle.”

The one word that escapes his lips is like a lash to my soul. Dropping the tee, I stay turned away to stare blankly at the wall. It’s an odd pose, but one that feels right. “Finn Doyle was the same age as me when I was thrown into the mafia life. He took pity on me and took me under his wing. Showed me the ropes. I was quick on my feet, nimble with a knife, and could throw a swift punch. He saved me from what would otherwise have been a living nightmare. He saved me.”

“So, you feel loyalty to him.”

“I *am* loyal to him,” I hiss, spinning quickly and jabbing him in the shoulder to make the distinction known. “I would die for him.”

“Yet you covet his wife.”

Closing my eyes, I breathe in deeply before I open them again. “That marriage is unconventional at best. Why not make it more so?”

“You wish to enter their marriage as a third?”

“You don’t seem bothered or at all disgusted by any of this.”

“Told you, I know how shit works. I’m not a sheltered little choir boy turned priest. You know my family. You think that from day one, I was just *good*?” He spits out the word. “You don’t get to be good when you’re born a Gannon.”

“And yet here you are.”

“Here I am, thinking about a woman who has touched a part of my soul that has never seen the light of day, knowing she belongs to another.”

“She has a way, doesn’t she?”

We lock gazes, and something deep, profound even, passes between us.

“She does.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

He blinks, not having expected that question.

“I see I’ve finally shocked you,” I snicker. “You *have* a choice.”

He shakes his head. “No, I don’t.”

“Course you do. Everyone does. There is no fate or divine plan. There is you and whatever choice you make next.”

He closes his eyes and turns to lean his forehead on the windowpane, whispering, “Hail Mary, full of grace...”

Knowing it’s time to leave him to make his choice or not, I slip back into the kitchen and pour a whiskey. It’s barely mid-

afternoon, but who gives a fuck?

“Fuck, Aidan,” Valentina whispers as she comes up behind me, her voice a tremor that sends ripples across the stillness between us. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but this place is small.”

She rests her hand on my hand, and I flinch but then relax. Her touch is heaven itself and soothes the raging in my soul.

“Where’s Finn?” I ask, ignoring her words. I can’t go there with her yet.

“Sleeping.”

Turning to face her, I chuckle. “You do seem to have a soothing effect on him.”

“I feel like I’m drowning and don’t know how to stop it.”

At her outburst, I lean against the counter, my arms folded over my chest. “Do you want to talk about what’s got you feeling like you’re at the bottom of the ocean?”

She paces, a caged, wounded animal, her hands fluttering to her hair, tugging at the ends in frustration. “I heard you and Ryan. It’s got me all confused. It’s like being torn between two storms, each ready to claim me whole.”

“Storms can be weathered,” I say, watching her movements and the way she seems to battle invisible forces.

Valentina stops pacing and faces me, her eyes searching mine with an intensity that could start a fire. “But what if I don’t want to be just something to be weathered, Aidan? What if I want to be the fucking storm?”

“Then become it.” The words are out before I can stop them, a whisper of encouragement for the chaos she could unleash—a chaos I’d willingly stand in the eye of if it meant having her there with me.

“God, you don’t understand!” She’s close now, so damn close I could reach out and pull her to me. But I stay rooted, a statue chiselled from self-restraint. “With Finn, it’s like standing on moving ground, only you don’t know which piece goes where, but with Ryan... he’s solid, a lifeline.”

“And me?” I can’t help but ask, the question slipping out, laced with the weight of a thousand unspoken confessions. “What am I to you, Valentina?”

“You?” Her laugh is humourless, a sharp sound in the quiet. “You’re the dark water that terrifies me and beckons me all at once. You’re where I might find peace or where I might finally sink.”

The admission slams into me like a bullet, lodging somewhere deep and dangerous. Part of me wants to surge forward, to claim the lips that spill such raw, intoxicating truths. But I hold back because this isn’t about what I want—not when she’s caught in the crossfire of her own heart.

“Tell me what you need.”

She swallows hard, her gaze flickering down before meeting mine again. “I don’t know if what I need is something I should want.”

Every instinct urges me to close the distance between us. “Sometimes, what we want is exactly what we need. Even if it defies reason.”

Her breath catches, and she nods slightly, acknowledging the truth in my words.

Slowly, carefully, I reach out, hunger clawing at my insides. My fingers tremble as they trace the line of her jaw, skimming over her skin like the brush of velvet. The gesture is tender yet loaded with a current of raw desire that I struggle to cage.

“You saved me.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“I’m Finn’s wife.”

“And?”

“Your touch... It’s both comforting and unnerving. I shouldn’t want it, but I do.”

“Because you feel it here?” I ask, the pads of my fingers grazing her cheek, then down to rest ever so lightly above her

heart. I can almost feel the wild beat through Finn's shirt, a rhythm that matches mine.

"Yes."

"Valentina," I breathe, my thumb brushing her cheek, willing her to understand the depth of what I can't put into words. "You don't have to be afraid."

"Finn won't stand for this."

"Have you asked him?"

Her eyes widen and she shakes her head. "I wouldn't dare."

"Try it. He might surprise you."

"You sound like you know something I don't."

"I know what happens when two storms collide."

"Chaos."

"Or salvation," I counter, gripping her chin lightly. "Tell me to stop."

She remains silent, her eyes locked on mine, dark with the promise of things unsaid and actions yet undone. And in that silence, the answer is clear—we're past the point of no return.

Her breath hitches, a soft gasp of surrender that fans the flames licking at my self-control. My lips brush against hers, light as the touch of shadow, yet it's enough to send a jolt through me, a current of longing that has been dammed up for far too long.

"Aidan," Valentina whispers against my mouth, her voice a featherweight tremor, but there's no fear in her eyes—only raw desire.

I deepen our kiss, giving way to something more primal, a hunger that can't be sated with mere touches. Her hands find their way to my hair, pulling me closer as if the millimetres that separate us are an excruciating distance.

I groan, low and guttural, as her tongue slides against mine. Our mouths move together, each stroke stoking the fire

this kiss has lit.

My hands roam over her curves, memorising the dips and swells of her body.

“God, Aidan,” she moans, her back arching, pressing herself against me, and I’m lost in the sensation of her. Every touch, every taste of her is like a brand upon my skin, marking me as hers just as much as I need to mark her as mine.

The world beyond this room fades away, leaving only the sound of our breathing, ragged and intertwined, and the heat of our bodies locked in this desperate embrace.

My tone is low but urgent as I pull away and say, “You need to talk to Finn about this.” The words carve through the thick silence, an offering and a sacrifice all at once.

Her lips part slightly as if to protest or plead, but no sound escapes.

“Listen to me,” I urge, cupping her face, thumbs caressing the high bones of her cheeks. “If you want this—us—as much as I do, then you need to talk to him.”

“You sound like you know what he’ll say.”

“I do.”

“What?”

“He is your husband. It is his right to say.”

She searches my eyes and then nods, but I don’t trust that she will, which is why I need to kick Finn’s ass until he brings the subject up with her. I’m not letting this slide; I’m not letting it go. Not now. Not ever.

FINN

The moment I step into the room, it's like walking into the belly of a beast that's just been wounded—dangerous and unpredictable. Valentina, Aidan, and Ryan are already here, their faces etched with lines of concern so deep I swear you could hide secrets in them.

Maybe they are.

Taking in the thick curtains drawn tight against prying eyes, casting us all in shadows that seem to flicker even without the presence of light.

“What did I miss?” It feels like I've walked in on the end of a joke that fell flat.

Aidan leans against the wall, his preferred spot to be in any room, his arms crossed over his chest, eyes scanning my expression, always the strategist even when the world's gone to shit. Valentina sits rigidly on the edge of a worn leather armchair that has seen better days, her posture one of a queen holding court in a kingdom of despair. Ryan perches on the sofa, fingers tapping an erratic beat on his knee.

“Nothing but questions on who the fuck did this.” Aidan is the one to pipe up, although there is definitely more to this. The way his gaze skates over Valentina, never lingering for longer than half a second, while she ignores him completely, tells me they've kissed. Deeply, passionately, and they are waiting for the shoe to drop.

Let them wait.

The silence that follows is the kind that screams, loaded with unasked questions and unspoken accusations. My mind churns as I try to piece together the fragments of betrayal, feeling the weight of Aidan's stare like a physical touch.

"We need to sort this mess out before it sorts us."

"Right," Aidan agrees, pushing away from the wall with a grace that doesn't go unnoticed by Valentina, who quickly averts her gaze again. "Let's figure out who the fuck wants Valentina, dead or alive. Jury's out on that one."

She grimaces and rests her hand on her side, my shirt riding up her thighs sexily as she shifts.

"Your clothes not dry yet?" I murmur.

She blinks. "I don't know. I'd forgotten all about them."

Snickering, I stand next to her, taking her hand and giving it a quick kiss before I release it again, resting my hand on the back of the chair.

My hands itch to strangle the answer out of someone, anyone. But I force them still because right now, it's not about what I want to do. It's about what we need to do to survive.

Dust motes dance in a stray beam of light, slicing through the murky gloom of the room like a spotlight on the damned. The four of us are huddled around in hiding like fucking mugs. This has to end.

"What's on your mind, little bird?" I ask when I see her anxious to spit something out.

"Someone tipped them off," she says, her voice low and dangerous. "How else would they have known where to find me? I didn't even know where I was going until about five minutes out of the driveway."

Her accusation hangs heavy in the air, and I feel the threads of trust stretching thin like spider silk as she voices my thoughts. My gaze drifts from Aidan's grim face to Ryan's blank mask. I'm looking for something, anything that might point to deceit among us. Nothing stands out, but the seed of doubt has been planted, and it's taking root fast.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Aidan snarls, shaking his head. “Ride or die, asshole.”

“Didn’t say anything,” I murmur, holding my hands up. “But Valentina has a point, and don’t say you weren’t thinking it as well. It’s not like our moves are broadcast for the world to see. This is betrayal because, from where I’m standing, someone made damn sure Valentina was a sitting duck. What they didn’t count on was the good Father going above and beyond protecting his flock. Took that to a whole other level, didn’t you, Gannon?”

“Fuck you,” he snarls back, losing more and more of his priestly persona the longer we are holed up here.

The atmosphere thickens with suspicion, and I can almost taste the metallic tang of impending violence. Something’s gotta give—and soon. Because if there’s a snake in our garden, I’ll burn the whole damn thing to the ground before I let it hurt Valentina again.

Silence slams into the room like a body hitting the floor, heavy and final. In the quiet that follows, a thought slithers into my mind, venomous and sharp—Ross and Lee.

“Ross and Lee,” I mutter, the names tasting like poison on my tongue.

Aidan’s head snaps up, his eyes narrowing. “You think they would be that fucking stupid?”

“Think?” The word is a growl, scraping at my throat. “They were the only ones not accounted for when Valentina was ambushed. They were meant to be on her tail every second of every fucking day. So, where the fuck were they?”

Aidan shifts, unease written all over his face. “But they’re our boys, Finn. They’ve been with us since the beginning.”

“Since the beginning,” I echo, mocking. “Enough time to weave a web of lies so tight we’d be stuck in it without even knowing.”

Aidan leans forward, his hands spread wide as if he’s trying to offer something profound, but I can see the tension in

the lines of his body. “And you think they just decided to bring in the rest of the attackers? Just like that?”

“Stranger things have happened,” I snap back. “All it takes is one weak link, one whisper of a better deal, and suddenly ‘brotherhood’ means jack shit. This was opportunistic, no doubt, and they took it and ran with it.”

I glare at Valentina, furious that she ran out and nearly got abducted, worse, killed.

She locks onto my gaze and tears well up. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t know...”

Reaching out to stroke her hair, I crouch down, take her hands and squeeze them hard enough for her to squirm in my grip. “It’s not okay, but we have to move forward. This can never happen again, wife. Are we clear about that?”

She nods as a tear seeps out of her eye. “I’m sorry.”

Ryan hisses, but I ignore him. He doesn’t know the first thing about us, so he doesn’t get to say anything about anything.

“Fuck,” Valentina breathes out. “If this is true...” She shudders and with good cause. I will annihilate anyone who turns their back on me.

“Then we’re dealing with more than just betrayal,” Aidan finishes grimly. “We’re dealing with a war from the inside out.”

“Exactly. But for who? They are as thick as two fucking sheep, so they’re not the ones pulling the strings here. Someone else is. So, we find the truth. We find out who’s behind this and what their end game is. And we make them pay for hurting my wife.”

Rising, I face Aidan, leaving Ryan out of this.

“Blood for blood,” Aidan spits out, anger creasing into every line of his body.

“Who would do this?” Valentina suddenly demands, standing up as well, each word edged with steel. “This isn’t just about the Doyles, Finn. There are so many variables. I was

there, at that church with a Gannon, an O'Shea, alone without her enforcer husband and his right-hand man."

I watch her rage unfold, something primal uncoiling in my soul at the sight of her strength, her raw defiance. She's a masterpiece painted in shades of passion and power, and for a moment, I forget the chaos around us.

"Someone's playing us," I say, focusing again on the treachery at hand. "They want to start a war between the families, using you to light the fuse."

"Which families?" Ryan asks, eyebrow raised.

"Time to find out. Before they have a chance to finish what they started," Valentina grits out.

"Agreed." My voice is a vow—a promise carved in the darkness of our world. We'll find who's responsible. And God help them when we do. "Let's smoke them out."

RYAN

The room feels like a pressure cooker, charged with tension. My guts are churning from the hard exterior that has dropped into place automatically at this shitshow. Once a Gannon...

Fuck.

I'd thought, I'd *hoped*, this life was behind me, but now I'm thrust straight back in where angels fear to tread.

And with Finn fucking Doyle at that.

Where?

Where did this all go wrong?

But I know the answer to that.

Valentina O'Shea.

Valentina *Doyle*.

My stomach clenches, and I resist the urge to throw up at the memory of these men taking lives as if it meant nothing in my church. But the worst part? The worst is that I let them.

I let them slaughter those men like lambs all because of the woman pacing up and down in front of me in a black shirt that barely covers her ass, and little all else by the looks of it, tempting me, making my cock grow harder when she turns. The hem of the shirt flicks up, showing me a brief glimpse of paradise before it's gone.

There is no going back for me from this. No amount of penance will *ever* make this right in the eyes of God.

If I didn't already know it when I jerked off in the confessional, I know it now.

Aidan leans back against the wall, the shadows playing over his angular features like dark omens. His eyes are hard, unyielding, but I see the flicker—doubt or fear, I can't tell.

“Betrayal cuts deeper than any knife,” I mutter, watching the way Valentina's eyes narrow. The very air around her seems to thicken with her fury.

“Ross and Lee,” Finn spits out, his voice rough as gravel. “I should've fucking known.”

“Desperation makes men do stupid things,” I say simply.

“Then we squeeze them. Squeeze until their loyalty—or their treachery—pours out,” Valentina says, her voice cold enough to freeze hell over.

It makes me wonder who she is protecting. Herself, her father, Finn? Me? All of the above?

“That's a path lined with corpses,” Aidan says.

“Better theirs than ours,” she retorts.

Finn nods, rising to his feet. “We set a trap. Ross and Lee are our Judases, so we'll give them enough rope to hang themselves.”

“Careful, Finn,” Aidan says, his voice low. “In this game, even the bait can end up dead.”

“Then let's make sure we're the ones reeling in the fish,” he says.

A ping from Aidan's pocket makes him drag his phone out with a frown, and all eyes are on him as he swears.

“Fuck.”

“What?” Finn says, automatically going full enforcer and pulling his gun out.

“The cam at the end of the driveway just pinged.”

“They’re fucking dead,” Finn spits out and heads to the door.

“Wait!” I snap. “You can’t go out there. You don’t know who it is or how many there are.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck. Ross and Lee are behind this; they know this place. We should’ve thought inside job straight off, but with Valentina injured... shit...” His face is pale as he looks at his wife. “Get in the wardrobe in the back bedroom and stay there. No matter what. Take the gun, and if anyone opens that door, you shoot.”

“What... what if it’s you?” she stammers.

“You fucking shoot, *wife*. Which part of my order did you not understand?”

“Finn,” I warn him as his tone has gone menacing, and Valentina has tears in her eyes at the harshness.

“I don’t have time to play nice. Everyone falls in line or gets killed. Got it?”

Valentina nods and hurries off.

“How long has it been since you got blood on your hands, Father?” Finn clips out as he locks and loads and checks that fucking evil knife he has stashed is close to hand.

“How do you know I have?” I lick my lips, wishing that part of my life to disappear into the ether.

“Two things I know about you. You’re a fucking Gannon, and you’re lusting after my wife. You may be a priest, but it’s in name only, *Ryan*. So, answer me. Are you prepared to defend the woman you’re falling in love with, or are you going to pray to your God to save us?”

Blinking, I swallow loudly. How did he know? Aidan must’ve said something. I knew it was foolish. Loose lips sink ships, as the old saying goes.

“I see everything, motherfucker,” he spits out and turns to the door. “Guard her with your life, or you will wish you fucking had.”

And with that, he and Aidan, a silent soldier falling in behind his General, march off to... do fuck knows what.

Reaching for the gun I'd placed on the windowsill, not really wanting it near me, I pick it up and balance it in my grip. Flicking the safety off, it's like old habits never die.

"Fuck you, Doyle," I mutter. "If I have to use this, God won't be able to save me."

But the thing is, the whole fucking crux of this is Valentina. Seeing her hurt in the church was a knife to my heart, so I will defend her with my life if I have to. No one will get to her through me.

The haunting thought that if anyone *does* get as far as me, that means Finn and Aidan have fallen because without even knowing either of them all that well, nothing, and I mean *nothing*, will take them down. They are the hurricane, and I'm just a gentle breeze on a summer's day.

Or I was until Valentina O'Shea walked into my church.

"Oh, how my cousins are going to fucking love this," I mutter, marching down the short hallway to plant myself outside of the bedroom Valentina is hiding in.

Only, she's not.

"Valentina?" I call out softly. "Where are you?"

"Here," she says, coming up behind me and making me jump out of my skin. Clearly, stealth operations are my weak spot.

She is dressed in her washed clothes but still has Finn's shirt on. She has the gun in her hand, gripping it with white knuckles. "I don't need a defender."

"If you get hurt or worse, Finn *will* kill me," I snarl, taking her gently by the elbow. "So unless you want my death on your head, get in that cupboard, now."

"No."

"Valentina," I warn.

“Sorry, Ryan. But you need to work on your menace. It’s like being threatened by a puppy.”

Giving her an imperious glare that she giggles at, despite the danger lurking all around, she tilts her head in the direction of the room opposite the one she is supposed to be in. “I have never fired one of these things, but they aren’t taking Valentina O’Shea today,” she says and ducks into the box bedroom.

“Doyle,” I remind her as I follow.

She shrugs and presses her hand to her side. At my look of concern, she brushes it off, but I can see the pain flickering in her eyes. “I’m fine.”

“You’d better be,” I mutter as we hunker down and I get ready to be the last line of defence for Valentina. I have a terrible feeling she is out to prove herself, and it’ll take a stronger will than mine to get her to stand down.

Too bad Finn is already probably committing mass murder outside. He seems to be the only one who has any influence over her.

And therein lies a major issue.

Yesterday, I wanted to drag her away from him at the cost of everything in my life to keep her safe, but now... Now, I don’t know anymore.

FINN

The rage inside me is a living thing clawing its way out as Aidan and I move silently into the bushes that line the driveway. The crunch of boots on the ground approaches, and we see the two traitors in the midst of six men.

“Six?” Aidan sneers under his breath. “Don’t they know us?”

A wicked smile passes briefly over my lips. “Clearly not.”

“How are we going to do this?” Aidan mutters, ever the strategist.

Usually, I would have a well thought out plan, but this time, I’m working on pure instinct.

“With brute force,” I say, and with a nod, I aim the gun over a bush and fire, which sets all hell breaking loose when I take out one of the guys standing next to Ross. He isn’t going to get off that easily.

Chaos erupts as the men scatter for cover. I barrel forward, focused solely on Ross. That treacherous bastard is mine, and after him, Lee will feel my wrath. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Aidan engage two men at once, his movements swift and lethal with his knife.

Ross spots me coming, and his eyes go wide with fear. He turns to run, but I’m on him instantly, tackling him to the ground. I flip him onto his back and straddle him, my knees pinning his arms. He struggles futilely beneath me.

“You betrayed me,” I snarl before I smash my fist into his face, feeling the satisfying crunch of bone and cartilage. Blood spurts from his nose.

“I had no choice!” he cries. “They were going to kill me if I didn’t help them!”

“Who are they?” I hit him again, harder this time.

He shakes his head, fear in his eyes, but I know that only some of it is because of me. Someone bigger, badder and scarier is pulling the strings here, but who the fuck is it?

Wrapping my hands around his throat, I start to squeeze. Ross’s eyes bulge as he gasps for breath.

A silenced gunshot pings out nearby, followed by a grunt. Lee falls face first on the driveway, cut down by Aidan. I increase the pressure on Ross’s windpipe. His face starts to turn purple.

“Who?”

“I can’t.”

“Then you die. No one hurts my wife.”

“Please...” he chokes out weakly. “Finn...”

His struggles grow feeble. I stare into his eyes as the life starts to drain away. He scrabbles, letting go of my wrists as he thrashes under me.

I’m powerless to stop it.

He brings his fallen gun to his head and shoots himself in the temple while my hands are still wrapped around his throat. Blood spatters out, and I grunt with frustration as I let him go and swiftly rise to kick Lee over. He is as dead as his friend.

Aidan is engaged in a knife fight with another guy, the rest of them scattered around us, dead.

I pull out the zombie knife and march up behind the guy fighting with Aidan and stab him in the kidney. He howls like an injured wolf, and I twist the knife and pull it out, letting him drop to the ground.

“Well, that didn’t go according to plan,” I say, bending down to wipe the blood off my knife, using the dead man’s coat. “Did you have to kill Lee?”

“It wasn’t me,” Aidan pants. “This guy took him out.”

Giving him an interested stare, I feel a slight chill. “So Ross takes his own life, and one of their buddies takes out Lee. They knew we’d get them to talk. It makes me wonder why they didn’t think we’d get *them* to talk.”

“Hardcore assholes. This isn’t Sunday League, Finn. We are talking top of the Premiership.”

“No fucking kidding. But this seemed too easy...” Glancing around, I hear Valentina scream and a shot fired.

“No!” I roar and lunge towards the house with Aidan close behind me.

Bursting through the front door of the cottage, my heart pounding with fear. Another gunshot rings out.

“Valentina!” I yell, with Aidan on my heels.

As we race down the hallway, Ryan is standing in the doorway of the bedroom, gun aimed inside. He turns, gun swivelling with him to aim at me when he hears us. He lowers it, but only just.

I shove past him into the room and stop short. Valentina has her gun pointed with an unsteady hand at a man lying on the floor, blood pooling under him from a wound in his thigh. Her face is pale and grim, and I’ve never been so relieved to see her.

Nor have I ever had such a hard-on from seeing her like this.

The man groans in pain, dropping his weapon to clutch at his leg. I don’t recognise him.

“Check him for other weapons,” I order Aidan tersely.

He hurries to comply, disarming the man while I keep my gun trained on him.

“Are you okay?” I ask Valentina. She gives a tight nod, not taking her eyes off their attacker.

Aidan steps up and delivers a vicious kick to the man’s ribs. “Who sent you?” he demands. The man just glares defiantly up at him.

I crouch down next to him, my voice deadly calm. “You have two choices here. Tell us who you’re working for and maybe we let you live. Keep silent, and you bleed out here.”

The man sneers, blood flecking his lips. “Go to hell.”

I nod, leaning back a little, my gun never wavering from his face. “That can be arranged.” Pressing the gun to the middle of his forehead, his eyes flicker with fear. His chest heaves with shallow breaths.

Suddenly, he laughs, a bitter, desperate sound that echoes around the room. “Do you really think they’d tell us? The lackeys? None of us have any idea. So shoot me or don’t, but I can’t tell you shit even if I wanted to.” He coughs violently, fresh blood staining his teeth.

“In that case, see you in hell, asshole.” I pull the trigger, and he slumps to the floor.

“Jesus,” Valentina sobs, looking away. “What is this?”

Rising, I go to her and take the gun from her shaking hand. “One way or another, we will find out. You did good, little bird.”

“That wasn’t me. It was Ryan.”

Arching an eyebrow, I flick my gaze to the priest with a look of respect.

His gaze meets mine, and it’s unwavering.

Giving him a nod of thanks, I take my wife in my arms and hold her close, vowing that whoever the fuck has come after me has made the worst mistake of their lives.

VALENTINA

Pine scents the air through the open window in the main bedroom. Finn likes an open window, it seems, wherever we go. My breath mists in front of me, the cold creeping into my bones like uninvited whispers in the dark.

“Valentina,” Finn’s voice slices through the silence, his tone edged with a darkness that matches the sky outside. His tall frame emerges from the shadows, eyes like shards of midnight studying me, searching for something I’m not sure I can give.

“What?” My voice sounds foreign, thick with the residue of fear and adrenaline.

“Ryan,” he says, and the name hangs between us, heavy and fraught with implications I can’t fully grasp. “What is he to you?”

The question stuns me — not because it’s unexpected, but because answering feels like stepping onto a minefield where every word could trigger disaster. Ryan... his name alone is like a lifeline thrown into the raging sea of my life, but how do you explain that the man who saves you also wears a collar that promises salvation of another kind?

“I don’t know,” I admit, my gaze flickering away from Finn’s piercing stare. “He’s...” But words fail me, tangled up in the complexities of a heart that doesn’t follow the rules.

“Is he your confessor or your lover?” Finn’s voice is low, a growl reverberating in the hollow space left by fleeing warmth.

“Neither? Both?” I force out the truth, even though it tastes like betrayal on my tongue. “I find solace in him, but he’s a priest, Finn. There are vows...”

“*We* have vows.” He thumps his chest and steps closer. “Are his more important than what you have with me?”

Turning back to him incredulously, I gape. “What I have with you? And what is that, Finn? An arranged marriage that our fathers forced us into for God only knows what reason?”

Ryan’s face flashes in my mind, the serene conviction in his eyes that always seems to see right through me. How do I choose between a promise of peace and the stormy pull of desire?

Finn’s face is a blank mask. The only thing that gives away any emotion is his clenched jaw.

“Ryan doesn’t think like we do. His world isn’t ours. How can I answer for him?”

“I’m not asking you to put words in his mouth. I want your words, your feelings.” Finn’s hand catches mine. His touch is both fire and ice, burning through the numbness that’s taken hold of me.

I look up into his eyes, finding there a reflection of my turmoil as he shows me this rare vulnerability that I’m not sure how to handle. How do you tell a man whose world is built on power and control that your heart is a divided kingdom, one he might never fully conquer?

“I don’t know how to answer you, Finn,” I say, the honesty of it raw and vulnerable. “Because I don’t even know what my own heart wants.”

“Do you want Aidan?”

That question wasn’t unexpected, but my answer is still unsure. This situation is madness—complete insanity. I don’t know if I can answer honestly because of Finn’s actions. Will he hurt the other men just to keep me all to himself? Does he even *want* to keep me despite his possessive words?

When I don't answer, he steps even closer, moving into my personal space, forcing me to tilt my head back to look up at him.

"Aidan and I have talked." His eyes, the colour of the stormy sea, lock onto mine. "If you want to see where things could go with him, I won't stand in your way."

The words hang between us, suspended like the dust motes, dancing in a stray beam of moonlight piercing through the wide open window. The world outside fades into nothingness; it's just Finn and me, alone with the truth that's been lurking beneath the surface.

"Explore something with him?"

He steps even closer, a predator's grace in his movements, until he is pressed against me. He grips my chin, almost painfully, to force my gaze to stay on his. "I'm falling for you," he admits, the confession raw against the silence. "And I want you to be happy—whatever that means for you and for us."

My heart stutters in my chest, a frantic rhythm against the calm I'm desperately trying to maintain. Is this a trap? I just don't know because the man before me is a mystery and one I am nowhere near beginning to solve. I take a deep breath, the cold air slamming into my lungs, trying to make sense of this impossible situation. My hands tremble, betraying the turmoil that swirls around my soul.

"Happy..." The word tastes foreign to my tongue, a luxury that's always seemed out of reach in this dark and violent world we inhabit.

"Valentina?"

His voice pulls me back from the edge of the abyss. But there's no easy answer, no clear path forward. How do I navigate these choppy waters when every choice feels like a trap?

"God, Finn. This is..." I can't finish the sentence because 'complicated' doesn't even begin to cover it. My gaze flits over his features, seeking some hint of what lies behind his

hard façade, some clue as to how to respond to the man who has become both protector and potential destroyer of my entire being.

“Say something, please.” His plea slices through the tension, a desperate note that tugs at something deep inside me.

His desperation forces a choked sob from my throat. Who is this man, and where has he been all this time? I’d make a joke, but this is as serious a conversation as they come. One wrong move...

Though no longer trembling, my hands now clasp together as if they might hold the fragments of my fractured emotions together.

“Tell me what you feel.” He places his hand over my heart, which thumps erratically under his touch.

“I can’t pretend there isn’t something between us besides being thrust together in an impossible situation. But it’s not just us anymore.” The admission feels like pulling stitches out of a wound—necessary, but fucking painful.

“Not just us,” he repeats. It’s not a question; it’s an acknowledgement of the web we’re all tangled in. His dark eyes hold mine, steady and unwavering, a silent command for the truth.

“It’s not simple.” I stumble over the three words.

“Never thought it would be with you,” Finn says, his tone softer now, edges blurring with something that sounds like understanding. “You are a remarkable woman, Valentina. I see something in you that speaks to me, that wants to speak back. This *was* an impossible situation. I didn’t ask for this.” He gives me a searching stare, pleading with me to believe him. “This was all my father—our fathers. But you are my wife, little bird. You have gripped onto my soul, and you won’t let go. I want you as my wife in more than name only. I want to give you everything, not just protection from the evil monsters in this world that will rip you apart, but because you’ve touched a part of me that I didn’t even know existed.”

“Finn...” My breath catches in my throat. His raw honesty has unnerved me.

“And Aidan.” The name alone conjures a storm of memories, moments shared under circumstances too intense to not leave marks on my soul. “He gets under your skin without trying.” I don’t miss the slight stiffening of Finn’s posture, the imperceptible sharpening of his gaze. “I shouldn’t be surprised. He has something about him that draws people in. Always has.”

“My heart doesn’t know where to land. With you, with him... with Ryan.”

Finn moves then, a simple shift of weight that somehow speaks volumes. He runs a hand through his hair, a rare show of frustration from a man who usually seems carved from ice and shadow.

“Valentina—” he starts, but I cut him off with a shake of my head, not ready for whatever reassurance or condemnation he might offer.

“Please, just let it hang there for a minute,” I say, a whisper against the noise of doubt and desire ringing in my ears. “Let me just breathe.”

The room seems to close in around us, the darkness of the woods creeping through the walls, mirroring the murky depths of our situation. But here, in the shadows, is a man I know would walk through fire for me—a realisation that terrifies me as much as it anchors.

His gaze pierces mine, seeking answers in the contours of my face, in the flicker of fear that I can’t quite hide.

I open my mouth, but the words are prisoners in my throat, sentenced by uncertainty. My chest tightens, and every breath is a battle as I watch the war waging behind his eyes. Loyalty, desire, and confusion clash within him, an internal storm I’ve unwittingly triggered.

“Talk to me.” It’s a command wrapped in silk, soft but unyielding.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Whatever is going through that pretty little head of yours.” He is growing impatient, and I understand why. I’m being wishy-washy, but it’s because I don’t know what he is trying to achieve or if there is a veiled threat behind all of this.

“I wish I knew what you were thinking,” I murmur. “I wish I knew *you*.”

“You do. You are the only one. Okay, Aidan, as well. Don’t you see why this doesn’t have to be a bad thing?”

“What doesn’t?”

He stares at me, silent, his jaw clenched so tightly I fear he might shatter his teeth. A battle rages in the depths of his sapphire eyes, a hurricane threatening to sweep us both into oblivion.

“Fuck, Valentina.” The curse is a surrender, a white flag amidst the smoke and debris of our emotions.

We are stripped bare of everything but the raw truth of our feelings, even though we are dancing around them like gazelles in the forest; I need him to simply be here, with me, in this twisted darkness we’ve woven together.

Finn’s hand moves then, hovering just shy of my skin before he seems to decide against it. “You’re not alone in that ocean, Valentina.” His eyes lock onto mine again, stormy seas meeting the shipwreck of my indecision.

“Maybe not,” I concede, “but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m lost at sea.” My hands shake, but I force them still, pressing them into the cool wall behind me for support. “I don’t have a goddamn compass, Finn. I don’t know how to sail through this without hurting someone... without hurting you.”

He watches me, the muscle in his jaw ticking. Then, slowly, a decision forms in his gaze, something resolute yet pained. “So we chart a new course.”

“Is that even possible?” The question is a lifeline back to him, fraught with hope and fear intertwined. “Can we navigate this... whatever this is?”

“You need to make a choice,” he states then, not coldly, but his vulnerability has disappeared instantly. “Just know that whatever you decide, I’m here.”

He is giving me time to sort my shit out, but I don’t even know what that shit is. Aidan is, I don’t even know, and Ryan is untouchable, forbidden and shouldn’t even be an option on the table.

Yet he is.

And that makes me the worst person in the world.

I won’t ask him to break his vows for me, and at the same time, I won’t break my vows to Finn. For all the shit this situation has brought to me, I *am* his wife and the traditional part of me that my mother drummed into me means something.

I nod, my throat too constricted to form words, my heart thrumming an erratic rhythm against my ribcage. The silence stretches, tight as a wire, and I feel it might just snap and take us all down with it.

A raw, wordless understanding passes between us. Our bodies inch even closer without conscious thought, drawn together by a force we’re both helpless to resist.

His lips find mine with a hunger that’s fierce and unapologetic. His hands roam over my back, pulling me flush against him, and I dig my fingers into the fabric of his shirt, clinging to him like he’s the anchor in my fucked-up world.

We break for air, foreheads pressed together, panting, the rest of the world fading away until there’s nothing left but the heat of our bodies and the chaos of our intertwined souls.

“Whatever happens,” I say, my voice steady despite the whirlwind inside me, “this moment is real. *We* are real.”

VALENTINA

“To be continued,” Finn murmurs. “We have other shit to deal with, but I’m not letting this drop, wife. Do you understand?”

Nodding my response as I’m unable to say anything else, I know this conversation went badly. There was so much left unsaid on both sides, but being caught off-guard with Finn’s softness and his admission that he does have feelings for me, is huge and shocking and has brought forth a shit ton of emotions that I’m not ready to deal with yet.

Not now when there is someone after me, and I’m scared shitless about what will happen if the men fall, and I’m left all alone to be taken by whoever this is.

He grips my hand tightly and drags me out to the living room, where Ryan and Aidan are seated. Ryan is grim-faced, pale and clutching at the rosary in his hands like it might transport him to another place, another time when he didn’t know me, and I didn’t make his life a living hell.

If only.

Finn’s voice cuts through the silence, sharp as a knife. “Someone out there is bold enough to come after what’s mine,” he growls, the menace in his tone suggesting that retribution isn’t a possibility—it’s a promise.

Aidan, unusually perched on the sofa, leans back, arms folded, his emerald eyes hard. “We’ll find who it is,” he assures Finn. His gaze meets mine for a fleeting second, and

something akin to an electric shock zips through me, but I shove it down, out of sight.

Not now.

“Valentina needs to be kept safe,” Ryan insists. The priest, the voice of reason amidst our chaos, looks at me now with concern etched deep into his features.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter. “For what you had to do earlier. I hesitated.”

Finn growls at this admission, but Ryan waves it off, even though I know it must be killing him inside.

I bite my lower lip, tasting the tang of anxiety. “But this isn’t just about me,” I add, my voice steady despite the fear lancing through my veins. “They’ve thrown down the gauntlet to three families. It’s not just a threat—it’s war.”

“War it is, then,” Aidan says, with a lethal smile that does things to my insides that it really shouldn’t. He rises and moves like a shadow, graceful yet filled with latent power. “And we fight to win.”

Finn nods, his jaw set in a hard line. “We’re not just going to sit back and wait for them to strike again. We hit back twice as hard. We need to take this fight to our ground. On our terms.”

“Damn right,” Aidan agrees, the edge of fury honed sharply in his voice.

“So we’re going home?” I ask tentatively, fear shooting through me, even though we are not exactly safe out here in the woods either.

“Home,” Finn declares, his voice slicing through the silence. “We need to be on familiar turf, where we can control the variables.” He paces like a caged tiger, each step measured and full of purpose. His eyes are steel, his jaw set. There’s no questioning his command, yet the air vibrates with unspoken objections. “And it’s time to bring in some old friends.” He glares at Ryan, whose face pales even further, if that’s possible.

“Shit,” he mutters. “Do we have to?”

“Yes.”

Ryan lets out a sigh. “If I know my cousins, they’re all over this shit already. Caden is a regular at the church. He’ll know shit went down.”

Finn nods. “We’ll take you back to the church where you can sort out whatever shit you need to do. But you make that phone call, Gannon. If I have to remind you, you won’t like my persuasion tactics.”

“Can you ever say anything without a huge threat hanging at the end?” Ryan grumbles.

Finn glares at him. “No.”

“Back to the city, then,” Aidan murmurs.

“Our city, our rules.”

I watch them silently, not really having anything to add. I’m convinced this isn’t just about me, but about all of us. It’s too much of a coincidence. Placing my hand over my side, I slump into an armchair with a soft groan.

Finn immediately crouches next to me. “Are you okay?”

“Painkillers are wearing off.”

He nods up at Aidan, who disappears to get some from the kitchen with a bottle of water, which I take gratefully. “Thanks. I can be on my feet as long as I have these.”

“Rest,” Finn says. “There is no need for you to be on your feet.”

“Says you.”

“Yes, says me and my word is king.” He glares at me with that tough guy front up, but I can see the worry in his eyes. It just confuses me further.

He rises and gives Aidan a knowing stare, unspoken words flowing between them. Two sides of the same coin—loyalty and power personified. It’s almost electric, this bond they share, forged in blood and darkness. Yet I see the flicker in

Aidan's eyes, a riptide beneath calm seas, as he looks at me. He knows the risks, and it's not just the city that's dangerous—it's what pulses between us, a current too strong to ignore.

"Let's go home then," I whisper, breaking away from his gaze.

Finn nods once, decisively, as I wonder if *home* will be our haven or the beginning of our end.

With nothing to pack, we head out, Aidan locking up behind us before sliding into the driver's seat with Ryan taking shotgun. The bodies from before have been buried in shallow graves, and it chills me to know we are leaving behind a graveyard.

Glancing at Finn as we drive through the night, I press my lips together. "You have an idea who this is, don't you?"

He waits a beat before he turns to me, eyes searching mine. "Maybe."

"Who?"

"Someone bigger and badder than me."

Ryan turns around at those words, and Finn meets his gaze with a tilt of his head. It's almost like they've had this conversation before.

"Okay? Well, who is that?"

"Any number of people," he mutters, glancing out of the window.

Knowing I'm not going to get any more out of him, I shut my mouth and close my eyes.

They fly open again when the car stops, and I realise we are back in the city outside the church.

"Ryan," I start, sitting up as quickly as my wound will allow, but the words snag in my throat. How do I tell him what he means to me when his duty calls with a voice louder than my own heart?

"Go," Aidan urges gently, nodding toward the looming spire.

“I’ll be in touch,” Ryan says and slips out, trudging up to the church that has yellow police tape across the entrance.

“Shit. We’ve left him to do this alone.”

“He’s not alone,” Finn says as we drive away, I turn to look back at Ryan’s retreating form, his resignation evident by his stooped shoulders.

“Be safe,” I whisper into the void, the words a futile charm against the dangers we all face. When the church fades from view, I’m left with the stark realisation that love, much like danger, strikes when least expected—and it’s just as hard to escape.

AIDAN

Blood seeps through the gauze, a stark red against the ivory of her skin, as I help Valentina up the grand staircase of Finn's mansion. The place is a fortress, but right now, it feels like paper walls against the storm inside me.

"Ow," she whispers, pain lacing her voice.

It guts me to hear her like this. She's being an ass about this wound. She's trying to prove something to someone, but it's taking a toll on her. At least now she can rest in a place where even these bold assholes would have to be beyond dumb to try to get to her, to us.

"Nearly there." My words are steady, but my hands betray me, trembling as I guide her, trying not to jostle her wounded side. Each step we take is a silent conversation, an exchange of trust and unspoken fears between us.

We reach their room, grandiose and cold, with its high ceilings and opulent furnishings. I ease her onto the bed, and she winces, a soft gasp escaping her lips. Her eyes—those damn, expressive eyes—lock onto mine, and for a moment, I'm drowning in their depths. Vulnerability isn't a luxury I can afford, but with Valentina, it claws its way out regardless.

"Shit," she mutters when she holds her hand up, and it's covered in blood.

"Doc will be here soon. Finn is calling him now."

"It's after midnight."

"And?"

She giggles softly before she grimaces. “Okay, big shots. I get it.”

She lies back, her breaths measured, trying to mask the pain.

“Thank you, Aidan,” she murmurs, her voice a ghost of its usual fire.

“Anytime.” The words slip out, a confession wrapped in one simple word. It’s true, though; I’d burn the world down if it meant keeping her safe. And yet, the thought terrifies me. I’ve lived life on a razor’s edge, but this feeling for Valentina is a different kind of danger.

Part of me wants to pull her close, to shield her from any more harm. But another part screams to keep my distance, to not let emotions cloud my judgement. This isn’t who I am—I’m the man who can stare death in the face without blinking. Yet here I am, unravelling at the bedside of a woman who’s seen me at my most vulnerable.

“Get some rest,” I tell her, standing to leave. But what I really mean is stay with me, don’t shut me out, don’t make me walk away.

“Will you stay? Until I fall asleep?”

“Of course. You’re not going to be on your own until we sort this mess out.” I settle into the armchair beside her bed. As she drifts off, her breaths come slow and even, the soft rise and fall of her chest hypnotising in the low light of the lamp. The room is quiet. I’m perched on the edge of the chair, every muscle coiled tight, a predator at odds with his instincts.

“Valentina,” my voice breaks the silence, and it feels like shattering glass in the stillness of the night. She stirs, her eyes fluttering open, confusion mingling with the remnants of sleep.

“Yeah?” Her voice is hoarse, laced with fatigue.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, hands clasped to keep them from shaking. “There’s something I need to say,” I start, and goddammit, why does this feel like walking a tightrope without a net?

“Okay. Could it not wait until I was awake?”

“Sorry... but ever since you came into this fucked up world we live in, everything’s been different.” My words hang between us, a confession and an accusation all at once.

“Good different or bad different?” There’s a flicker of something in her eyes, maybe hope, maybe dread.

“Complicated different.” I pause, trying to find the words buried beneath years of walls built around my heart. “You’re in my soul, Valentina. And I don’t just mean because you’re beautiful, or because you’ve got more strength than half the men I know.”

She watches me, her gaze steady, waiting for me to continue. I stand up, pacing in front of her bed. “What I’m saying is, I’m falling for you. And I don’t know what the hell to do about it.”

“You and Finn both,” she mutters. “We had a conversation earlier. It was left open-ended, and I really don’t have the strength for this right now, Aidan, please.”

“What conversation? What did he say?” My demand makes her close her eyes wearily.

“Talk to him about it. I was left confused, and now I’m too tired to pursue this.”

Nodding, even though she can’t see me, I breathe in deeply. This was a mistake. I should’ve waited, but I couldn’t hang on any longer. I needed to know if she and Finn had spoken about me.

Going to Finn was the second option, but clearly, it should’ve been the first. He knows what I want, but the question is, does Valentina want it?

“He said that if I wanted to pursue something with you...” Her voice drifts off, leaving the sentence hanging like a noose.

“And?” My fingers itch to reach out, to trace her face, to ensure that this isn’t some fever dream conjured by my twisted desires.

Her lips part, and she takes a breath that seems to take all the courage in the world. “He agreed, Aidan. Finn agreed that we could explore... this,” she gestures vaguely between us, “if it’s what I want.”

If it’s what she wants. The phrase echoes in my mind, a haunting refrain. What Valentina wants has become the axis on which my world turns, a dangerous pivot. I’m caught in the crossfire of my own making, torn between loyalty and longing, and it’s a battle I never trained for.

“Christ,” I mutter, raking a hand through my hair. This is real.

“Valentina,” I start, my voice a low growl. “Please, I need to know. What are you thinking about what Finn said? About us?”

Her gaze locks onto mine, unflinching, and in the depths of those green eyes, I see something that mirrors my raw need. “I think I’m tired of always doing what’s expected of me.”

“Fuck expectations,” I say, the sentiment erupting from some primal part of me that refuses to be shackled by rules. I move closer.

“Exactly.” Her voice is a whisper that seems to vibrate through my body, setting every nerve ending on fire. She reaches up, hesitantly at first, but then with growing confidence, her fingers grazing the line of my jaw. It’s a touch that speaks of danger and desire, a silent plea that begs for more than just a skin-deep connection. “Tell me this isn’t a mistake.”

“Make it not be one.”

We are chaos and calm entwined, a paradox of light and dark that somehow finds harmony in this madness.

She nods, her eyes fluttering closed again, and this time, I leave her to rest. She will give me what I want. There is no other choice now.

RYAN

“What a fucking shitshow, Ry.”

Turning towards the voice, I grimace at Caden, coming out of the shadows.

“Where the fuck have you been, and what in the name of the baby Jesus have you got to do with *this*?”

“How long do you have?” I counter with a sigh and turn to the nearest pew. Somewhere along the line, the bodies have been cleared away, and the blood cleaned up. The state of the broken furniture and knocked-over objects still remains. Kneeling, I close my eyes.

“Well?”

“Not now, Caden.”

“Yeah, now, Ryan. You know I’ve got eyes on you, so I know what happened in here, and I sorted it out, but what it has to do with *you* is something that I can’t figure out.”

Opening my eyes, I glare at him, and clench my jaw. “Normally, I would be pissed off that you’re watching out for me. I don’t fucking need it. But this situation is anything but ‘normal’.”

“Who are you in bed with? Figuratively speaking...” He gives me a thorough once-over, and I swear he knows my innermost thoughts.

“Not now, Caden.” Closing my eyes again, I lean my forehead on the pew in front and start to pray but stop. How

can I pray for my soul when it's lost in oblivion?

He kneels next to me. "I've got all night, Ry."

"Where do I even start?"

"At the beginning."

"The beginning." I let out a scoff but sober up and try to sort my thoughts into some sort of order. "Valentina O'Shea walked into my church and asked me to perform her arranged marriage to Finn Doyle. That's the beginning and the beginning of the end."

"Doyle? Yeah, heard he got hitched. Wasn't invited. Fucker."

"You didn't want to be here, trust me. It was a farce."

"So what's it got to do with the pile of bodies?"

"What did you do with them?"

"Cleaned them up."

"The police were on their way when we left."

"What can I say? I work quickly," he drawls.

Shaking my head, I don't even know what to say. Thanks? Hardly seems appropriate or enough. I'd expected to be arrested the second I set foot outside Doyle's car, but here I am, free as a bird.

Free as a bird, except for the chains around me that tie me to... my calling.

"Someone came after Valentina. She was here with me."

"Here with you."

The way he says it makes me think he knows everything.

"They tried to take her, there was a fight, Finn and Aidan Quinn arrived, it got ugly, Valentina was stabbed, and we fled."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

“And the reason you fought for this woman is...?”

“I would’ve fought for anyone.”

“Liar.”

“Fuck you.”

He snorts. “I see more than you think, Ryan. This woman has got under your skin. I know what that means for you.”

“What does *that* mean?” Fear claws at my belly.

He sighs. “I saw it in my brother. He was the same as you, but then he met Summer, and everything changed.”

“Cathal,” I murmur, knowing Caden is speaking the truth. I knew it as well but could never open up about it. We were one and the same, but I went one way, and he went a whole other. “You are all lucky to have found Summer. She is sweet.”

“She’s more than that. She’s our life. Is Valentina yours?”

The blunt question doesn’t startle me so much as makes me sad. “I can’t answer that. She has said her vows, and I’ve said mine.”

“Vows. Huh. Word on the street is that this marriage isn’t exactly a match made in heaven.”

“What word?”

He shrugs.

“Well, you heard wrong.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.” I have to say the one syllable that breaks my heart.

“If you love her, go to her.”

“And do what, exactly? Fight Finn for her? Give up everything for a lost cause?”

“Who says it’s lost?”

“You are a massive pain in the ass.”

“So are you. Vows can be broken.”

“Not mine,” I grit out. “Not hers.”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll leave you to it. I suspect the police will be around. They were looking for you.”

“Course they were.”

He squeezes my shoulder and rises, leaving me alone to think. But I know I’m not alone. He wouldn’t leave me. None of them would. Ciarán, Cathal, and Caden, my cousins from another life.

“Forgive me,” the plea rips from my chest, raw and ragged in the deathly silence. “I don’t know how to unlove her.”

I’m a man torn in two—priest and lover, saviour and sinner.

“Tell me what to do,” I breathe, desperation seeping into my voice. “Because every moment without her feels like an eternity in hell. Show me the way, please.”

There’s no lightning strike, no thunderous voice from the heavens—just the quiet creak of old wood and the flicker of candlelight against the darkness. I rise, knees stiff, and turn away from the altar, the decision looming over me like a storm cloud ready to break.

“Ryan.” Finn’s voice cuts through the fog like a gunshot.

He saunters towards me, his fingers trailing over the flickering candles, almost caressing the flames as if he could command them to bend to his will. His gaze meets mine, carrying a storm of their own.

He stops beside me, his gaze flicking to the altar but seeing something far beyond it. “What are you going to do about Valentina?” he asks, turning those perceptive eyes back on me.

“Isn’t that the question of the hour?” My laugh is devoid of humour, a sound that doesn’t belong in these holy confines. “I have no answer for you.”

The silence settles between us, thick as the incense that lingers in the air. I clasp my hands together, not in prayer this time, but to keep them from shaking.

Finn’s expression is unreadable for a moment as he considers my words. He takes a slow breath, his chest rising

and falling beneath the tailored cut of his suit, the very image of composed strength. But there's a flicker in his eyes, hinting at something raw and unguarded.

"I never thought I'd feel anything for her," Finn finally admits, his voice betraying a trace of vulnerability that surprises me. He looks away, fixing his gaze on a stained glass window where light casts colours onto the stone floor. "I was ready to marry Valentina, make her a part of this world I'm chained to at my father's request. It was all arranged, oh-so convenient."

He turns back to me, his gaze swirling with an emotion I recognise all too well. "But fuck me if I didn't fall for her." His fist tightens at his side, a flash of anger—or despair?—crossing his features. "The problem is, she doesn't love me. She loves you, Ryan. And I know you love her." He pauses, his jaw set hard as if the words are prised from him. "You have a choice to make."

I run a hand through my hair, letting out a long, shaky breath, feeling the weight of centuries pressing down on my shoulders. There's a pull in my chest, a magnetic force drawing me towards decisions I can scarcely comprehend.

"Choice," I echo, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. "She does love you. I've seen it."

He raises an eyebrow as if he doesn't believe me, or maybe he is pressing for more information. I remain silent.

"Life's a bitch like that," Finn says with that arrogant smile, his presence commanding even in the house of God. "Either way, Ryan, you're damned if you do, damned if you don't. Thank Caden for me. He did a good job."

His footsteps echo as he walks away, leaving me surrounded by the relics of faith and devotion, alone with the torment of my soul's deepest dilemma.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

No fucking shit.

VALENTINA

“Fuck,” I grunt, as the doctor pulls the last stitch and finishes up. I grab the bowl that Aidan hands me and promptly throw up into it. I wonder how he knew. This has been worse than getting stabbed in the first place. I figured I’d get some general anaesthetic and wake up fixed.

Not so much.

All I got was local, and the fucking prick sewed up my insides as well as my outsides.

While I was awake.

“You did good, fledgling,” Aidan murmurs, stroking my hair and taking the bowl away from me without a flinch. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Fuck you,” I growl, sitting back sweating and panting. “Where the fuck is Finn?”

“I’m here, wife.” He moves into the room and gives the doctor a swift nod as he packs up and leaves without a word into the dark night. He sits on the bed next to me and takes my hand, kissing it, as Aidan leaves to clean out the bowl.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I had something to take care of. Aidan took good care of you?”

Unable to stay angry with my arranged husband leaving my side when I needed him, I nod. “He did. He was here the whole time.” I can’t help the bite to my words.

He smiles sadly. “Good, that’s good.”

“Where were you?” The question is out of my mouth before I could stop it.

“With Ryan.”

Those two words stop my bitterness dead. “Is he okay?” I ask, sitting up and then cursing as I pull the stitches.

“Yes, his cousins sorted out the mess at the church. I’m going to have a lot of favours to owe.”

“As long as I’m not one of them,” I mutter, making him snicker.

“Oh no, little bird. You are not going to be handed out as a favour, not in my lifetime.”

There is something about his choice of words that makes my blood run cold as Aidan steps back into the room.

The atmosphere is thick enough to choke on.

“What can I do?” I murmur.

He gives me a questioning stare.

“About the favours.”

He smiles. “That’s not for you to worry about.”

“I’m part of this mess. If I can do anything—”

“I told you, you don’t need to worry about it.” His face has gone hard, and I’m struggling to breathe, as I have no idea what is going through his head. “What you do need to consider is this situation.” He gestures to Aidan, who hasn’t moved a muscle since he slunk back into the room.

“I’m not ready to think about that yet.” My voice is soft, almost pleading with him to drop it.

“I’m done waiting for your answer, Valentina. It is distracting me at a time when I can’t afford to lose focus. One way or another, this gets sorted out tonight. So you have to tell me what this is.”

“I don’t know.”

“Dammit, Valentina!” he roars, slamming his fist on the bedside cabinet, nearly knocking the lamp over. He rises and

paces next to me. “This isn’t a fucking game.”

“I know that,” I whisper, tears forming in my eyes. “But I don’t even know what you’re asking me. Do you want me to decide between the two of you? Do you want me to allow Aidan into our room while we’re fucking? Do you want me to allow him to touch me during that time? Fuck me, even? Or what?”

“Jesus,” Aidan mutters, rubbing his hand over his face, but I ignore him and focus on my husband.

“He loves you,” Finn grits out. “He has admitted that much to me. He wants to join us in our relationship.”

“What does that even mean?” I yell.

“It means you don’t make a choice between us. You have us both.”

“What?” My confusion is at its highest, not helped by the anaesthetic or the painkillers and lack of any proper food for days.

“You heard me.”

His words cut through the oppressive atmosphere like a blade. I feel a drop of cold sweat trickle down the back of my neck, but I stand my ground. This is not just about clandestine kisses stolen in the dark or whispered promises; it’s about survival in a world where love is often a liability.

“I—” My voice falters for a moment, betraying the turmoil raging inside me. “It’s not that simple. There’s more at stake here than just—”

“More at stake?” He cuts me off, his tone laced with disbelief. “Every goddamn day, we’re playing Russian roulette with our lives, and you’re telling me there’s more at stake than staying alive than keeping this family together?”

“This family?” Finn’s words have hit a chord in me that I wasn’t aware was even there.

I inhale sharply, steeling myself against the onslaught of his frustration. I understand where he’s coming from, the pressure he’s under to protect what he’s built. Yet, how do I

explain that my heart refuses to obey the rules of our fickle world?

“I didn’t ask for any of this to happen. With you, with Aidan, with Ryan—it’s all messed up. I get it. But can’t you see? It’s tearing me apart, too.”

He advances a step, and I can sense the danger that rolls off him in waves. But despite the fear that snakes its way through my veins, I don’t back down. Finn needs to understand that my heart isn’t a territory to be claimed or a prize to be won.

“Valentina,” he hisses, the sound of my name like a warning shot. “Make your decision. Now. Are you going to allow Aidan into our relationship?”

A shiver runs down my spine, and I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. In this moment, surrounded by the men whose lives are intertwined with mine, I realise the inevitable truth: There is no easy answer, no path that leads to a place where love doesn’t equate to vulnerability.

“Time’s running out,” Finn presses, his impatience palpable. “We’ve got a war on our hands, and I need to know where you stand.”

My lips part, the decision trembling on the cusp of revelation, and I know that whatever I choose, it will change everything.

The silence breaks, and it’s Aidan who shatters it, his voice slicing through the tension like a knife. “Finn, she doesn’t need to answer now. She’s just been stitched up, for fuck’s sake.”

“Stop this!” My voice finally breaks free, though it trembles like a leaf in the wind. “You don’t understand how hard this is for me.”

“Then make us understand,” Finn growls, not taking his eyes off Aidan, but somehow, I know his words are meant for me.

“Because I can’t sit here and pick one life over another!” The confession burns my tongue and tastes like betrayal.

“Each of you... Ryan, as well. You’re part of who I am now. How can I just cut pieces of myself away?”

“No one is asking you to,” Finn grits out impatiently, shifting his gaze back to me.

“No, you aren’t, but here’s the thing, *husband*. How the fuck am I supposed to be with both of you and not favour one over the other? Are Aidan and I to get married as well, so we are all on equal footing? Hmm? What? What is it *you* want?”

“This isn’t about me.”

“No?”

“No. This is about you. Your decision.”

“And how do I know this isn’t a trap?”

There, I’ve said it out loud to his fucking face.

And I’ve surprised him.

“What? A trap for what?”

“I don’t know, to kill Aidan or me or Ryan!”

“Fucking hell!” Finn roars again and, this time, swipes the lamp off the cabinet. It crashes to the floor, the bulb going out, plunging us into an abyss with only the bathroom light on to show us the way. “Is that what you really think? That I’ve made up this ridiculous, elaborate scenario to off my right-hand man, my wife, and some priest that has nothing to do with anything apart from falling head over heels for *my* wife?”

“This wasn’t his idea,” Aidan says into the silence that follows. “It was mine. I’ve known you for a while, Valentina. I overheard about the deal; I knew what was coming. I wanted to see who you were. Who this great prize was for the Doyle family heir. The second I laid eyes on you, I fell for you. So beautiful, so sad, torn apart by loss and solitude, living like a good little mafia princess but too scared to take flight and spread her wings. The gilded cage, no?”

“Fuck,” I mutter. “What?” Closing my eyes, I clench my fist and then release it and open my eyes again on a slow exhale. “*Your* idea? So Finn doesn’t want this?”

“Finn wants it,” my husband mutters. “Finn wants to see his wife fucked so hard in her perfect little cunt by a man I trust with my life.”

“Jesus,” I murmur as the image makes me sweat suddenly.

“So what’s it going to be, little bird?”

“I guess there is no choice. I guess we’re doing this.”

Finn breathes out in relief that a decision has been made, and he can move on from this. Aidan is trying not to show his relief that I made the decision to include him, and me? I’m still in shock and pain and wondering what the hell I’m supposed to do about the priest who has captured my heart and soul, the exact opposite of these fearsome men in front of me because one thing I know for sure is that I won’t ask him to break his vows. He has to decide that for himself, and if I lose him, not that I ever had him, I will have to live with that decision for the rest of my life.

VALENTINA

My breath catches, not from fear but anticipation. The wound on my side throbs, a painful reminder of the danger lurking around us, but it fades against the heat building between Aidan, Finn, and me.

“Valentina,” Aidan whispers, his voice a dark caress that sends shivers down my spine. His green eyes glint with an intensity that rivals the embers of a dying fire, promising warmth and destruction in equal measure.

“Careful,” Finn’s gruff command cuts in as he sits on the bed again, his large hand gentle on my waist as if he’s cradling something precious—something irrevocably his. It’s a contrast to the ruthless leader I know him to be, and it only makes me want him more.

I nod, the pain a dull ache now, overshadowed by the mounting desire. “I can handle it.”

They flank me, their presence engulfing, two powerful storms converging over open waters. Aidan’s lips find mine, hungry and claiming, while Finn’s fingers dance across my skin, igniting paths of fire wherever they touch. We’re a tangled mess of limbs and need, each kiss, each touch stoking the flames higher.

Finn’s hot breath teases my ear as he murmurs, “I’ve been thinking about this all day, taking you with Aidan watching, sharing you.” His words are like fuel, burning through me, leaving only raw desire.

“Then take what you want,” I breathe out, my voice sounding foreign, laced with lust and power.

Finn helps me out of his shirt, which I’m still wearing. I lost my pants when the good doctor came in and put me through purgatory for the longest half an hour of my life.

Aidan’s hands roam lower, hooking into the sides of my panties, pulling them down and discarding them on the floor. I don’t help. I can’t. I lie there and let them have complete control.

“Soaking for us already?” He chuckles darkly, slipping a finger inside me, teasing my clit with his thumb. “Such a greedy pussy.”

My body arches into his touch, craving more even as the pain from the stab wound rockets through me.

Finn’s lips trail down my neck, his teeth grazing lightly before he sucks a spot just below my ear, marking me. “You’re ours, Valentina. Say it.”

“Yours,” I pant, the word barely escaping as Aidan’s fingers work me mercilessly, drawing moans from deep within my throat.

“Say it again,” Finn demands.

“Yours,” I repeat louder, a declaration, a surrender.

He pulls back and strips off. There is urgency in his movements. He wants this, he needs it.

“Don’t move,” he murmurs as he looms over me, and Aidan moves away to undress.

Finn guides his cock into my pussy slowly, mindful of my wound, but his possession is total, leaving no room for doubt or hesitation. Aidan watches, his gaze searing, then leans in to capture my mouth in another bruising kiss, swallowing my cries as Finn thrusts steadily into my pussy, jostling my body as I lie motionless like a doll.

“Fuck,” Finn groans. “Don’t fucking move.”

Breathing in deeply as his cock grows harder inside me, his arousal is off the charts with his complete control over me.

“Come for us,” Finn growls, his thrusts deepening, hitting that sweet spot inside me.

“Fuck, yes,” I choke out, spiralling towards that edge, their names a litany on my lips.

“Let go, fledgling,” Aidan urges, his hand snaking between Finn and me to find my clit. He flicks it before pushing down, and I gasp, shattering in waves of pleasure as they crash over me, pulling them along into the abyss.

My body convulses, and I cry out as my wound throbs, but I would take ten times the pain just to be here under my husband as he pounds into me. He grunts as my pussy clutches him tightly.

“Fuck, yes,” he groans and stiffens as he shoots his load into me. “Stay still, wife.” He murmurs as he moves away. “I want to watch Aidan use your cunt filled with my cum to please himself.”

Aidan manoeuvres himself into position over me, his cock rock-hard. Casting a wary glance at Finn, he smiles dangerously and lazily as he reaches out to circle my nipple with his fingers, and I draw my attention back to Aidan.

FINN

The sight of Aidan touching my wife sends a sharp jolt of possessiveness through me. Never before have I shared what is mine, never before have I watched another man lay claim to what I consider my own.

Yet, watching Valentina with Aidan sparks a primal thrill that I only partly understand. Her pleasure, amplified by his touch, is a siren's song. The way she moans beneath him is a sight that will forever be etched into my memory.

Aidan grins at me as he slips his fingers in and out of her cunt, making slick sounds that fill the room with raw, unrestrained want. His movements are slow and measured, carefully observing the effects each thrust has on her.

"Like what you see?" he asks in a low voice designed to provoke me.

"Don't be smug," I warn, my voice gruff as I watch him circling her clit.

She whimpers, gasping at the pressure, but remains completely still, like a good little girl. It's almost too much for me to watch without reacting. My cock stirs again despite the recent release it had found.

But I let Aidan have this. He pushes her legs open wider and teases her pussy with the top of his cock, coating it in my cum seeping out of her.

He closes his eyes and exhales a deep, guttural sigh, his body stiff with restraint. "You feel so fucking good," he

murmurs.

Her eyes dart to mine, looking for confirmation that this is really okay. I give her a curt nod.

Aidan eases himself into her slowly, testing her limits. I see her gasp as she adjusts to his length and girth. My breath hitches as I watch him claim my wife with an agonising slowness that has my hands bunching into the bedding as her cunt encases his cock.

He thrusts hard into her all the way to the hilt, mindful to keep his body leveraged so as not to hurt her wounded side. She moans out loud, her hands balling in the sheets underneath her.

“Fuck...” Aidan breathes heavily as he starts moving, his rhythm steady but torturously slow. He’s drawing it out, savouring every moment - enjoying the control he has over both of us.

I grit my teeth and force myself to sit back and watch. This isn’t about me right now; it’s about Valentina - our Valentina. With each passing moment, the sight of them together becomes less foreign and more fascinating. Wanting to touch her, I hold back.

“Lie still,” I murmur. “Let him enjoy your body, my wife.”

She closes her eyes, and I stroke her face as Aidan slams into her, his movement becoming more feral as he loses his restraint. His focus sharpens on Valentina, his brow furrowing as he dives deeper into the intoxicating thrill of her body. My cock stirs again in response to every sensual sway, every gasp of pleasure that escapes her lips.

Reaching out, I tuck the tendrils of hair stuck to her neck behind her ear. Our eyes meet in a silent understanding. She’s floating high on a crest of ecstasy while Aidan is the wave carrying her there.

“Feel good?” I whisper.

Her answer comes as a shaky nod and a moan laced with pleasure.

Tonight is about surrender, about us giving ourselves to each other in ways we'd never fathomed before. Ownership is shared rather than singular, and it's surreal how right it feels. The sight of Aidan thrusting into Valentina evokes conflicting feelings, jealousy wars with arousal, but the undercurrent of it all is acceptance.

"I've got you," I reassure Valentina, my voice strained as I watch her body undulate under the forceful thrusts of Aidan's cock as she remains frozen under him, pinned in place by the stab wound on her side.

Aidan's rhythm becomes erratic, his body tenses. She cries out his name, and it hits me like a punch in the gut, but not out of jealousy; it's another victory and further submission to this *new* arrangement.

Watching my wife find pleasure in another man's hands should have been torture, but paradoxically, it is anything but that - it is the biggest turn-on I've ever experienced.

"Come for me," Aidan growls as he pumps into her faster. His gaze locks onto mine, a sick sense of triumph lighting his eyes. He knows he's breaking barriers, changing the status quo between *us*, and he relishes in it.

"You're so fucking tight," Aidan groans. "Fuck, Valentina, fuck."

Her gaze is hazy with pleasure as she moans louder. My cock twitches in response to her cries, growing stiffer with each second, a low growl escaping my throat. I find myself reaching for her hand, gripping her fingers tightly as if to ground her amidst the surge of pleasure coursing through her body.

Aidan thrusts into her for the last time, his body convulsing with the force of his orgasm. His grunt echoes in the room as Valentina cries out his name one final time before succumbing to another wave of pleasure.

I watch them; this intimate entanglement of passion and surrender between Valentina and Aidan leaves me breathless and oddly satisfied. As Aidan collapses beside her, the sight of

Valentina lying between us is more captivating than I could have ever imagined.

“She’s such a good girl, isn’t she,” I murmur, leaning over to take her nipple in my mouth, biting down hard as she cries out in pain.

“She’s incredible,” Aidan rasps once he catches his breath. His eyes are heavy-lidded with satisfaction as he looks at me, a silent question in his gaze.

But I’m not finished with my wife. Pulling back, I reach over to where I’d hastily dropped my jacket. Pulling a lightweight, wicked knife out of the inner pocket, I regret that I cannot use my regular blade, but it would make her scream in ways that I don’t wish to hear. Climbing back on the bed, I trail the tip of the knife between her breasts.

“You’ve been a bit naughty,” I murmur. “You let Aidan spill his cum in your cunt when I threw your birth control away.”

Aidan’s sharp intake of breath is heard over Valentina’s shocked gasp. I figured she’d forgotten in all of the chaos of the last few days. I was waiting to see if she remembered.

She did not.

And now she needs to be punished.

Her eyes widen at my words, the colour draining from her face as she looks between Aidan and me in alarm.

Aidan sits up slowly, his gaze hardening as he looks at me. “You did what?”

I chuckle darkly. “It’s simple really. Valentina is mine; there is no greater symbol of that possession than carrying my child inside her.” I tilt my head towards him. “And you just filled her with your cum. She’s been a bad little girl.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but I silence him with a razor-sharp glare. This is between Valentina and me; he is just an intricate part of this twisted game we’ve only just started playing.

My gaze drops to my wife, lying naked and spent between us. She's beautiful in her vulnerability, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she processes my words.

Her eyes are wide in shock. The sight of her fear, the anticipation of what's about to come next, makes my cock twitch with need.

My smile widens as I trail the knife further down her body, pressing firmly against the soft skin of her belly.

"I never liked the idea of sharing. But I can see how it has its appeal now."

Valentina's expression changes from shock to something akin to fear and then finally settles into a kind of submission. It's in the way her body relaxes beneath mine, in the soft sigh that escapes her lips.

Aidan remains silent throughout this, his eyes never straying from me. There's a hardness to his gaze now, a wariness that wasn't there before. But there's also a flicker of something else, something I can't quite put my finger on. Desire, maybe. Hope?

The knife moves lower still until it rests just above her mound. Valentina tenses again, and I can feel her heartbeat quicken beneath me. It thrills me - this power, this control.

"Do you trust me?" I ask quietly, my tone deceptively gentle.

Valentina swallows hard before nodding. "Yes."

"Good, because I think it's time we added some new rules to this game."

Aidan's gaze darkens at my words. "And what would those be?"

I turn my attention back to him, an amused smile playing on my lips as I grab Valentina's hand and place it over Aidan's on the sheets.

"We won't hurt her," I state clearly, looking back at Aidan.

He doesn't answer immediately, his gaze flickering between our entwined hands and my face. I can see the gears turning in his head, the uncertainty dancing in his eyes as he wonders what the fuck I'm doing. But gradually, a nod of understanding comes from him.

"Agreed," he says, voice husky from his previous activities.

My gaze returns to Valentina as I bring my other hand up to cradle her cheek, my thumb tracing over her lips. "You will always come back to me."

Her eyes flutter, and she nods slowly. "Always."

The euphoria that fills me at her words is intoxicating. The trust she places in me makes everything else irrelevant. This game we play may be twisted and complex, but it's ours.

I stroke the flat side of the knife against Valentina's stomach before I lift it and throw it up to catch it by the blade. Trailing the handle over her pussy, I tease her clit with the hilt, circling it slowly as her eyes widen and her breath catches. Her fear is arousing me as much as the sight of her laid out naked before me with my knife dancing over her body. Thrusting the handle of the knife into her, she grunts at the brutal invasion. Twisting the handle inside her, the sharp side of the blade slicing into my palm, I grip it tighter, needing the pain.

Aidan watches us silently, his eyes a storm of emotions.

I pump the handle harder, faster. Her breath hitches every time it moves; it's addictive. The blade is digging deeper into my flesh. Blood trickles down my hand and drips down onto Valentina's thigh.

She whimpers, painfully bucking on the bed, hands fisting the sheets. She's close, but I'm not ready to let her come just yet.

"Hold it," I growl my order.

Valentina chokes out a sob, fighting the wave of pleasure threatening to crash over her.

“Can’t...” she gasps out, but I don’t relent. I keep driving her closer, pushing her to the edge but not letting her fall.

I hear Aidan’s ragged breaths, and see his cock harden again at the sight of our wicked game.

My fingers are beginning to go numb from the blade slicing into them, but instead of deterring me, it only fuels my desire. Pain has always been my muse, guiding me towards rapture.

Valentina starts trembling beneath me as I fuck her with the knife. “Please,” she begs. “Please, Finn.”

The desperation in her voice is intoxicating, the sweet taste of submission that rolls off her tongue more potent than any drug. Aidan’s gaze is pinned on me, his mouth dropping open as he registers the level of our deviance. There’s a flicker of confusion, fear even. But also, an undeniable lust.

As I continue to work the knife, blood freely flows down my hand, pooling onto the sheets underneath her.

My eyes never leave hers as I pull the knife out, watching as she shudders at its absence. Then, without hesitation, I plunge three fingers into her soaking pussy. The move has her arching off the bed, jerking against the stitches in her flesh.

“Please... Finn...” She chokes out words between heavy breaths as her body teeters on the edge of climax.

“Not yet,” I whisper, relishing in the denial that paints her face in shades of agony and desire. My thumb goes to her clit, circling it at a relentless pace that drives her closer still to the cliff’s edge.

Beside us, Aidan grabs his cock, twitching at the sight, but he remains silent as he tugs on himself.

The room fills with the sounds of Valentina’s desperate whimpers.

“What do I do with bad little girls who let another man come inside their sweet pussy, Valentina?”

She shakes her head as I flash the blade at her throat. Fear clashes with arousal as she lifts her chin higher.

Smiling, I place the knife between her breasts and stand up. Crossing over to the dresser in the corner, I open the top drawer and pull something out. Valentina's eyes are wide when I pop a pill out of the packet and press it into her hand. Picking up the bottle of water on the side, I hand it to her.

"Take it." The two words are a clap of thunder, breaking the erotic mood instantly.

"What... what is it?"

"The morning-after pill."

She blinks. "It's only been a couple of days... I don't think I need to..."

"Take it," I hiss.

Afraid of the change in my tone, she pushes it into her mouth and drinks a mouthful of water, the bottle shaking violently in her hand.

Smiling at her again, I take the bottle from her and set it down. "Good girl. You will always do as I ask without question in the future. Every. Single. Time."

She nods quickly.

"Good," I say, satisfaction warming me from the inside like a single malt scotch. "Now, where were we?"

Aidan has gone quiet, watching the exchange with wide eyes. I can see the gears turning in his head, the uncertainty dancing in his eyes. He had no say in this – he was merely an observer of our twisted game of submission and control.

"Get on your knees," I order Valentina.

There's a tremble in her limbs as she obeys me. She moves to the edge of the bed, sliding down until her knees sink onto the cold, hard floor. Carved from moonlight and satin, she is painfully beautiful.

"Open your mouth."

She does as I command, staring up at me with those doe eyes.

Running my fingers through her hair, fisting it gently at the nape of her neck, I nod to Aidan. He climbs off the bed to stand next to me. Guiding her mouth onto Aidan's hardened cock, which he has stroked into a raging beast, my gaze locks onto Aidan's as he lets out a shallow gasp at the sensation of her warm mouth enveloping him. A smirk plays on my lips at his reaction. It's almost too easy to play these two like a fiddle.

She is slow at first – testing waters that have been stirred into a whirlpool. But she picks up the pace, getting more comfortable with each passing second. Aidan's breath hitches as her tongue teases the head of his cock.

“Good girl,” I murmur as she takes Aidan deeper into her mouth, her cheeks hollowing as she sucks on him. The compliment earns me a flicker in her gaze, a spark that fuels my domination.

I let my fingers ghost down her spine, nails barely scraping against her skin, and earning a shiver that courses through her body. She's wet and ready for me again - I can smell her arousal in the air.

With a hand on the back of her head, I control her movements as I move around her, thrusting her mouth over Aidan's cock.

Valentina moans around his enormous dick, causing him to bite his lower lip in pleasure.

Letting go of her hair, I crouch down and flick her clit with my fingers. Aidan's hoarse moan fills the room as he nears his climax.

Valentina looks up at me from underneath her lashes, and in those depths of sparkling blue, I see it: surrender. With a stifled groan vibrating against Aidan's cock and a watery whimper escaping her lips, she breaks.

The orgasm crashes over her like a wave, making her shudder and convulse with Aidan's cock in her mouth. Her movements become erratic, but I keep my hand steady, coaxing her through her climax whilst keeping Aidan on the edge of his own.

Aidan's eyes are glazed, unfocused. But when he finally comes in Valentina's mouth with a strangled cry, they snap back to mine. The look of shock and pleasure in his gaze rips through me.

Valentina collapses against me, panting heavily. Her body is still trembling from the aftershocks of her climax.

“You're learning fast, little bird. Perfect. Purely perfect.”

VALENTINA

Waking up alone, stiff, sore and thirsty, I groan at the ceiling and haul myself to my feet. Staggering naked to the bathroom, I sit on the toilet and rest my head against the basin while I pee. Grabbing the toilet paper, I wipe when I'm finished and then blink a couple of times.

“Fuck. What date is it?”

I can't even remember. Standing up and flushing, I reach for the tampons in the cabinet and insert one, shaking my head at the ridiculousness of last night. But Finn was in no mood to hear that the chances of getting pregnant the day before my period is due is slim to none.

Not that I remembered.

Quickly showering and brushing my teeth, I slip back into the bedroom to see my husband already dressed in a navy blue suit and white shirt that brings out his eyes.

Damn him.

“Morning,” he murmurs, a heated look in his eyes.

“I'm bleeding,” I state.

Instantly, he is at my side, placing his hand gently over the wound. “I'm sorry, we should have taken more care with you last night—“

“Not from there, you idiot.”

His eyes narrow and drop to my pussy.

“There you go,” I murmur.

He grabs my throat lightly, a wicked smile curving his lips. “Good girl,” he purrs. “Now you are a blank slate.”

Feeling a weird sense of pride that he praised me for doing something out of my control, that my body does every single month, I purse my lips. “Meaning?”

“Now we can start fresh. You will only allow me to dump my cum in that pretty cunt until you are knocked up.”

“Finn,” I hiss. “You are pressuring me to do something I’m not ready to do. Why do you even want this?” Slapping his hand away, I stalk over to the wide open window and slam it shut, feeling a sense of satisfaction warm me. “How can you want to bring a child into this world? A child that will be used as leverage, threatened daily, or worse. How can you want to raise a child that will be fucked up like you, Aidan and me?”

“It’s not about any of that.”

“Then what is it about?”

Our gaze meets, and he clenches his jaw.

“It is to keep you safe from certain aspects of this arrangement.”

“Arrangement?” I spit, getting so worked up that my towel slips and drops to the floor, leaving me naked.

His eyes heat up again, but to his credit, he keeps his gaze on mine.

“To some people, this is still an arrangement.”

“Who? You?”

“Not me.” His vehemence startles me, but I need answers.

“What aren’t you telling me? Do you know who is behind all of this?”

“I have an idea.”

“Not good enough, Finn.”

“I know, but the less you know, the better.”

“So that’s how this is going to play out? I’m the little trophy wife sitting around twiddling my thumbs, waiting for you to bestow your attention on me?”

“Valentina!” He runs his hand through his hair and spins with a curse of frustration. “My father. I think my father is behind all of this.”

Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me. “What makes you say that?”

“Your wedding dress. He bought it. He arranged the entire thing, the reception, everything.”

“What has that got to do with anything?” I ask, bending down to retrieve my towel now that my skin is about to crawl off my body at the thought of wearing a wedding gown that Paddy Doyle purchased, *touched*. I shudder with revulsion.

“I think he wants you. Don’t ask me why we were put into this situation when he could’ve just taken you as part of the deal, to begin with. I haven’t figured that part out yet.”

“So you think getting me pregnant with your child will stop him from taking me?” My mouth has gone dry.

“It buys you time.”

Fuck.

I gulp back the saliva that has suddenly flooded my mouth. He’s being deadly serious.

But I still can’t do it.

“This isn’t right, Finn.”

He turns back to me at my whisper. He is in front of me in a couple of giant strides, grabbing my hands. “I want this.”

“I don’t.”

“Tough.”

“Finn.” Imploring him with my eyes doesn’t work. His harden and his mouth is in a set line.

“We do this my way, wife. End of story.” He lets me go and sweeps out, leaving me to choke on a sob for everything

that is being taken away from me, my choices, my freedom, all for a man who hasn't even said he loves me.

And the sad thing is, I'm going to let him take it all because, without him, I'm nothing.

VALENTINA

After taking two painkillers and washing my face, I grimace at my hollow cheeks, sunken eyes and pale skin. I need to eat. I need to eat everything. I'm suddenly ravenous, which I know has everything to do with my period but also because I haven't eaten properly in days.

It's time to get over the pity party and accept this life for what it is. As painful as it is to push Ryan from my thoughts unless he comes to me, we will never be. Two ships that passed in the night through a stormy sea that, for one brief moment in time, threw us together before we went our separate ways.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I hear loud voices coming from Finn's office. As much as I want to ignore them and find food, I pause at the loud crash that sounds like someone sweeping everything off the desk.

"We need to focus!" Aidan yells, showing a rare bout of temper. "Someone's gunning for us, and we've been too fucking up our own asses to notice."

"Then let's do something about it," Finn snaps. "I'm done talking about this. We act. Now."

"Fine," Aidan states. "We bait them."

There is a pause before Finn asks in a tone of voice that sends goosebumps flickering down my spine. "How?"

"We make them think they have another shot at Valentina," Aidan elaborates. "Somewhere public, unpredictable. Make

them desperate to finish what they started.”

My whole world comes crashing down around me, which isn't difficult in a time where it is propped up by feeble twigs that could snap under even the slightest weight.

Forgetting all about food again, I march over and practically punch the door off its hinges as I barge in, the flames of hell lapping at my feet in my fury. “Excuse me?” I roar, catching them both off guard.

“Valentina,” Finn says, regaining his composure quickly. “What did you hear?”

“Everything, you asshole. If you think you're using me as bait to lure your father or whoever out of hiding, you have another fucking thing coming to you.”

“This may be our only way,” Aidan says carefully, approaching me with his hands at half-mast, in an effort not to startle me.

“Exactly,” Finn agrees, his jaw set, but his eyes are wild, telling me he doesn't like this plan. “We'll be close by, but it has to look convincing. They won't strike if they smell a trap.”

“You're serious?”

“As death.”

“Fuck, Finn! You can't just use me without even bothering to ask if it's okay!” Shoving my hands into my loose hair, I allow Aidan to sweep me into his embrace for a few seconds before I snarl and shove him away.

“This has disaster written all over it,” I spit.

“Valentina. This is dangerous, we know. But it is the quickest, most effective way of drawing them out. I've been up all night thinking this over, piece by piece by bloody piece.”

“Listen to us, please,” Finn pleads, stepping closer, the familiar scent of his cologne wrapping around me. “We aren't going to lose you. I swear on my life, but Aidan is right. This is the quickest way to get what we want.”

Shaking my head, I back out of the office, turning in the entrance hall and making my way to the kitchen. Finn is right behind me, snatching the whiskey bottle off the counter before I can reach for it.

“No.”

“Fuck you.”

“No wife of mine gets pissed at nine o’clock in the morning.”

Glaring at him, I fold my arms.

“I’ll make you some coffee and some toast. You haven’t eaten, and with all the painkillers and stress and now with your period, you need food, Valentina. Not booze.”

Refusing to move as he bustles about the kitchen, looking quite at home in here, he sighs as I just stand there in his way.

Eventually, he takes me by my upper arms and moves me carefully out of the way, sitting me on a stool at the counter. He places hot buttered toast and steaming coffee in front of me.

“Eat.” It’s an order.

My stomach rumbles, and despite myself, I snatch a slice and start eating quickly.

“Slow down,” he says, placing a hand on my back as he sets a tub of cherry yoghurt in front of me with a spoon.

Suddenly, it’s all I see. Food. Food and more food.

I devour it all and more as he brings me muffins, a croissant, a cone with jam and cream until, eventually, I let out a rude burp and sit back, replete with a happy smile.

“Thanks.”

“I take care of my wife,” he murmurs.

Sighing, I have to admit, I feel less irrational now. I can see the other side of the coin, and unfortunately, they’re right.

“Fine,” I concede. “But we do this smart. We wait for the right moment, and we strike fast.”

“You’re so precious,” he murmurs, kissing the top of my head. “So brave. If this goes south, we pull you out, no matter what.”

All I can do is nod because the words are stuck in my throat. I’m scared. I don’t want to be a sitting duck. There are a thousand things that can go wrong, but at the same time, waiting for the other shoe to drop is nerve-wracking, and I can’t live like this.

“Aidan and I will formulate a plan with every contingency. You will be safe, little bird.”

I want to scream at him that he’d better hope so, but what can I do if I’m not? Nothing. I’ll be taken and given to Paddy Doyle to do whatever he wants with me.

Gulping back the urge to throw up everything I just ate, I force a tight smile on my face.

Finn gives me an understanding stare that is rare and will likely be something I never see again. “Go and rest. We’ll tell you when we have the plan.”

Rising from the stool, I brush past him and stride towards the door, the gravity of the situation settling over me like a shroud. I am bait in a game of predators, but I refuse to be prey. That mindset will get me taken or killed. I am the queen on this board, and I have to act like it. I’m the one with all the power. With one last glance back at Finn, I head for my bedroom, eager to lie down and close my eyes, hoping this doesn’t go sideways.

For any of us.

VALENTINA

Blood thrums in my ears, a pulsating reminder that I'm about to become the moth dancing dangerously close to the flame. I sit in Finn's office, the air thick with the scent of polished mahogany and tension. Finn leans over his desk, a large paper map sprawled out in front of him with little 'Xs' marked all over in red marker pen. His jaw is set hard enough to chisel stone.

"Seeing as it's you they want, we're going to make damn sure they think they can get you."

Aidan nods, his eyes sparking with something feral. "Let them come," he murmurs, his smile, dangerous and alluring. "We'll be waiting."

The thought sends a shiver down to my soul, but I push it back, focusing on the plan. It's risky, but I have to have faith that Finn doesn't want me taken or dead. It's shaky, but it's there, steadying when he looks at me with those baby blues and smiles.

"You okay, so far?"

"Fine," I say, rolling my shoulders back. "I'm not some damsel—"

"Trust me, fledgling; no one thinks that," Aidan cuts in, but then he frowns as the cam at the front gate pings for someone's arrival.

Finn and Aidan exchange a look as my palms start to sweat. The security screen flickers, and Ryan's face appears at

the gates; brows knitted together. Aidan glances at Finn, who nods once and goes back to his map.

Aidan pushes the button to open the gates, and they swing open so Ryan can drive up the long driveway.

The door bursts open moments later, and Ryan storms in, his presence like a sudden storm front. “Valentina, we need to —” He stops short, taking in the scene, the plans, our faces etched with fear and determination.

“What is going on here?” His gaze snaps from Finn to Aidan and then locking onto me.

“We’ve made a plan to use me as bait to draw them out.”

His face goes apoplectic. “What? No! This is insanity.” He rounds on Finn and grabs him by his jacket lapel, getting in his face. “You can’t do this.”

Finn raises an eyebrow and silently, removes Ryan’s hand from his expensive jacket. “Valentina has agreed this is the best way.”

“Agreed or forced to agree?” Ryan snarls.

“Ryan, it’s okay,” I say. “I agreed it was the quickest way to end this.”

He searches my face, looking for any sign of weakness, but all he finds is the iron will of the woman who has been traded by her own father into an arranged marriage with a man so dark he might as well be the devil; a woman who has been attacked and stabbed and forced off her birth control for reasons still unclear; a woman whose husband has agreed to share her with this best friend and a woman who has fallen in love with a priest.

“You’re bait? That’s your plan?” Disbelief and something darker, fear maybe, flash across his features.

“Isn’t just any plan,” Finn interjects. “It’s the only one we got.”

“I trust them.” My voice trembles, but I lift my chin higher, defiantly, daring him to contradict me.

Aidan's hand briefly brushes my shoulder, a silent promise of violence to come, of protection. "We've got this covered, Ryan. We won't let anything happen to her, I promise."

The emotions warring on Ryan's face, the urge to protect, battling with the understanding that sometimes, you have to let the ones you care about walk into the fire, melt my heart, and I know I won't ever let him go from my heart.

"It's about survival now. She'll be safe. We've got a solid plan." Finn's voice is steady, commanding and trusting.

Aidan's eyes burn with an intensity that could set the world ablaze. "We've thought of every possible angle," he assures Ryan.

I can feel Ryan's fear for me, almost like an electric current sizzling through the air. "Valentina, please—" he starts but gets cut off by the abrupt buzz from the front gate.

"Shit," Aidan hisses, glancing again at the security cam footage at the front gate. "It's your father," he adds to Finn.

Finn's expression changes instantly. His hand is already snatching the gun from the desk, his other hand checking that the dreaded jagged evil knife is at his back. "Guess he brought the fight to us instead."

"Adjust," Aidan states, already reaching for his weapons.

"Valentina, upstairs," Finn commands, not a request but an order, his gaze searing into mine.

"Like hell," I respond, my stubbornness flaring up in a ridiculous show of... something. I don't even know. I'm scared of Finn's dad, of what he could do to me if he gets his hands on me. If Finn fears him, then that means everyone should, but my adrenaline is pumping, and it's pushing rational thoughts away.

Finn's stare doesn't waver. "Go," he repeats, and something in his voice tells me this isn't the time to argue. This is the time to trust them completely.

Rising, I slowly turn on my heel and take the stairs, giving the impression that I'm being the good little wife. The tense

anticipation of what's coming next grips me like a vice. My mind races with the sound of my footsteps echoing in the grand staircase, each footfall a countdown to an inevitable confrontation.

One way or another, I know this ends today.

My pulse is a staccato rhythm against my temples as I climb to the top of the grand staircase, each step resonating like a drumbeat in the hollow silence of the mansion. The air is thick with tension, a pre-storm calm that whispers of violence to come. The front door opens below, and my breath catches.

The instinct to know, to see, to be part of the unfolding danger roots me to the spot. Concealed in the shadows of the upper hallway, I press my back against the cool wall, the ornate wallpaper rough beneath my fingertips. A sliver of fear uncoils within me, and I draw the knife from its hidden sheath under my dress in my thigh, the weapon is familiar and strangely comforting in my grip.

“Dad,” Finn’s voice is a low growl, barely contained fury laced through every syllable. “What’s up?” The casual tone does nothing to cover up the edge of danger lurking in every bone of his body.

“Listen to me, boy,” Paddy Doyle’s gravelly tone carries a gravity that makes even the dust motes in the air seem to be still.

I crouch down and peek through the railing of the staircase, seeing Paddy shove his way into the entrance hall where Aidan is waiting, armed and ready. Ryan is out of sight but no less focused on this, I’m sure.

Paddy stands with the regality of a king—or a mafia leader who has seen more than his share of bloodshed, *caused* most of it. “You’re walking into a trap with your eyes wide shut.”

“Is that a threat?” Aidan’s voice is deceptively calm, the kind of quiet that precedes a storm.

“Don’t be a fucking dick, Quinn,” Paddy snarls. “It’s a warning. You think you’ve got a plan, but you’re playing

checkers while they're playing chess. And Valentina? She's the queen they're aiming to topple."

"You mean *you*," Finn points out, waving his gun in his father's direction.

From my vantage point, I watch the muscles in Finn's jaw clench, a visible sign of his simmering rage. Paddy's hands are empty, his lone presence speaking more of truth than deception. His eyes, mirroring Finn's steel blue, are earnest and sharp with an urgency that sends a chill spider-walking down my spine.

"Who then?" Finn's demand slices through the heavy air. "Who's coming for us?"

"If I knew, they'd be fucking dead. No one comes after my family," Paddy spits out, and I believe him. There's no deceit in his anger, only the raw anger of a man on the verge of losing his control over his kingdom. "But they're not some bottom feeder looking to make a name. They're major leagues, Finn."

"No shit," he mutters. "How can I trust you when you've made no secret about your desire to take my wife?"

Paddy sneers. "Your *wife*?"

"My everything."

My heart skips a beat as Paddy raises an eyebrow. "Made quite the impression, hasn't she? I'm not surprised. She is quite the prize."

Aidan, silent now, shifts his weight, his body coiled and ready to pounce. His gaze flickers upward briefly, and I shrink further into the darkness, praying he hasn't spotted me. But his attention snaps back to the standoff below.

"Get out of here, old man," Finn hisses. "Before I forget you're my father."

"Stubborn as your mother," Paddy mutters. He turns slowly, each step away from Finn measured and heavy.

"You think I'd fall for this, Dad? You showing up here, just when shit hits the fan? Where were you a few days ago?"

“Damn it, Finn! I’m trying to warn you.”

“Fuck off with your cryptic bullshit,” Finn spits back, his body taut like a drawn bowstring.

The heavy thud of the front door being kicked in shatters the illusion of safety. There’s no warning, just the sudden, violent intrusion of dark figures—masked and armed to the teeth—pouring into the mansion like a flood of hostility.

“Shit!” Aidan spits out the curse, his voice barely cutting through the chaos that erupts. Instinctively, I flatten myself against the wall, my breath hitching in my chest. My eyes dart around, taking in the attackers as they spread out, weapons raised, their movements efficient and terrifying in their precision.

My breaths come out in ragged pulls, the metallic tang of blood perfuming the air. The fight rages on, a brutal ballet of violence that dances dangerously close to chaos. Running as fast as my wound will let me, I shove through the door to Finn’s armoury, the sanctuary of steel and gunpowder.

“Fuck,” I hiss as I survey the walls lined with lethal promise. My hands don’t shake as they reach out—right hand, left hand—each curling around the cold grip of a handgun. A strange serenity settles over me, like the eye of a storm, quiet and deceptively peaceful. No one is ripping me away from my husband, my *men*—not today.

“Valentina!” Ryan bursts into the room, making me jump and raise the weapons higher. His eyes widen with something akin to panic as his gaze roams over the cache. Without hesitation, his fingers close around a handgun with an intimacy born of familiarity, which piques my curiosity about this priest who seems to know his way around the mafia better than I do. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Surviving,” I snap.

“Put those down. You can’t do this.” His voice cracks like a whip, but I’m not some pet to heed commands.

“Stand down, Ryan.” The words feel like shards of ice, even to my ears. “This is my fight.”

“Like fuck it is.” There’s a blaze in his eyes, a fire that wasn’t there before. “Your fight is my fight, Valentina. Always.”

“Ryan,” I start, but his fingers brush mine, his touch grounding me amidst the chaos. We’re two halves of a loaded gun, and together, we’re fucking explosive. It reminds me of why he burst in here before. What did he want to say to me?

But now isn’t the time to ask.

“Let’s go,” he says, turning towards the door, our battlefield awaiting. I follow because, in this moment, we are one and the same—warriors with our hearts on the line, fighting for love in a world that knows only power.

The scene before us is a twisted ballet of brutality. Finn is a whirling dervish of destruction, but even he can’t be everywhere at once. He ducks a swing, counters with a vicious uppercut, his knife slicing through flesh with ease, but there’s another assailant coming up behind him—silent, deadly.

Aidan and Paddy are in their own fights for their lives. If I had any doubt Paddy was behind this, it disappears in an instant. He is in this with the rest of us.

“Shit,” I breathe out, raising one of my guns. The weight feels right—a deadly extension of my will. My finger caresses the trigger like the softest kiss, my aim steady despite the thunderous pounding of my pulse. “Don’t hesitate,” I murmur.

I pull the trigger.

The gunshot cracks through the air as it kicks back, pinching my skin, but I barely feel it. Finn’s attacker drops, a puppet with its strings cut, and Finn pivots on instinct, his eyes locking onto mine. There’s no time for words, but the message is clear. He is fucking furious.

Aidan’s shout cuts across the room, and with a look at Ryan that conveys everything I feel about him in one second, I fly down the stairs, guns raised like a maddened Bonnie after rescuing my Clyde. Too bad, I’m not adept at this and firing again, I miss. But I have to keep going, they keep coming, relentless as the tide.

Wincing as Finn's Zombie knife arcs through the air like the harbinger of death it is, slicing a man's head nearly clean off his body right next to me, I shriek, covered in blood and sweat.

"Fuck! Behind you!" I scream as an assailant lunges at him from the shadows. Finn pivots, throwing a punch that lands with a sickening crunch. The attacker staggers backwards, only to be met by Aidan's boot to his chest, sending him sprawling.

"Keep them off Valentina! Nothing else matters," Finn commands, sweat beading on his brow as he ducks another wild swing.

Aidan nods and attaches himself to my side like glue. "You're in serious trouble, fledgling," he growls as he fights like a wildman, and I just stand there, slightly dazed, the whole thing catching up on me. "Move!" he roars, and it gets me back into motion.

I scan the room, my breaths coming in short, sharp gasps. They're encircling us—a pack of wolves hungry for blood. Their footsteps are a drumbeat of doom, growing louder, closer. I lock eyes with one, the cold glint of his weapon mirroring the chill of resolve in my veins.

The world slows down, bullets become lazy flies buzzing through the air, and I am acutely aware of every movement, every breath. It's in this crystalline moment that Ryan makes his move out of nowhere.

He hurls himself into the fray like a man with nothing to lose.

"Ryan, no!" My voice is lost amid the cacophony of violence.

"Behind you!" Finn's warning is sharp, urgent, drawing my attention away.

Reflex kicks in—I pivot and shoot, once, twice, three times, from both weapons. My arms are aching, my hands have seized up, but I can't fail now. I can't fall. I won't.

The assailants go down, but they're like hydras—two more spring up for every one that goes down.

And then, amid the commotion, the unthinkable happens. Ryan's gaze locks onto something beyond my line of sight, a shadow moving where no shadow should be.

“Valentina, move!”

But it's too late. The shadow solidifies into a figure. Ryan throws himself towards me, a human shield against the inevitable.

A single gunshot echoes, a death chime that hangs in the air, resonating with finality. The room falls silent, the battle pausing as if the world itself holds its breath.

“Ryan!” My scream is a raw wound torn open as the one on my side rips apart. I rush to him, blood roaring in my ears, every thought narrowed to the man sprawled on the floor and the gorgeous dark-haired woman standing over him, her black leather outfit a second skin, the gun in her hand an extension of her self as her eyes fix on me and she smiles, slow, sinister and all too familiar.

“Fuck.”

Book 2 in the Broken Vows duet is [Their Sin](#)

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DARK KING CHAPTER

1

Pressed against the wall of the nightclub, the good-looking stranger kisses me. Topsy and disoriented, my heart races with a mix of uncertainty and desire. I never expected my night to take such a thrilling turn.

Sweat clings to my skin as the crowded club pulsates around us on this hot summer night. Loud music drowns out any semblance of conversation while flashing lights create an electrifying atmosphere, amplifying the raw energy that courses through my veins.

As we remain locked in our forbidden embrace, I'm acutely aware of how out of character this is for me. Yet, there's something so undeniably exciting about living on the edge, if only for a brief moment in time. The danger and uncertainty, combined with the allure of this mysterious stranger, have awakened a long-dormant fire.

The stranger's hands greedily explore my body's curves, leaving fire trails on my flushed skin. His tall frame towers over me, dark hair framing intense blue eyes that seem to pierce my very soul. Tattoos snake their way up his muscular arms, and even though I can't hear him speak over the

pounding bass, the memory of his Irish accent as he drew me into this darkened corner sends shivers down my spine.

Our lips collide again, and every nerve in my body awakens with a mix of hesitation, excitement, and nervousness. The sensation is intoxicating – something I’ve never felt before. It’s as if we’re dancing on the edge of a precipice, teetering between wicked and desire, and I’m powerless to resist the pull.

His fingers trace the contours of my hips, pressing into my flesh with a possessiveness that terrifies and thrills me. My breath hitches in my throat as he tugs at the hem of my dress, exposing more of my quivering skin to his ravenous touch. I should be afraid, but instead, I crave more of this deliciously wrong connection.

As our kisses deepen, I find myself lost in the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside me. The seductive dance of our tongues mirrors the chaos in my mind, each stroke sending electric jolts through my veins.

What am I doing?

Is this really who I want to be?

Even as these thoughts race through my head, my body betrays me, responding eagerly to his every touch. I feel my heart pounding, not just from the exertion but from the thrill of the unknown. This man, this enigma who has captured my attention and ensnared me in his web of desire, holds a power over me that I can’t explain.

“What’s your name?” I pant, wanting to know more about this stranger who has awakened such primal urges, but the cacophony of the nightclub drowns out my voice. He only smirks in response, his eyes never leaving mine, bewitching me within their depths.

I’m terrified.

This dark, brooding stranger has unlocked a part of me that has long been hidden away, and as much as I know I should be afraid, all I can think about is how alive I finally feel as his fingers trail up my thigh, sending shivers down my spine. My

breath catches in my throat, my heart racing with anticipation and uncertainty.

“Wait,” I whisper, suddenly feeling the weight of our actions through the drunken haze that has descended on me from too many glasses of cheap Chardonnay. “Your name...”

Something wicked and alluring dances in his blue gaze. Without breaking eye contact, he pushes my panties aside. My body tenses at the unexpected intrusion. For a moment, I feel vulnerable, exposed, and scared, but then his fingers find their target, and my resistance melts away.

“Ah!” The sensation is intense, a mix of pleasure and pain as he works his fingers inside me. I cling to him, my hands gripping his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin through the fabric of his tight black shirt. He holds me against the wall, one hand pinning me by the waist while the other sends waves of pleasure coursing through my body.

“Fuck,” I gasp, my head falling back against the wall as he picks up the pace, expertly teasing and tormenting me. My leg wraps around his waist instinctively, drawing him closer, my hips grinding against his hand in a desperate search for more of that intoxicating sensation.

Raising an eyebrow in question, as if challenging me to admit just how much I crave his touch. I nod, unable to form words, and he rewards me with another delicious thrust of his fingers.

Around us, the club-goers are lost in their own world of revelry, utterly oblivious to the scandalous exchange just inches from them. A tangled mass of sweaty bodies writhes on the dance floor, consumed by the pulsing beat of the music. Drinks clink, laughter rings out, and it's as if we exist in our own secret bubble, hidden from the judgmental eyes of the world.

“God, you're so wet for me, Tinkerbell,” he growls in my ear, and I shiver at the sound. His voice is dark and commanding, a dangerous edge that weakens my knees. “You like being fucked by a stranger in the middle of a club?”

I can't deny it. The very idea both terrifies and arouses me. As much as I want to pull away, to escape this intoxicating dance of desire and danger, I find myself giving into the temptation completely.

When I don't push him away, he smiles. It's sinister, and it touches a part of me that I know I should run from.

But I don't.

"Good girl," he purrs, sending a hot thrill down my spine. And with that, I surrender to the darkness, allowing him to take control, to push me further than I've ever dared to go before.

He leans in and captures my lips in a searing kiss, leaving me breathless and aching. Wedging himself further between my thighs, he fumbles at his fly. Gasping as I feel the invasion of his cock in my pussy, I cling to him as he slams me against the wall, filling me with his thick shaft.

"Ah!" I cry, but my voice is lost in the deafening music of the club. The sinful thrill of being so exposed, so vulnerable in front of so many people, races through me, the wine doing nothing to stop it. In the back of my mind, the voice of reason reminds me that this is crazy. I've never done anything like this before.

It disappears as our bodies move together in a frantic dance of lust. His thrusts are urgent and filled with a desperate need for release. I cling to him, my hands gripping him tightly as my body stretches to accommodate his length, filling me in a way I've never experienced before.

All rational thought flies from my head as his hands move to my breasts, tweaking my nipples through my dress. The pain sends a jolt through my body, and I cry in pleasure. The sensation is mingled with the feel of his cock thrusting deep inside me, driving me senseless with pleasure.

"This is so wrong," I whimper, but the words come out as little more than a mumble against his lips. I don't know who I'm trying to convince, him or me.

“So fucking right,” he growls, his lips moving to my ear as his cock continues its relentless assault on my body.

The familiar pressure builds in my core, the coil of desire tightening with every thrust. Moaning, I throw my head back in ecstasy as he works his magic.

Fuck.

I’m going to come in a public place while a complete stranger fucks me.

I’m overwhelmed by the sensations crashing through me, bliss, fear, lust, and the thrill of doing something I never thought I would do. The truth is, it’s terrifying, but at the same time, it’s the most exhilarating thing I’ve ever felt. I’m completely at his mercy.

“That’s it,” he hisses, thrusting hard and fast into me, his cock hammering in and out of my pussy. “Come for me, Tinkerbell. Come for me. I want to feel you come all over my cock.”

The words send me over the edge, and suddenly I’m falling, my body rocked by an orgasm unlike any I’ve ever experienced. My entire body shudders, and I gasp as waves of pleasure wash over me, stealing my breath and my voice, washing away my sense of self until I’m nothing more than an empty vessel.

His fingers tighten around my hips, and he rams into me for one final thrust, burying himself deep inside my pussy as he comes.

When his body goes slack, he leans his forehead against mine, his hot breath mingling with my panting. We stay like that for a moment, him buried inside me, neither of us aware of the reality around us, time entirely lost to us.

Knowing what I’ve just done crashes around me like a thunderstorm. I’ve just had unprotected sex with a stranger in a club in front of hundreds of people.

He pulls back, that sinful smile on his face as he does up his fly.

“Thanks, Tinks. I needed that.”

As abruptly as he entered my life, he now walks away, disappearing into the throng of club-goers without so much as a backward glance. The emptiness left in his wake engulfs me entirely, an inexplicable mixture of satisfaction and confusion swirling around inside. He had been everything I both feared and craved – and yet he vanished as quickly as a shadow in the night.

My heart pounds erratically in my chest, caught between the exhilaration of what just transpired and the anguish of knowing it might never happen again. Why can't I shake this feeling? This insatiable longing for a man I don't even know?

“Fuck,” I mutter, shoving my dress down and looking around to see if anyone is looking at me.

They aren't. Or if they are, they aren't doing so overtly.

Wiggling my panties back into place, I feel the dampness pool, and I shudder.

What have I done?

Feeling nauseous with the booze and the knowledge of my actions, I lean against the cool wall, trying to catch my breath and make sense of the overwhelming mix of emotions coursing through me. The taste of him still lingers on my lips, a bittersweet reminder of what just transpired in this dim corner of the club.

Tinkerbelle, he'd called me, his Irish accent making the words sound like a deliciously wicked incantation. A shiver runs down my spine as I remember the way he'd looked at me, his intense blue eyes seeming to pierce through every layer of my defenses, laying bare my darkest desires.

“Summer?” I hear my name being called faintly over the cacophony, snapping me out of my reverie. It's my friend. Her voice tinged with concern. I know she must be wondering where I've been, why I disappeared so suddenly – but how could I possibly explain the truth to her? How could I put into words the intensity of my encounter with the enigmatic stranger?

“Summer, let’s go home,” Amelia says, finding me. “I’m way past drunk.”

“Same.” I nod, eager to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the club. As we make our way through the throngs of people, I glance back one last time, my eyes scanning the crowd for any glimpse of him. But he’s gone, vanished like a ghost into the night.

“Are you okay?” Amelia asks, her worried gaze fixed on me.

I force a smile, trying to mask the turmoil within.

“Fine,” I lie, my voice barely audible above the din. “I’m fine.”

But as we step out into the cool night air, I can’t shake the feeling that something has changed forever – that I’ve crossed a line from which there’s no turning back. Part of that is fueled by alcohol, hunger for the dangerous taste of forbidden desire, now awakened and impossible to ignore.

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