



till
death
do
us
part

violet paine

TILL DEATH DO US PART

VIOLET PAINE



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Till Death Do Us Part

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Editing: Dee's Notes

Formatting: KB. Row

Cover Design: Coffin Print Designs

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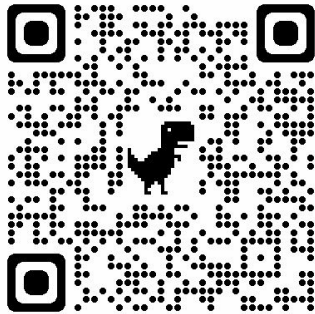
Violet Paine is an English author and British-English spellings, word phrases will be used throughout this story.

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Till Death Do Us Part has dark and mature content that some readers find uncomfortable and triggering. Explicit language, drug use, physical abuse and sexual activities are included in this book. For a breakdown full content warning list please use the QR code below.



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To the readers who want to choke on a dick while being called a good
this one is for *you*!



To the readers who want to choke on a dick while being called a good girl . . .
this one is for *you!*

PLAYLIST



The music that made this journey a bearable one for me ...

Speak Now – Taylor Swift

This War Is Ours – Escape The Fate

I Don't Wanna Live Forever – ZAYN, Taylor Swift

Just Pretend – Bad Omens

Hold My Hand – Lady Gaga

Unholy (feat. Kim Petras) – Sam Smith

Favorite Crime – Olivia Rodrigo

Going Under – Evanescence

Run To You – Lea Michele

You Are The Reason – Calum Scott, Leona Lewis

Carry It Well – The Duet – Sam Fischer, Hana Effron

El Tango De Roxanne – Aaron Tveit

Don't Blame Me – Taylor Swift

Like A Prayer – Miley Cyrus

Wildest Dreams – Taylor Swift

How Do I Say Goodbye – Dean Lewis

THE LONLIEST – Maneskin

Praying – Kesha

Judas – Lady Gaga

Some of these songs fit with the words on these pages, some do not. This was just my musical journey as this story unfolded.

Don't Blame Me – Taylor Swift

Like A Prayer – Miley Cyrus

Wildest Dreams – Taylor Swift

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THE LONLIEST – Maneskin

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CHAPTER ONE

Thunder rumbles through the darkening sky, the boom deafening echoes across the city. They say rain on your wedding day is a good luck, promising a lasting marriage.

Can the same be said for a tumultuous storm?

I can't help but think of it as an unwelcome omen.

Flashes of lightning zip through the clouds, coming and going in succession. From where I stand on the balcony, facing the gardens hotel, the tent for the evening reception is in my direct line of sight.

Hotel workers rush in and out of the space overseen by the wedding planner. The vision comes to life slowly, though nothing like I would have chosen for myself had the choice been mine.

Turning, my gown catches my attention from the wardrobe where it is laid out. At its feet are the most beautiful off-white lace and crepe satin Lorraine heels.

They were a gift from my father.

Only the best and most expensive for his little girl.

For most women, their wedding day is a day of great celebration. they've been dreaming about their whole lives.

The white dress.

The handsome groom.

The happily ever after.

Unfortunately, that isn't my story.

My groom is a man I've only met twice. My dress was chosen for a handful of people whom don't know the first thing about my taste and

And the happily ever after?

That's something that only exists in fairy tales.

Being wed to a man of the Mafia at only twenty-one is the furthest sign of what could get from a fairy tale.

I drop down into the seat at the vanity, waiting for my sisters to help me into my dress. The only thing I have left to do now. They would be here with me while I was having my hair and make-up done this morning but my father kept them busy with other tasks.

I glance at myself in the mirror, letting out a heavy sigh at the girl looking back at me. My chestnut brown hair is twisted into a low bun with tendrils framing my face while my make-up has been brushed to perfection.

Gold and brown shadows coat my eyelids, accentuating the usual brown, and the layers of foundation, concealer, and bronzer hide my blemishes.

The girl in the mirror looks beautiful.

Radiant even.

But that girl isn't me.

The door behind me opens, loud voices spilling into the room.

A day footsteps follow. I force a smile while turning to face my sisters. The three of them stand before me, each with varying expressions on their faces.

Rosa, the rebel child—as my father calls her—looks bored out of her mind while Elisa looks excited and happy.

It's my eldest sister, Sofia, who sends my stomach soaring with butterflies when I get a glimpse of the sorrow reflecting at me through her blue irises. "Are you ready to get in your dress?" she asks, moving towards me with a wry smile on her face. It's almost as fake as mine.

Out of the three, she's the only one who has verbalised any concern about this marriage. She tore my father to pieces when she found out he'd signed the dotted line and passed me over to a stranger for the rest of my life.

Arranged marriages are common within the Mafia, but since our family moved us from America to England when I was only six, it had never occurred to my mind that mine could—or would—be arranged for me.

By morning, Sofia and Rosa have yet to marry, and Elisa got to marry for love. I must marry because my father told me to.

He hasn't exactly been forthcoming with information about my upcoming nuptials. Every time I've asked, he's only ever responded with how important and an honour for our family that this union was requested.

There's more to the story than he's willing to tell me, but I've yet to fully understand what any of it is.

"Do I have to do this?" I ask Sofia when she slips my dress out of its garment bag. It is truly exquisite with an a-line silhouette—the perfectly flattering for my small frame. White lace appliqués over a slip and a scattering chapel train.

A dress made for royalty, yet I felt nothing the few times I tried it on. "Yeah," Sofia tells me, her eyes filling with tears. "I wish you did

three of you do, sweet girl.”

I hate that my sister is hurting over this and for reasons I don't understand. There is little I know about the life I will marry into; only small pieces of information have been passed on.

We've lived in England for the last fifteen years, and our lives have been normal enough, but Sofia, being eleven years older than me, grew up surrounded by the Mafia. She spent her childhood being raised and protected by them, by them.

Our papá was a Capo before we left.

Which is why this marriage is even more surprising.

Men don't leave the Mafia—unless they're in a body bag, and even then the exit is bloody painful.

It's unheard of to walk away.

Yet, our father was allowed to pick up his whole life and move across the world with no consequence.

Then when I turned eighteen, he was handed a marriage contract and a warm welcome back into the fold for him.

“Now, no moping,” Sofia tells me with a shake of her head. She looks at the dress on the bed and grabs a bag from Rosa's outstretched hand, her thumbing through it and pulling out a bottle of tequila. Now I know I should be worried. “We need drinks, music, and then we'll get you ready for the married.”

shape

in ivory



1.

n't, but

Stumbling over my feet, I barely make it up the stairs to the church
stand, falling on my face and breaking my nose. I'd like to say it's because the
ceiling is too high—while that may be true, the giggles coming from behind
remind me much of my lack of graciousness comes from the many
times we've been tequila my sisters and I downed in my hotel room.

Well, I doubt getting drunk on your wedding day is the most clever idea,
amongst five shots too late to worry about it now.

Papá tightens his grip on my arm, pulling me upright before I hit
concrete.

"I can't believe you girls," he hisses in my ear. The glare on his face
isn't then, probably be scary if I were not so tipsy. I find it rather endearing, cut
the way his nose wrinkles as his eyes narrow at me.

When he runs his hands through his greying dark hair, letting out a
groan, he steps into him and wrap my arms around his waist. "It's all going to be
fine, Papá, I promise."

He blows out a long shaky breath, resting his palms on my shoulders
and pushes me back just enough that our faces are aligned.

"Do you have any idea how important this day is?"

"Nope," I say, shrugging. "You haven't told me anything. I
should've whenever I have asked, you've refused to answer any of my questions
to get forgiveness if I have not taken this seriously enough for you. That is
not me, Papá."

His hands tighten on my shoulders, the grip punishing. I wince under
his touch but keep my back straight.

The last thing I want to do is anger my father, especially today, but
my tongue isn't something I've ever been good at.

"There are many things I have not told you, Pippa. Many things I

withoutBut this union is important to our family, so when we get in there you
ie heelsbe on your best behaviour. When you leave and fly to New York wi
ind menew husband, you are going to do everything that he expects of you
shots ofcan be no outbursts or disrespect towards him. No insolence. You wil
perfect wife to him. Do you understand?”

but I’m I nod, stepping away from him the moment he loosens his grip

While I understand his words, there’s something deeper in his tone
kiss theread.

I move again, ascending the steps one by one, until I pause at the e
e wouldof the church. My hands tremble as Papá slips my arm through his,
e even,me closer as he guides us into the open arch and over the threshold.

He pulls me into a small room off to the side, letting me fall into
i sigh, Iwhile we wait. Light sounds of a piano fill the room while candles fli
be fine,almost every surface, casting a dim orange glow over the space.

Truthfully, the church is nothing less than magnificent.
ers. He Lofty ceilings with stained-glass windows spread across them hide
falling outside, while statues of the saints pave the way from the
entrance.

in fact, Opulence and glamour everywhere you look.

oms. So, Though the building is beautiful, truly; it is cold.

on you, A bitter cold that seeps into my bones, chilling me from the insi

Another omen, perhaps.

ider his It feels as though the world is screaming at me not to do this.

Urging me to turn around and run away.

t biting The signs are glaring, and I want to listen.

To follow them out of that door and far away.

cannot. But when the opening notes of Bach’s “Arioso” trickle into the ro

My sisters take their places ahead of the door that will lead them down the aisle, I know I'm too late.

There It is time.

There can be no running now.

I'm regretting the choice to drink several shots as my father pulls me towards the door. My stomach churns, threatening to bring up what I can't have eaten today, and I know it will not be pretty if I let that nausea take over of me.

Though, it could put an end to the proceedings if I feign a sickness pulling me away from the door, but I'm busy pondering whether that could actually work when the doors open in front of us.

My sisters descend the aisle slowly, in an orderly line, and I almost choke on how out of place they look in their sage green dresses amongst the black filling the pews. I'm not sure if there was a dress code the guests were to follow, but there isn't a single flash of colour in the waiting crowd.

The women are dressed in expensive black evening gowns while the men sit in tailored black suits.

I wonder if it's a uniform.

Or it's another sign.

It cannot be a good thing when you enter your wedding and it looks like a funeral.

The guests stand following the change in music to signal my entrance. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath before taking the first step towards my new life.

My gaze is trained on the floor as my father leads me down the aisle, my grip tight where our arms are linked. I fear if I look up, I'll be tempted to look away from him and

own the tail and run. I imagine the only thing I will wind up with if I were to die is a bullet in my skull.

Not the ideal beginning to one's wedding day.

Or end, I suppose.

It calls me "You have to breathe, bambina," my father whispers. "This is just a little thing, you'll see."

I don't believe him, and I'm not sure he believes himself either. The tension in his voice is anything to go off.

I doubt there is anything good that can come of this day, but I send ahead a small smile anyway. The last thing I want to do right now is lay my ears out for all to see. This room is full of dangerous people, most of whom wouldn't hesitate to use them against me.

Letting out a breath, I squeeze his arm. "I'm sure you're right, Papá." I barely register the rest of the walk down the aisle, and long before ready, my father is slipping my arm out of his and placing my palm in the waiting hand of my groom. I keep my gaze on the floor for another moment, pulling in a deep breath before coming face-to-face with Antonio Bianchi.

My soon-to-be husband.

The boss of New York City.

The Capo Dei Capi of the Italian Mafia.

He is everything I would imagine the boss to be in his black pinstriped suit. His dark hair is slicked back, perfectly styled to accentuate his sharp features, his eyes are deep blue, and his smile is a cruel curve of his lips that reaches my cheekbones and strong jaw.

He reminds me of a Disney villain, though that thought has me fighting back a giggle. Laughing at your groom is another sure-fire way to receive a black eye, I imagine.

He does not speak nor smile as he stares at me, his deep-blue eyes

o that is burning in their wake as he takes in my features. A harsh frown mars his eyes narrowing when he finishes his perusal.

Well, fuck you too, buddy, I don't want to be here either.

I face the priest, ignoring the man at my side. While handsome and a good there isn't a spark of lust in my body for him. His face is too sharp, his too lean, and his personality too stiff for my liking.

r if the While I know better than to judge a book by its cover, there's something viciously chilling about him.

d him a "O' God who consecrated the bond of Marriage . . ." the elderly notions starts.

whom While he speaks, I focus on his black Cassock; the traditional reminding me that this marriage isn't just in front of friends and family. "God Himself.

re I am If ever there was a time to step up and say I can't do this, it would be into the I'm sure the Big Man would forgive me.

moment, But whether anyone else in this room would, remains to be seen.

chi. With every word spoken, my blood chills further and my heart violently. My eyes flicker over the altar, my hands twisting in the material of my dress. I've never had a panic attack before now, I wonder if this is the start of one?

pe suit. I take a few calming breaths, trying to remain inconspicuous in the high audience, but when Antonio tightens his grasp on my wrist, I know I've failed.

ting off He leans into me, his voice low and threatening. "Calm the fuck down. You do not want to embarrass me, Bride."

"Sorry," I whisper, turning my gaze to the marble floor. It seems strange to leave a church that would be filled with such opulence.

his lips, Surely God isn't about lavish designs and magnificence.

Then again, what do I know?

I barely pay attention when Papá drags me to Mass on a Sunday.

enough, The ceremony drags, and I swear the priest talks slower with each I
is bodybecause he can. Can't he see that everyone's patience is wearing th
maybe that's just me and everyone else is loving his spiel on why mar
nethingsacred.

All I know is by the time we're finished here, I will need a large al
y priestbeverage.

The tipsy haze I was in earlier has gradually faded, and all that rema
l attirelow-level headache and a sickness in the pit of my stomach.

aily but "Since it is your intention to enter into the covenant of Holy Mat
join your right hands and declare your consent before God and His chu
e now. *Shit.*

Antonio tugs at my hand, squeezing me tightly. I lift my gaze to his
my tongue to stop myself from asking him to let me go. That wou
t racesweakness to him—a weakness I cannot afford.

erial of He says his vows, promising to love and cherish me in sickness
s is thehealth and blah blah blah.

It's all bloody bullshit.

to the The most a man like Antonio could offer me is a lifetime of p
ow I'vesorrow.

When it is my turn, my throat dries. The priest stares at me. Antoni
: down.at me. Every single person in this church stares at me.

But I can't get the words out.

strange I don't want to get the words out.

You can do this.

I repeat the mantra over and over again for long silent seconds.

With a deep breath, I open my mouth and finally the words come. A collective sigh rings around the room, the relief palpable as I speak my vows. I just say, “I, Pippa, take you, Antonio, to be my lawful husband, to have and to cherish you as my love, in all joys and sorrows, from this day forward—”

My wedding is over. A door slamming pulls my attention to the back of the church. I turn my head, facing the intrusion, my body locking on contact.

A man stands there, dressed in a black suit similar to the others around the church, but it looks much different on his frame. Better. The material moulds to his body perfectly, as though the suit were handcrafted with him in mind.

He struts down the aisle, not at all bothered by the fact he stopped the wedding ceremony in its tracks. Unsurprisingly, I am not bothered either.

In fact, I am trying hard to keep a smile off my face.

Not only has he given me a moment's reprieve, but he has actually brought a little bit of entertainment to an otherwise long and boring ceremony, and I would be lying if I said I could kiss the man.

It also helps that he is the most handsome man I have ever seen.

His hair is a shade or two darker than mine, and as he gets closer I see his eyes are a deep brown. His shoulders are broad, and his legs long.

He must be at least six foot five and has tattoos peeking from under his suit.

Glorious, beautiful tattoos.

They cover his hands and there's black ink working its way up his arms. I can't deny that I'm intrigued to see what it all looks like under the black shirt he's wearing.

Only when Antonio coughs do I realise I'm staring at the new groom with my mouth gaping slightly. I quickly turn my head back to face the front, ignoring the

the flush that spreads over my cheeks at being caught ogling a man that
ome. Amy future husband, on my wedding day.

r vows. *Well, shit a brick.*

to hold *Forgive me Father, for I think I am going to sin.*

The guests watch in rapt silence while the man continues to make I
urn mytowards us. When he stops just ahead of Antonio, the two men shake

with a smile before Antonio mutters, "Always do like to make an er
und us,don't you, Leonardo."

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on my arm, I am sure the sound would have sent me buckling to the flo

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something to me I can't comprehend. He slaps a hand on Antonio's sh

before speaking again. "Happy wedding day, friend. Now, where the :
broughtI stand?"

and for The priest steps in then, guiding him into position beside Antonio

them standing side by side, I am hit with a fresh wave of anxiety.

It is one thing to find another man attractive that is not your groom
; I losewhole other when he's the best man.

When the priest asks me to repeat my vows, they come easily thi

ider hisThough it is not Antonio my eyes lock on when the words fall fr
mouth.

It's his best man.

neck. I His eyes darken as he watches me, the brown becoming almost black

e fittedI vow, "Till death do us part."

er, my

gnoring

the flush that spreads over my cheeks at being caught ogling a man that is not my future husband, on my wedding day.

Well, shit a brick.

Forgive me Father, for I think I am going to sin.

The guests watch in rapt silence while the man continues to make his way towards us. When he stops just ahead of Antonio, the two men shake hands with a smile before Antonio mutters, “Always do like to make an entrance, don’t you, Leonardo.”

“You know me.” The man chuckles, and if it were not for Antonio’s grip on my arm, I am sure the sound would have sent me buckling to the floor.

I have never heard a voice so low, or a laugh so deep, and it does something to me I can’t comprehend. He slaps a hand on Antonio’s shoulder before speaking again. “Happy wedding day, friend. Now, where the fuck do I stand?”

The priest steps in then, guiding him into position beside Antonio. With them standing side by side, I am hit with a fresh wave of anxiety.

It is one thing to find another man attractive that is not your groom, it is a whole other when he’s the best man.

When the priest asks me to repeat my vows, they come easily this time. Though it is not Antonio my eyes lock on when the words fall from my mouth.

It’s his best man.

His eyes darken as he watches me, the brown becoming almost black when I vow, “Till death do us part.”

CHAPTER TWO

The pitter patter of rain on the windows and the rumble of the engine beneath us fill the awkward silence in the car. My hand rests nervously in my lap as I keep stealing glances at the man beside me.

There hasn't been a single word uttered between Antonio and me since we stepped out of the church as husband and wife. If anything, he seems to be going out of his way to *not* speak.

The anxious pit in my stomach worsens the longer the silence drags on. There are too many questions running through my mind, too much confusion. Why me?

Why was I chosen to be a wife for the Capo?

I open my mouth, the questions on the tip of my tongue, but his eyes are on the road and I lose the chance. Sighing, I glance out the window, watching the streets of London as we fly past.

"We're here, ma'am," Nico, Antonio's driver, tells me when the car is rolling to a stop at the kerb.

With his brown hair, hazel eyes and black suit, he fits right in with the other men of the family—but there's something softer about him, a kindness in his eyes.

Antonio and most of his men seem to lack.

Antonio pushes his door open, stalking up to the entrance of the hotel without a word of backwards glance, and I let out a sigh before rolling my shoulders.

“Manners cost nothing,” I mumble under my breath, sliding out of the car. Nico chuckles softly, a small shake of his head as he holds an umbrella over me. It hasn’t stopped raining all day, and comes down harder now, splashing everything as it bounces off the pavement. “Thank you, Nico.”

Thunder crashes through the sky, a flash of lightning follows, and I jump out of my skin at the unwelcome storm.

“We should get you inside, ma’am.”

“Please call me Pippa,” I tell Nico with a grimace. “Ma’am is for someone far older than me. I’m not quite there yet.”

“Okay. Shall we go, then, Pippa.” He smiles softly, offering me his hand, which I graciously accept as we make our way towards the lobby. The moment we reach the doors, he folds the umbrella down, pushing me through the entrance before turning on his heels and heading back to the car.

I blow out a deep breath, blowing the tendrils of hair away from my face before entering the hotel . . . *alone*.

Only a handful of people move around the lobby, but each stops to stare at me. A flash of heat spreads up my neck to my ears, a sign of embarrassment. I wonder what they’re thinking as I walk through the lobby in my wedding dress without a groom in sight.

Do they think I’m a runaway bride? Or a bride abandoned by her husband on her wedding day?

If it’s the latter—well, they wouldn’t be wrong.

A shiver passes through me when I make it to the reception tent. I see

a beat, trepidation stealing my breath. Each step I take is a step closer to the hotel life no longer being my own . . . and I'm not ready for that.

ing my But I don't have a choice.

"Where is your husband?" Elisa asks when I make it inside and find the car sisters at the head table. I grab a glass of champagne, tipping it to my lips and Lila overswallowing the contents down in one gulp before I answer.

soaking "Not a clue. The man left me in the car and came inside, so I'm guessing

he's got to be around here somewhere." Dropping into the seat meant almost I kick my heels off, a happy moan slipping from my lips "Oh, that feels

Those shoes may be beautiful, but my god do they hurt."

"Classy as always, my girl." Rosa laughs, clinking her full glass with someone empty one. "How does it feel to be a married woman?"

"Ask me again when I've drunk a few more of these, and maybe my answer will be a favourable one." I exchange the flute for another one. Thea large swallow while Rosa only laughs and drinks alongside me.

into the "Don't get sloppy," Elisa says, her brow furrowing as she glances over the few guests that have made it to the reception. "These people are dangerous, P. You'll probably get yourself killed with a slip of that to yours."

in their "Don't be dramatic, maybe just a light spanking," I tell her with a face in She rolls her eyes, but a smile forms on her lips anyway. "Besides, it's the hotel, wedding day. Surely it's a rite of passage to get super drunk and pass out on the dancefloor."

er new "Sure, if this was a normal wedding. You just married into the Mafia

I don't think the usual traditions apply here." She chuckles, twisting a lock of hair through her blonde curls. We couldn't look more different, my sisters and I. I'm low forme.

r to my There were many times when we were growing up that I wondered
were even related.

Elisa and Rosa look the most alike, both olive-skinned with bright
and my eyes. They could be twins, if it wasn't for the eighteen-month age gap
lips and is the most like our mother with her auburn hair, sea blue eyes and pale

Then there's me. Brown hair, brown eyes, lightly tanned skin. Papá
has the same brown eyes as me, but besides that, I look nothing like him—
for me, like either of my parents.

is good. Not that I can say that with absolute certainty about my mother since
my only memories I have of her come from photos hidden around our house
with my She up and left one night when I was only a baby. There one moment
gone the next, as though she never existed.

Maybe my Papá and Sofia refuse to speak of her, and Rosa and Elisa have
a handful of memories to share, given they were also too young when
she left off for her to have left a real imprint on them.

I warily “So, you're telling me I'm not allowed to drink all the champagne
because a white-girl wasted on that dance floor over there, while getting down and
dancing to Cardi B?” I ask Elisa, raising a brow and pursing my lips disapprovingly
at her.

I laugh. Elisa shakes her head, scowling at me playfully while laughter falls
from her. It's my Rosa, the drink in her glass spilling over the rim as her shoulders
shake out in amusement.

“Oh, sweet girl, I hope you keep that spark alive when you go home,
America.”

With her reminder that I'll be leaving England tomorrow to fly to
New York, the mood on our table turns sombre. We've avoided talking
about the inevitable. All of us struggling with the thought of saying go

The tent gradually fills over the next half hour, the volume in the room becoming almost deafening as introductions are made and the alcohol flows. Very few people interact with my sisters and me, beyond the odd hello. Sofia congratulates me. It seems they're unsure as they pass, wary as to how to interact with the new wife of the Capo.

All I can hope is that they get over themselves quickly, otherwise New York will be quiet and lonely. From everything I know—which I've learned—the Mafia are a tight-knit family and rarely do they interact with outsiders. It's easier that way.

Safer.

My stomach churns when Antonio finally graces us with his presence, slipping into the seat beside me. He doesn't speak, and the conversation around us halts as people turn to take him in. I wonder what we look like together to them all.

The boss and his obedient wife.

That's what they're all expecting, I'm sure.

But when his best man walks into the room shortly after, commanding their attention, awareness travels through me. I'm not sure obedience is something I can offer with a temptation like him around.

There's a tickle in the back of my mind, a familiarity when his eyes fall on me. My body recognises him, but I can't recall ever seeing the man before today. I'm sure I haven't—he isn't the kind of person you could forget easily.

"Hello, ladies," he says, dropping into the seat to my right. He reaches for a New York hand on the table, right beside mine, our pinkies grazing as he flings a compliment my way. "Princess."

Narrowing my eyes on him, I clench my thighs to temper the pulse.

the space starts in my centre at the nickname. There's something about the way
flows. from his mouth that sends a wave of heat coursing through me.

ello and A single word from his lips, and I might as well be panting like a horse
how to heat over a stranger.

Taking a deep breath, I will my heart to slow. He's just a man.
life into totally fuckable, hotter-than-the-sun man with a voice rich like
is little chocolate—but he's still just a man.

siders. "Good evening," I reply, dropping my eyes to the table and taking
my champagne. His eyes burn holes into my head, but I refuse to look

Instead, I focus on the differences in our hands, my eyes tracing the
presence, of the ink that spread over his skin. A rose on the back of his hand, et
conversation black and grey, and a series of numbers and letters across his
look like Whereas my hand is bare and rather boring in comparison to his.

Thankfully, Rosa comes to my rescue and steers the conversation
York. Over the next hour, Leonardo entertains our table with stories
city and his life growing up in New York with Antonio.

standing Antonio remains silent, oblivious to any questions sent his way.

ence is My father finds us a little while later, a frown marring his face but
smiles widely at me. When I ask what's wrong, he tells me it's nothing

lock on Bloody brilliant.

before A husband who wants nothing to do with me.

forget so A father that is keeping secrets.

And a hotter-than-sin man making me think all kinds of naughty
things about him—that I doubt he even realises.

a smile Elisa is right.

I'm going to get myself killed.

else that

r it falls

bitch in



Sure, a My feet burn and a steady thump is starting at my temples as I'm melted around from man to man on the dancefloor. Antonio's uncle smiles le me, dropping a wet kiss on my cheek before spinning me out and hand a sip of off to yet another person.

up. I'm not sure whose bright idea it was to make sure half of Ar ne lines extended family got a dance with me, and if I ever find out, I might a ched in kill them.

fingers. I close my eyes, trying to stave off the dizziness, then a large hand around mine. The other lands on my lower back, the touch gentle but to New I'm pressed flush against a firm chest.

s of the There's something comforting about the way he holds me a sandalwood scent coming off him. I'm half tempted to rest my head him and take a nap.

efore he Though, comfort is the last thing I'm feeling when he whispers in m s. "Hello, Princess," he murmurs, sending shivers down my spine. M

flicks up, my eyes locking onto his deep brown orbs that are ingrained into my brain after staring at them for a short time back church. Up close, his face is strong and chiselled as though made from

r things There isn't a single wrinkle on his face, nor a line in sight when he down at me. I know Antonio is thirty-four, and given they grew up tog assume Leonardo is the same age but he doesn't look a day over thirty.

"Good evening, again," I say politely, keeping my voice soft. Th only way I will survive any interaction with him, by keeping ca

collected. He's dangerous, that much is obvious when his dark eye
over my face and travel down my chest, lingering slightly on the c
threatening to spill over the neckline of my dress.

Maybe I'm not the only one feeling affected. Then again, he's a blo
passed I'm pretty sure most would stop and stare at a woman's breasts if the
erily at in their face like mine are.

ling me "Have you had a good day?" he asks me, twirling me arou
dancefloor. His movements are gracious, confident as he leads us thi
tonio's waltz across the floor. The fact the man can dance only makes hir
actually attractive.

"It's been lovely, thank you."

l wraps He laughs a little, the sound tickling my earlobe as he leans into me
firm as do I get the feeling this little miss perfectly polite act is just that, an act

Because it is.

nd the "I have no idea," I answer, the lie falling easily off my tongue. Th
against to say I'm not a polite person, but I'm also not the kind of person that
around things.

y ear. The role of the perfect wife is something my father has been trying
ly gaze into me since he first told me about the marriage contract three years a
already No man wants a sarcastic, witty wife.

in the At least that's what I've been told on an almost daily basis.

stone. I'm not sure I agree but then I have no previous marital experi
smirks compare to. So maybe Papá is right. Though, why any woman would
gether, I be with a man that tries to tame them and their voices, I've no clue.

It's not something I want to do; not that I have a choice. So, for n
at's the play the role. I'll act the part and hope that it sticks, or pray the M
lm and

s movewilling to take on an outspoken twenty-one-year-old who drinks like
leavageand has a mouth to match.

Leonardo tightens his grip, pulling me even closer. There's barely
ke, andof space between our bodies. I'm not sure it's appropriate to be this c
ey werethe man, though, I'm not complaining.

"You're interesting," he murmurs. His lips graze my earlobe, and I
nd thecontrol the moan that tries to escape me. "I can't wait to see how yo
rough ainto yourself in New York. I doubt Antonio is going to be able to han
n moreat all."

"Maybe I'm not meant to be handled," I quip, tilting my head up
Our lips brush, a whisper of a touch before I lean back.
". "Why "Oh, that's not true at all. You're meant to be handled." He pull
t?" from me, taking a few steps backwards towards the bar. Before h
around, he sends me a wink, and my heart races. "But not by him. S
at's notaround, Princess."

minces

to drill
go.



"Hey, Papá." My father spins in his seat, a smile plastered on his face
stares up at me. His tie is loosened, and the top button of his shirt undc
ence to Like this, he just looks like any old dad at his daughter's w
want tocarefree, jovial even.

There's something else shimmering in the depths of his brow
ow, I'llthough. A sadness of sorts, and the frustration I saw earlier lingers
afia aretense hold of his muscles.

a sailor “Bambina.” Leaning into him, he presses a kiss against my cheek, wrapping over my back and giving me a light squeeze.

an inch “Are you okay?” I ask when he pulls back, a frown at my lips.

close to “Of course, Pippa,” he answers, patting me on the shoulder with a palm. “This is a day of great celebration for us. For you.”

I barely nod, placing a hand over his and patting his fingers twice before removing his hold. “You’re right, Papá.”

“You will be a good wife, an obedient wife.” His words come in a quiet whisper, his eyes pleading with me. I’m under no illusions that my father isn’t getting something out of this union, though, I have no idea what it may be, but he’s been too focused on me playing a role. The role of an obedient woman who stands behind her man, waiting in the shadows until he turns to return home bloody and beaten.

The life of a boss’s wife isn’t an easy one. It’s certainly not the life I want for me.

Before I can say anything further, shouts fly across the room as gunfire is drawn and aimed on the flowing curtains at the entrance to the tent. My father hisses, standing to his full height and pulling out his gun. There is a glint of light there that I can see, but the dramatics won’t be for nothing—that I’m sure.

“Pippa,” Papá warns, his voice little more than a growl as he watches me. I pull my dress upwards, my hand sliding under the ivory material to reach the spot where most women wear a garter on their wedding day.

The thing about me though, I’m not most women.

I’m not the obedient bride, or the perfect little woman created to stand behind a man.

My hand presses against the cold metal on my thigh, my mouth quirking into a smile as my father only shakes his head at me. I pull my gun from

his armholster, feeling the heavy weight in my palm and letting out a sigh of relief when my pointer finger lingers on the trigger.

“What, Papá?” I ask with a wink, showing him my pride and joy. “I didn’t really think I’d come to this thing unarmed, did you? After all, you were the one who taught me never to leave the house defenceless.”

before He goes to say something more, a flicker of a smile at the corner of his lips, but heavy footsteps slap across the tiles, interrupting us.

out in a “Why does the new Mafia bride have a gun in her hand?” Luca looks at what my father ponders with a low chuckle, his eyes straying from my hand to me. There’s an amused smirk on his lips when he tilts his head, watching the chaos ensue around us.

for him The women are frantic, hiding under tables, while the men convene on the dancefloor, talking in hushed whispers.

meant “Can you handle it, Princess?”

I step forwards, my gaze remaining locked on his as my arm raises. My smile widens. There isn’t a single tremor in my hand as I press the barrel to the centre of his forehead, my finger relaxed on the trigger. “What do you think?”

ure of. “I think I’m in love,” he murmurs, his words meant for only me. He looks darkened when I push the barrel deeper into his skin. He cocks a brow, but I catch the thought to taunt me, which only eggs me on more.

I won’t pull the trigger, not on him.

Not today at least.

o stand My father grumbles under his breath before reaching a hand out and pushing my arm to the ground.

quirking Rolling my eyes, I let the gun hang limp at my side, a mumble coming from the falling from my lips.

of relief “No killing, Pippa. Especially not your new family,” he demands, I
moving between Leonardo and me. When he turns to face the com
7. “Youwith a blank look, he grumbles under his breath, “She’s going to be th
all, youof me soon.”

“Never. You’re too young to die, Papá,” I tell him, pressing a kis
r of hischeek. He shakes his head but smiles softly at me. My father may be
man on the outside—powerful and unyielding—but when it comes to
Leonardohis baby—he’s nothing more than a giant teddy bear.

my face. Although, a teddy bear that taught his youngest daughter how to ha
ing memanners of weapons. “Now, does anyone want to tell me what the
going on?”

around “Russians.” Antonio’s voice comes from behind, his tone heav
disdain while he watches the curtains on the tent. His hands are
weapons, which is surprising, considering how heavily armed the res
and mymen seem to be. He looks carefree, bored even, but those cold eyes of
netal toa different story. They narrow on the tent, watching as a tall lean ma
do youthrough the curtains into the space.

His sleek hair is dark, buzzed at the sides and longer on the top, and
his eyestravels over his forehead, slashing through his right eyebrow. He wear
row assimilar to the men around me, but where theirs are black, his is a roy
His stroll is lazy as he makes his way towards us, stopping just shy of
in front of my new husband.

“Gentlemen.” He speaks in an American accent, but a hint of I
slowlycomes through at the end of his greeting. His eyes travel over the men
me, his expression carefree as he takes them in. When he stops or
d curseghost of a smile flashes on his lips, but it’s gone within a second. “I
presume?”

his eyes “You presume correctly. Though I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” I tell him, the gun in my hand digging into my skin. I tighten my grip around the handle. While this man may not seem threatening with his easy stance, it would be foolish to lower my guard. I seem to know who I am, but I haven’t the first clue who you might be. a harsh “Alexei.”

to me— “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes,” he replies with a smile, offering me his hand. I raise my hand before we can make contact, a hand grips my hip, pulling me backward. My back is pressed against a hard chest. Fingers curl around my shoulder, burning my skin even with the material between us.

My father with “You’re fraternising with the enemy, Princess.”

free of I pull in a stuttered breath when Leonardo’s mouth grazes my ear, his teeth lightly nipping at the skin before he pulls away. While Alexei may seem harmless, the man behind me is not.

in steps He may just be the biggest threat I’ll ever face in my life.

“Your enemy, not mine,” I retort, slipping out of his hold and moving toward a scarred man beside him. My father and Antonio are too busy watching Alessandro, a man in a suit, have noticed the small interaction, and that’s something I can only be grateful for.

a metre “You are ours now.”

I snap my head up to meet his gaze. While his words are innocent, they sound sinful coming from his mouth. Paired with the way his chestnut brown eyes seem to devour every inch of me and his lips quirk up into a smile, this man is a walking temptation.

Pippa, I One I need to be careful to stay away from if I plan to survive.

“That means our enemies *are* your enemies.”

at a “Perhaps.” I shrug, turning to face the other men before he can reply when I stay silent, watching each other closely.

overly My feet move before I can think better of it, taking me to my father. “YouHe eyes me cautiously, though his hand reaches out and taps at my” before he traces a circle into the skin. A silent promise that we’re okay

“I assume you didn’t fly all the way to England to offer congratulations on these nuptials, Alexei,” Antonio comments, his face, but leaving Alexei’s as he steps forwards. The other man remains calm, though a smirk still on his face. Though he turns his gaze to watch me, sending a wink before he answers.

“I want your bride.” Alexei says the words so casually you’d think talking about the weather, not exchanging a woman. While hushed words fly through the room, I keep my face blank. Another thing my father seems to never wear your emotions in the face of an opponent. “Not to mention should add.”

He turns, his eyes glittering in humour as he addresses me. “While you’re very lovely, Pippa. You are not my type, no offence.”

Alexei to “None taken, you’re not mine either.” Before today I would have been grateful didn’t have a type, but now I’m not sure that’s the truth. Though there’s something I can admit to out loud. The men look at me, their expressions ranging from blank, to amused, to exasperated. The latter being my father’s, of course. “Though, I’m intrigued as to what you would want me for if you were to marry. What would be the point in stealing a new wife from the Mafia?”

“There are many reasons one might want to claim you.” His words shiver down my spine. On the surface, they seem harmless, a simple observation, but there is something bitter about the way he speaks the

y. They father seems to notice too as he grabs my hand, squeezing gently to o comfort.

's side. Alexei chuckles, raising his weapon-free hands in a show of inn y palm though it does little to ease the suffocating tension in the air.

：“Leonardo,” Antonio says, turning to face his best man. The way h r your is slow—measured and tactical. Turning your back on your enemy e never them you don’t fear them, that you believe them to be weak. “Take ie same back to the hotel.”

ig me a “Of course,” Leonardo mutters, his hand clasping my wrist and pul away from my father. The hairs on my arms stand, goosebumps rai he was my skin as a shiver passes through me at his touch. His grip is firm, whispers me backwards. Papá glances at us both, his eyes lingering on my fac : taught long moment before he lets go of my hand with a final squeeze. “L narry, I Princess.”

Alexei sends me a wave, a wide smile on his face as Leonardo le you are away from the room. I catch the gazes of my sisters huddled togethe corner. Winking, I blow them a kiss, noting the way their bodies rela e said I sight of me: okay and unharmed.

at’s not I’ve never really considered the ramifications of being married to / essions before now. I knew the life was dangerous, but I had assumed most ther, of would be kept away from me. However, when we reach the gardens f not to least ten guns are aimed at my head, loaded and ready to be fir a, if not thinking my assumptions were wrong.

Silly of me, really.

send a “Hello, boys,” I murmur, a slow smile spreading across my lips as a moreover the men who now hold my life in their hands. “Now this is what em. My party.”

ffer my

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ie spins

shows

e Pippa

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CHAPTER THREE

Confused expressions stare back at me, though the guns stay aimed at my head while I smile at them. It's not that I'm not scared—a man would be with ten guns aimed directly at their skull—but to show fear would be to admit weakness, and that isn't something I will do.

Leonardo remains unmoving at my side, his hand wrapped tightly around my wrist. His jaw is hard, his body tense as he eyes the men before us. He rubs circles against my pulse point with his thumb. The gesture is soothing and calming.

"Konstantin." The name falls from his lips easily, amusement coating his voice. It's very different to how Antonio addressed Alexei inside; I can't help but wonder why. Obviously these men are not friends, that is clear and a fact my life is at risk, but these two don't seem unfriendly either.

"Leo." The man smirks. Lowering his weapon, he steps towards me with a scowl on his face. "She is not what I expected."

"What did you expect?" I ask, the question slipping from my mouth. Leonardo's grip on my wrist tightens, my skin aching under his powerful hold.

“Mouthy too, I see. It seems we’re going to have our hands full with one.”

My eyes narrow, my mouth opening to say something more; though I have no idea. Leonardo cuts me off, speaking in a bored tone. “Thank you, fortunate that she is not yours.”

“She is not yours either, Leo.” Konstantin chuckles, cocking his head to the side. “But then, you’ve never been very good at keeping your hands off forbidden treasures, have you?”

“Not really.”

“While this conversation is thrilling,” I interject, smiling sweetly at the men before me. “I’m bored. Either shoot me or let us walk away together. Don’t shoot you.”

“Princess,” Leonardo growls, but his warning comes too late. The man’s hand is aimed between the man’s eyes.

“Do you think you could take me out before my men kill you? You’re dead long before your bullet ever hit me.” He keeps his voice flat, but there’s a hint of doubt lingering in the depths of his eyes. That’s the problem with men, they always presume to have the upper hand. While he’s right, he’ll be dead the moment I pull the trigger, he’s wrong in thinking I wouldn’t help him out with me.

“Shall we find out?” I raise a brow, my finger twitching on the trigger. Killing doesn’t scare me, but I’d rather not get blood on my wedding dress. It may not be one I chose for myself, but it feels awfully shameful to ruin it.

“Let’s not,” Leonardo says, letting my wrist free and stepping behind me. He towers over my five-foot-two frame, his body dwarfing mine with his hands on my shoulders. He wraps an arm around my waist. “Gentlemen, we must be leaving now.”

Konstantin watches for a moment before nodding at Leonardo. “I’ll see you later.”

with this Alexei is right about this one. I imagine we will be seeing you again, Pippa, but for now, I will say goodbye.”

1, what, I don't get the chance to respond as Leonardo quickly hauls me then it is the pathway that leads back to the hotel. He loosens his hold on my wrist, his hand finding mine. He threads our fingers together, his thumb caresses the back of my hand. I fight the urge to shiver at the electricity that flows away through our joint skin.

“Do you have a death wish?” he asks when we reach the lobby. The bright lights assault my eyes, a stark difference from the darkness that enveloped me at the gardens. We do not stop; he just continues to drag me towards the elevator. Before I will take us to the penthouse suite.

I don't answer his question, for the answer is not so simple. Of course, I do not *have* a death wish. But in this world, I doubt it makes any difference. Death is the endgame, some of us just reach it earlier than you'd beathers. I will not bow down to men who want to bring me harm in the thought that I will live longer.

What a boring life that would be.

The lift opens, though not in a hallway as I would have expected, but directly in the suite where I will stay for the night. It is a large open-plan design with a kitchen to the left and a lounge to the right. There are three doors, each housing a bedroom behind them.

I move towards the kitchen first, my eyes drawn to the kettle on the counter. Leonardo must sense my intentions, for he slides past me and hands me a mug from one of the many cream cabinets. “Go and sit down.”

Doing as he says, I grip the skirt of my dress out of the way, lifting myself onto one of the tall stools at the island. My elbows rest on the marble

Perhaps

n soon, drop my chin into my palms, watching him as he works. He moves
the kitchen easily, as though he knows the space well.

owards “Have you been staying here long?”

aist, his “I often do business in London,” he tells me, filling the mug with
ing the water before turning to grab a teaspoon. “This is my home when I’m h

imming “I suppose I should thank you, then.” He watches me curiously, pass
the steaming tea. “For letting me stay in your home.”

Bright “It would be very uncharitable for me to turn you away, would it no
opes the “I suppose but thank you anyway.”

lift that “Don’t thank me,” he retorts with a dry chuckle. “At least not until
something worth thanking me for. Letting you stay in my home is the
can do for the boss and the new wife.”

: makes His words are a harsh reminder of what today is. Not that I have for
er than but in the midst of the commotion, I haven’t let myself think of what
e hopes next.

What comes this evening when the lights go down and my husband
me in bed. I’m not naïve enough to believe consummating our marriage
ed, but expected, though a large part of me hopes it won’t happen today.

en-plan I finish my tea quietly while Leonardo slips away to check out the
several He moves gracefully around the room, his eyes running over every corner
ensure it is safe and enemy free.

on the When I’m rinsing the mug, he offers to show me to my bedroom
grabs a evening before bidding me good night and leaving to his own.

I barely glance at the bed, only long enough to grab the holdall that
myself been delivered from the suite I stayed in last night.

e, and I Grabbing a pair of plain black sweatpants and a white t-shirt, I move
the en suite and flip the shower on. Once the pins in my hair have

around removed, I twist my arms behind my back, trying and failing to unhook buttons that line the dress.

My cheeks puff before I blow out a slow breath, groaning in frustration. Leonardo is sitting on the couch when I find my way back into the suite. “His legs propped on the coffee table as he watches cars racing on the television screen.

“You couldn’t help me, could you?” I blurt out before I can talk myself out of it. I doubt it’s appropriate to ask him to help me undress, but it’s not like I have any other options at this moment, since we’re alone here. “I can’t get the buttons on my dress.”

He stands slowly, watching me as he makes his way across the room. His eyes are intent on my face, causing a flush to creep up my neck to my forehead. I turn quickly, pulling in a deep breath. Though his answering chuckle is meant to come off as a joke, he noticed the reaction.

“How is it that you can hold your own against ten men, all who would join to hesitate to take your life in a split second if it suited them, and yet you are not afraid of me?”

“Death is not scary.”

“Do you fear me, then?”

Goosebumps spread across my skin as he swipes my long hair over my shoulder, his fingers grazing my neck before moving to release the button. He takes his time, his hands moving at little more than a snail’s pace as he makes his way down my spine. His breath tickles my back as the fabric loosens around me.

“Should I?”

I wait for his answer, but it never comes. Instead, he trails his fingers down my spine, and my breath shudders as sparks of electricity race through

ook theHe leans in, his full lips pressed against my earlobe. My body tense
speaks, though not in fear as it probably should. “Good night, Princess
stration.

uite, his
evision



self outI sleep poorly, though thankfully, alone. Antonio never comes
t as if I bedroom, and when sunlight filters through the blinds, a grateful smile
get the my lips. I shower quickly, pulling my hair back in a claw clip so it can
while I dress in leggings and a plain black sweater before moving i
om. His main area of the suite.

cheeks. “Good morning,” Antonio says, calling out to me from where he sit
de tells island. He is dressed in another black suit, without a tie today, and his
slicked back. He wears a smile on his face while he pours over the nev
uld not in front of him. “Did you sleep well?”

ou turn “Yes, thank you,” I answer, moving to the kettle warily. This is th
he’s spoken to me, and I’m not sure what to expect from him. “Did you
He must sense the apprehension in me, as he chuckles darkly. “Yes
Thank you.”

ver one Nodding awkwardly, I make a cup of tea, avoiding his steely gaz
the top you want a drink?”

l’s pace “No, thanks.” He waves a mug of coffee in front of me with an
ie dress look on his face. My face flushes in embarrassment, my eyes settling
cup in my hand. “We should probably have a chat.”

“Surrre,” I say slowly, grabbing a stool from under the island and h
s down up on it before facing him.

igh me.

s as he He straightens, dropping his paper to the counter before lifting his
.” mine. His expression is blank—unreadable as he watches me for a bea
sure you have questions, many of them.”

“I do,” I agree with a small nod.

“I doubt I can answer any of them for you,” he tells me, tilting his
eye me curiously when I lift the mug to my mouth and blow on the s
to the tea. Steam curls from the mug, the warmth hitting my face. “Thoug
: passes try.”

air dry “Why am I here?”

nto the “That one I cannot answer unfortunately,” he retorts with a dark c

“This union is something that was planned many years ago, long befor
s at the you or I learnt of it.”

hair is My brow furrows, his words running through my mind. I was onl
vspaper aware of the contract three years ago, the day I turned eighteen. Papá h
me that day he had received the offer maybe a few weeks before. “
ie most father said—”

u?” “Your father lied, Pippa. The union between our families was plann
s. I did. sixteen years ago,” he says with a crooked smile perched on his face.

That makes no sense. We relocated to England fifteen years ag
e. “Did would my father move us away from our home, from his life, if a n
between our two families was imminent? Why bother?

amused I tell Antonio as much, but he just shrugs casually, the smile remain
; on the his face. My blood chills as I watch him, the hair on the nape of n
tingling with anxious energy.

opping “Who are the men from last night, and why do they want me?”

“The Bratva. They’re the Russian Mafia. And as for why they wa
that is another thing I can’t answer.”

gaze to “Can’t or won’t?” I ask him, reading between the lines. When he t. “I am again, his eyes turn cold. My stomach falls, and I bite my tongue anything more from flying out of my mouth. While Antonio might be nice this morning, I don’t doubt that’s all it is—an act.

head to There is nothing warm, welcoming, or nice about the man I now get calling husband.

h I will “Your father warned me you were free with your speech,” he con his brow raising. “Though I’m not sure you are what any of us expecting.”

huckle. “So I keep on hearing,” I mumble.

e either “Any more questions?”

“Our marriage—” I pause, unsure how to ask the question burning my made brain. “What is expected of me?”

had told “I won’t offer you love, Pippa,” he tells me, his mouth turning down. But my over the thought. “It is expected that we’ll have children one day. I’m to give you a little time to get used to me before I take you to bed but I need over that I will take you to bed. I need an heir, and you’re the woman who gives me the pleasure of giving one to me.”

o. Why My blood chills, my hands clenching so tightly around the marriage knuckles turn white.

“Okay,” I agree softly, knowing I can’t argue with him on that point no matter how much I want to. “Will you take others?”

ly neck “No,” he tells me bitterly, his steely gaze narrowing on mine. “I have no interest in fucking anybody else for the time being. And I expect you to be loyal to me too. There can be no men, Pippa. If I find out another man has touched you sexually, I’ll kill you both. I don’t particularly care one

laughs another about you as a person, but I do care about my reputation. Fuck to stop and you're dead."

My mouth gapes, my hands clammy as his words take effect. There's not a single part of me that believes he's lying.

Before I can respond, a door opens on the other side of the room. Leonardo steps into the lounge, dressed in black dress pants and a black shirt. He sends a wink my way, rolling the cuffs of his sleeves to reveal his scarred arms.

"Pippa," Antonio snaps, pulling my attention back to him. "I don't understand?"

I swallow nervously, a lump in the back of my throat. Coughing to clear my throat, I finally answer, "Yes. I understand."

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it know



Later in the morning, I stand on the runway, watching as my family exit the car. My hands twist in the hem of my sweater, tears springing to my eyes.

"We'll miss you, sweet girl," Sofia whispers into my ear, hugging me. In that moment she reaches me. A tear falls over my lash, but I swipe it away quickly, fighting to keep the rest at bay. The last thing I need to do right now is cry. The flight to New York is at least eight hours. If I start to cry now, I fear I won't stop. "You'll let us know the moment you land."

"Of course, I will." I squeeze her tightly for a long moment, longing to take her with me. She pulls away, running her hands down my arms, and I realize they're holding mine. There's a smile on her face, but it doesn't hide her sorrow as tears spill over her cheeks.

ck it up “You’ll behave. Please, Pippa, promise me you’ll behave.”

While I am not sure that is a promise I can make, I squeeze her hand. It isn’t an ood anyway. “I will.”

The private plane comes to life behind me as Antonio’s men make room andway up the stairs. Wind whips at my hair, the strands that have fallen from my black shirt. My clip slapping against my cold cheeks. I squeeze my eldest sister’s hand. I kiss her once more before moving to hug Elisa and then Rosa. They cling to me longer than necessary, but I make no move to push them away.

Do you “Give em’ hell, kid,” Rosa whispers, winking at me as they move away, leaving me alone with my father.

get rid “La mia dolce, bambina,” Papá whispers, pulling me into his embrace, wrapping his arms around me. The scent of whisky and cigars hits me. I breathe him in, my eyes filling once more. “I will miss you very much.

“I’ll miss you more, Papá.”

“Not remotely possible,” he tells me earnestly, his voice dry with emotion. “Be good, and be cautious, bambina.”

xit their “Always.” I nod, stepping back and patting my thigh to show him my gun is stashed—the perks of flying private. He sighs, though a smile slips from his mouth.

it away “You’re going to be the death of me, child.”

ght now “Ti voglio bene, Papá,” I whisper, my voice cracking under the weight of my words. While my sisters and I can speak fluent Italian, we prefer to speak in English, unlike our father who often slips into his native tongue. He gives me one final hug.

ns until “I love you too, my sweet little girl,” he finally responds, his eyes gliding over me as he pulls away from me.

Taking a deep breath, I spin on my heel and walk the few steps toward the door.

stairs of the plane. Leonardo comes up beside me, his hand pressing i
nds and lower back when I turn to look at him. "You ready for this, Princess?"

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stairs of the plane. Leonardo comes up beside me, his hand pressing into my lower back when I turn to look at him. “You ready for this, Princess?”

CHAPTER FOUR

The flight to New York takes longer than it should, thanks to turbulence. So by the time the wheels drop, exhaustion hits me like a ton of bricks. I close the book in my lap, stifling a yawn when I reach for my bag and drop it inside.

The door opens, letting bright sunlight filter into the jet—a welcome change from the cold dark sky back home. Standing, I brush my hands on my thighs, tossing the bag over my shoulder before making my way to the door.

“Welcome to New York,” Antonio says while taking his leave down the stairs. I scan the runway, though there is little to see beyond a handful of black SUVs awaiting our arrival.

Taking the handrail, my steps are cautious as I make my way down the stairs; the tiredness in my bones makes me more unsteady on my feet than usual. Which is a difficult feat, considering I am already clumsy at the best of times.

Antonio gestures for me to follow him into the second car, his arm pressed against the open door. Forcing my feet to move quicker, I stumble out.

last step, but a long arm wraps around my waist, halting my fall. “No death doesn’t scare you, Princess. You’re a walking disaster.”

I snap my head up, my eyes locking on Leonardo’s as he stares down with an amused grin on his face. He keeps his arm around me, help down the last step. As we reach the ground, I let out a slow breath thanking him.

“What did I tell you about thanking me?”

“If saving me from breaking my face is not worthy of a thank you, help but wonder what you consider is.”

“I guess we’ll find out at some point, won’t we?” he ponders aloud, silence, me go and pushing me towards Antonio. The latter steps aside, letting me slide across the backseat before stepping in beside me. I rest my head on the leather, closing my eyes as the rumble of the engine lulls me to sleep.

“We’re here.” A hushed voice calls to me, shaking my shoulder to welcome me from my slumber. Rubbing a hand across my face, I peel my eyes open to find Nico staring at me from the open door. He offers me a hand, helping me out of the car before grabbing my bag from the boot.

“Thank you, Nico.”

“You’re very welcome, Mrs. Bianchi.”

“Wow.” A laugh falls from my lips at the use of my new name. I’ve never heard it in reference to myself and it sounds so odd. I’ll take some getting used to, I’m sure. But the same thing as the ma’am thing. I’m not an old married lady. Just call me, Pippa.”

Nico smiles at me, nodding politely as he hands me my bag. Once he slides back into his seat and starts the engine before he pulls away, heading for the wrought iron gates of Antonio’s estate. I watch as the

wonderdrives out of sight, deep longing within me that I can't drive away
Instead, I'm stuck here.

n at me A large black mansion stands before me, beckoning me to enter. F
ing methe sleep from my eyes, I lift my bag and follow the pathway towa
. before new home. Anxious energy spreads through me, my body a tremblin
of nerves when I take the concrete steps and stop in front of the black
There's a knocker in the centre, shaped like a snake, and a bell to the left.
I can't I hesitate for a long moment, unsure as to whether I'm supposed to
or not, but the decision is taken out of my hands when the door swings
, letting "Hello, dear." I almost fall backwards as a woman steps out of the n
ing me and moves towards me. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

against "That's okay," I tell her, grabbing onto a tall pillar beside me, wh
ep. My other hand is pressed against my chest, trying to settle my racing hea
pull me frayed nerves just got the best of me, I think."

n to see "Understandable, you've had some big changes as of late, I imagin
me out comments with a small smile. Her voice is kind, her smile even kind
has greying hair, cut into a sleek bob, and wrinkles that spread across
face. Her outfit is simple, a pair of dark grey trousers paired with
white shirt and a cream cardigan.

It is the "I'm Margo, and you must be Mrs. Bianchi."

l. "That "Call me Pippa, please," I groan, lifting my hand and offering it
: whole When she takes it, she places her other hand on top, patting me w
fingers a couple of times before stepping away. The gesture is
e again, something my father would do; I'm instantly taken to her. She turns, v
: away, back through the open door, gesturing for me to follow.

ie SUV The foyer is dark and cold as I enter. A wooden table to my left h
bowl of keys, and a shoe rack to my right lays empty alongside a co

with it. There is a sprawling wooden staircase dead centre, taking you to the floor.

“Shall we get a cup of tea and then I can take you on a tour?” Margie leads me the way into a spacious kitchen. “Your father had bags of Yorkshire tea shipped over for you.”

A chuckle falls from my lips, my heart warming at the gesture. I am extremely fussy when it comes to his tea-drinking habits. If it is not Yorkshire, he will not drink it. Moisture gathers in my eyes as the door opens. Home hits me, and I have to take a steadying breath. While it may only have been several hours since I left the familiarity of London behind, it feels like a lifetime has passed.

“My



“This is the main area of the house,” she tells me, ignoring my scowl. She leads me into a large living room first, the space filled with an expanse of sunlight that doubt ever gets used, based on how fresh it all looks. Two large black sofas sit opposite one another, creating a square of sorts, and a rectangular glass coffee table sits in the centre, adorned with a bowl of potpourri and a tall candle. Two armchairs fill in the gaps between the sofas, also black. A host of cushions in mixed shades of grey and white decorate the seats. “This is the main area of the house,” she tells me, ignoring my scowl. “The use of the word house. There is nothing homely about this place. “The men you can probably tell, most of the men stick to their own areas.”

“The men?”

“A handful of Antonio’s soldiers live here also, did he not tell you that?”

second “No,” I answer with a shake of my head, my nose wrinkling. “I
very little Antonio has told me about anything. I’m surprised he even
go leadshis name, honestly.”

ire Tea “He’s a man of few words, that one,” she says with a short chuckle
guiding me out of the lounge and through another set of double doors
Papá is farther down. My mouth opens in a silent gasp, thoughts of whoever el
is notlive in this mansion long gone when I take in the expanse of book
minderlining the walls.

ay have A bay window sits opposite the door, where a large navy-blue l
it feelstakes real estate. There are a couple of blankets and cushions on th
making it the perfect spot to grab one of the thousands of books on
and tuck myself away for a day of reading.

“This is amazing.” My voice comes out in a hushed whisper while I
every detail of the room. A large crystal chandelier lights the room in
golden hue, and there’s a tea and coffee station set up in one corner
ie leadsroom could have been designed for me, and I’m going to pretend it wa
eating I live in here?”

corner Margo laughs before turning with a wide smile on her face. “This
angularhome now, Pippa. You are free to visit the library whenever you wish.

i and a “I’m not sure I will ever want to leave.”

k, and a “Then why don’t I show you to your bedroom,” she says, motionin
door. “You can have a shower, change out of your travel clothes, and
if at thewill get you a pot of tea together and some sandwiches, so you can
ugh, aswith a book down here.”

“Margo, I think I might love you.”

She says nothing more, just chuckles lightly to herself as we walk
hat?” long hallway and into another wing of the mansion. Here, there are

There is a handful of doors, and she takes me to the one at the end. The bed is told me large, light, and very basic. Not at all what I was expecting after the rooms I've seen.

Before The only furniture in here is a king-sized bed with plain grey sheets; a little oak nightstands with a small lamp on each, and a vanity that sits opposite maybe with a fancy mirror with lights surrounding it.

Shelves Margo must see the confusion on my face, as she tells me, "I was how you would want your room decorated. Since this is your home, it only makes sense for you to have a say in it. So you have the basics for the seat, until you decide to do some shopping and make it your own."

Display She shows me the en suite next. The bathroom is large, painted in white and creams which give it an overly clean feel. There's a large clawfoot bathtub in the center and a walk-in shower on the far wall. More than enough space for a soft The counter is porcelain, and a sparkling silver sink sits in the middle. This cabinet is stocked with the basics, though I make a note to ask about a list. "Can't trip to the local supermarket when I speak to Antonio so I can buy my preferred products.

is your The next door in my bedroom leads into a walk-in closet that is larger than my bedroom back at home. The rails are filled to the brim with clothes my size and all with the tags still attached, and there are two huge shelves stacked with shoes of differing varieties, ranging from running trainers to the highest heels I've seen.

curl up Having grown up with money, I am not unused to a more extravagant lifestyle, but this is far beyond anything I have ever experienced in my life.

We grew up in a modest five-bed house with only two floors and no elevator. Papá doesn't like to flash his wealth, though it seems Antonio and I have no such qualms.

room is The only thing similar is the staff, though I am sure our house
uple ofnanny, and home tutor pale in comparison to the sheer amount the
work in the shadows of the mansion. My father is very particular with
ets, twohe allows into our family home. So he keeps his staff to a minimum.

site the I doubt that is a remote possibility in a residence of this size.

“I’ll let you get settled, and I’ll have a pot of tea in the library in an
n’t sure “Thank you, Margo,” I tell her sincerely with a smile, following her
now, itthe closet and back into the bedroom. “That would be wonderful.”

or now, “Any time, Pippa,” she replies, patting my shoulder before leaving
peace.

n white A little while later, showered and dressed in leggings and an ov
h in thegrey hoody, I find my way back to the library. My finger trails o
for me.spines of the books lining the walls until I come to a stop at a shelf o
lle. Thethat do not seem to fit the mould in here. Most books I have passed by
car andare classics: the likes of Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, and Jane Eyre
ny ownshelf, however, looks as though it could have been handpicked fr
personal collection at home.

ger than Dark romances fill the shelf, some I’ve read, others I have not y
hes, allbrow furrows slightly at that. Did someone speak to my sisters? My
shelvesWere these books brought here for me, or does somebody else
s to themansion have a penchant for psychotic book boyfriends and
relationships in their novels?

avagant I grab a favourite, a story about a girl falling in love with her stalke
ny life.the book tucked into my chest, I slide down onto the love seat and pul
wings.pink blanket over my curled-up legs. Margo kept her word, and there
is menof perfectly brewed tea sitting on a small foldaway table. There’s a

keeper, cosy on the top in the shape of a pumpkin, a seasonal décor choice, I must assume since September creeps to a close and October looms.

whom Halloween is not usually a big holiday in England, though from what I gather, Americans seem rather fond of the spooky season. Personally, I would rather lock myself away with a spooky romance book than be out there dead wearing a costume and parading around as anybody but myself.

The small lamp beside me casts a golden glow over the pages as it lulls me into another world. There's a collection of candles burning in a scent similar to pumpkin, which sit on the fireplace built into the center of one of the shelves, and for the next couple of hours, I lose myself in the oversized comfort of my book.

"I see you've made yourself at home already," a deep voice rings from the book coming out of nowhere. Startled, I jolt upwards. Tea spills over the saucer of my so-farmy mug and onto the page I'm reading.

"Shit," I hiss, placing the mug down and shaking the book off—though it's of no use. The liquid has seeped through the pages, causing ink to bleed and several words to become a jumbled mess as the pages start to stain. "My No."

father? "It's just a book, Princess."

"Just a book," I mutter under my breath, my gaze lifting and narrowing on Leonardo. "It is not just a book."

"It looks like just a book." He shrugs, his face the picture of innocence. He smiles down at me.

I take a deep breath, willing myself to not throttle him with this book. He lets out a low chuckle.

"Anyway, dinner is ready. I was sent to hunt you down."

He repeats himself, staring at me like I've lost my mind when

I would respond.

Maybe I have.

Or maybe I have read one too many stalker romances of late. Finally, dinner was not the first thought that flashed into my head at his caught words. Though, I don't want to admit what the image of him hunting down looks like. Heat travels through me, my cheeks flushing under the scrutiny.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," I reply far too quickly to be truthful—and if his answering comes in this anything to go by, he recognises that too. He watches me as I place the book in front of the window, hoping the early-evening sun shining through the blinds might help dry the pages before any more damage is inflicted. My mouth opens on a yawn when I stand, the nap in the car earlier a little to ease the tiredness in me. Folding the blanket, I drape it over the loveseat and pick up the teapot and mug.

"You realise there are staff who will clean up after you, right?"

"Fuck. I figured, a place of this magnitude," I retort as Leonardo guides me the hallway towards the dining room. "However, I have always cleaned after myself and I'm not going to stop doing that now."

"You didn't have staff growing up?"

"Yeah, we did, but Papá is a bit paranoid, I guess. He doesn't like people in the house. So he kept it to a bare minimum."

"That's surprising," he tells me, his eyes locking on mine. I notice something odd in his expression that I cannot place as he towers over me. "Your father doesn't strike me as a paranoid man."

Shrugging, I push open the door to the kitchen, dropping the pot and I don't onto the counter before turning and leaning my back against it. "On

his children.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” he ponders, resting his elbows because counter next to me and keeping his eyes on my face. “It can’t have been because of raising four girls alone. Your mom disappeared, right?”

ing me “How do you know that?”

der his “People talk. It was a big deal around here from what I hear.”

“Of course, they do.” Sighing, I twist my hands together. “I guess she disappeared. Just up and left one night, apparently. I was about a month old. But Papá did all right, with the help of Bea, our nanny, and Grace White, our tutor.”

through “You never went to school?”

d. Shaking my head, I look at him, my eyes locking on his. He keeps his expression blank, listening intently as I talk. He doesn’t seem surprised by anything I say, but I guess he already knew it all, given the gossip.

“Nope,” I tell him, popping the P, before pushing off the counter.

“Paranoid father, remember. Now, didn’t you say something about dinner?”
“I did.” He follows me out the room, his hand on my lower back. He guides me through the hallways until we come to a set of double doors. His skin tingles under his touch, his palm warming me through the material of my jumper. I need to get a hold of myself where this man is concerned.

a lot of A single touch and my body acts as though it has been starved of it for years.

There’s He pushes the door open, motioning for me to pass him. There’s a mahogany table set up for at least eight people. Antonio sits at the head of the table, head down while he stares at his phone.

nd mug “Good evening.” His only response is a small nod, never taking his eyes off his screen. I guess we’re back to ignoring the wife tonight, then. I t

seat next to him while Leonardo drops down beside me. A couple more men rush into the room over the next ten minutes until the table is full. A handful of dishes are spread across the table.

The men talk over one another, each more eager than the other to tell their tales of the afternoon. I'm only half-listening as I pick at my potatoes and roast chicken. Whoever the chef is has done a wonderful job, and, yeah, assuming it is not any of the men devouring the food laid out before us. The topic turns to Alexei and his men, and my ears perk up as they talk about the events of the wedding. Before I can stop myself, a question slips through my mind since last night slips out, "Why did they let me go so easily?"

The men stop their chatter, all turning to stare at me with confused expressions. I'm not sure if it's because of the question I asked, because I dared to interrupt their conversation. Perhaps this is what my father always talks about when he tells me I should mind when I talk—"they aren't enough to stop me from continuing."

"They wanted me, right?" I ponder aloud, my eyes moving over the men. They each hold my gaze, nodding lightly at my question. "Something doesn't make sense that they would have just let me walk out of there."

Some men murmur, agreeing with my sentiments. Antonio is thoughtful as he ponders my question, while Leonardo just wears a mask on his face.

"It was a warning," the latter responds, his voice bored as he wears a dead expression on his face. "They wanted to show they could get in. They could breach our security. But they had no intention of taking you last night." "How do you know?"

"It's simple warfare," he tells us, his brow raising slightly when he looks

ore menAntonio. They hold each other's gaze for a moment, a silent conv
, and a passing between the two. "I would have done the same thing."

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Antonio. They hold each other's gaze for a moment, a silent conversation passing between the two. "I would have done the same thing."

CHAPTER FIVE

Waking up alone in a new place is disorientating; I take several moments to remember where I am, and why I am here. The white-gold ring on my finger feels like a dead weight, dragging me into depths of despair. It has barely been twenty-four hours since I left my family, and my life behind in England—and yet I miss them already.

My eyes roam over the bare room, and I let out a heavy sigh. I hope today will be a good day to make this place feel like home. A few more pieces of fresh bedding and décor, then maybe I can make this my little sanctuary in a world I don't belong in.

With a fresh resolve, I slide out of bed and make my way into the bathroom. The shower does wonders for my pessimistic mood, clearing the brain fog left over from yesterday.

Dressed in a pair of black ripped jeans and a grey knitted sweater, I make my way down the many stairs towards the kitchen. It is a bustle of activity when I find the room, and I cannot help but smile at the woman bouncing around the floor to Lady Gaga with a wooden spoon in her hand.

“Is this a solo dance party,” I call out, laughing as she jumps in before spinning on her heels and turning to face me with wide eyes. “Can anyone join?”

“Fuck. Shit. Sorry, you scared me.” While she takes a second to catch herself, I look her over. Her light blonde hair is fastened in a low bun with a thick black headband to hold the strands from falling into her face. There is not an ounce of make-up on her face, and that makes me feel better than I was after only swiping a little mascara on my eyelashes this morning to make myself look more alive.

Her outfit is simple, consisting of black leggings and a plain black apron. I suppose, though, I suppose when wearing an apron that covers most of your body, it doesn't matter what you wear underneath.

“Mrs. Bianchi, I'm guessing?” she says, her breath back to normal. She twists a knob on the speakers, bringing the volume of her music to a low hush.

“Please, call me Pippa. And I am sorry for giving you a fright.”

She shakes her head, laughing lightly to herself before offering me a seat at the counter. “No, it's my fault. I should know better than to prance around like a loon in this place. There's always someone lurking around the corner. Though I must admit, you're far friendlier than my usual visitors here. They're all scowls and minimal words usually.”

“I can see that. They are not the most welcoming bunch of people, are they?”

“Not really.” She shrugs, her mouth downturned into a slight grimace. “But you get used to them after a while.”

“Have you been here for long?”

“Three years,” she tells me with a small smile before moving over

1 frightkettle in the corner of the room. “My mom worked here before me, and
‘Or canshe got another job offer, I jumped at the chance. I grew up in this
running around these halls, and I love cooking and baking, so I figured
omposenot. Plus, the pay is pretty good too, so it was an easy decision. Th
i with adon’t think I should really be talking about my pay with my new emp
[here is should I? Tea?”

r about “Yes, a tea would be great, thank you.” I smile gratefully.

myself “I’m Felicity, by the way,” she tells me, shaking my hand quickly
turning away to make my drink.

k shirt; “Well, Felicity, it is nice to meet you and I am not really your employe
body, itI don’t think you need to worry too much about talking about money
me. I’d be a terrible boss, truth be told, and my accountancy skills were
al. Sheeven worse.”

o a low She chuckles, sliding a cup of tea over to me while she drops down
seat opposite. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

Over the next hour, we chatter incessantly, and I am pleased to learn
a seat athave a lot in common. Perhaps I will not be so lonely in New York,
aroundnot in this mansion.

l every

r down



ple, are

My knuckles rap on the wooden door a few times, but no answer comes
rimace. the other side. Looking up and down the hallway, I am almost confident
is the room Margo said is Antonio’s office; though as the silence draws
I’m thinking he’s not in there.

r to the

d when Twisting around, I start towards the main foyer of the mansion in se
s place, anybody that can tell me where to find my husband, or at least give me
ed whyas to whether I can leave for the day.

ough, I With Papá being so paranoid about my safety, it's become second n
mployer, ask permission to go out for the day. When I turned eighteen, I pr
should have fought him more on it, but it never seemed worth it.

I find myself back in the kitchen, but it's empty, and Margo is now
before be found either. The whole mansion is quiet. Far quieter than I am u
and I hate it. There are no sounds of my sisters chattering from the
oyer, so when they popped in to visit—which was almost daily—or my father
ey withon his phone in his office, or even the patter of our housekeeper, M
ould be running around the floors, talking to herself while she got her dail
done.

into the It is just me, alone, strolling in the cold and quiet.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I wander the halls aimlessly, ho
arn we find anyone on my exploration. The décor is lavish and dark. If it is no
at least of wood, like the tables that sit in every hall with candle holders on the
black and ominous.

While I enjoy black as much as the next person, there is somethir
about the black candles and chandeliers, and the black flowers across
every surface. It is hardly a welcoming sight, but perhaps in the
welcoming is the last thing you want your home to be.

es from “Pippa.” My hand halts on the portrait I was examining, ar
ent this gentleman who looks familiar, but I can't place why. I turn to face
ags out, pulling my hand away. “I wondered where you'd gotten to.”

“Sorry, I was trying to find Antonio but came up empty so I kind
wandered around exploring,” I tell her with a shrug, but then at a thou

arch of mouth turns down. “That is allowed, right?”

e a clue “Why wouldn’t it be?” She laughs lightly, stepping towards me. “
your home now.”

ature to “It doesn’t really feel like it,” I murmur, my voice laced with sorrow

robably “It will, over time. It’s all still so new to you, have some patience, d

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I smile at her, though the sadness
here to disappear. Stepping away from the portrait, I start down the hall. Mar
ised to, into step beside me, our shoes slapping against the hardwood as we m
lounge way towards the foyer. “You wouldn’t happen to know where Antoi
talking actually, would you?”

eredith, “He’s probably out. But I know Leo is home. If you need somethir
y task your best bet.”

Of course he is—the one man I need to avoid.

“Come on, I’ll take you to his office,” she continues when I
ping to respond. “He’s on the second floor of your wing, so at least he isn’t fa
ot made ever need him whenever Ant isn’t around.”

em, it is “You call them Ant and Leo,” I comment, a little curious about th
housekeeper at home, no matter how friendly we were with her, woul
ig eerie have dreamed of calling my father by his name, let alone a shortened
almost of it.

Mafia, “I’ve known them for most of their lives, we’re pretty informal
here as you’ll soon come to learn. I’m guessing things weren’t like th
1 older home?”

Margo, “No. Informal is the last thing a person would ever call my father
comes to his employees. His daughters, though, well that is quite a d
of just story,” I answer, smiling fondly at thoughts of my father and my sister
ight my “I can imagine.” She nods, tilting her head at me. “You miss them.”

“Greatly.”

“This is” “Well, this might not be home yet, and we might not be your family,” she says, a sad smile on her face. “But I hope you’ll learn to love it here and find some solace in your new life.”

“I hum, though I don’t offer her anything more.

“Anyway, here we are,” she tells me, tapping her knuckles on the table to my left. She pats my shoulder lightly before walking away with a look that makes me hesitate a moment, thinking about following her and escaping to the library, but the door flings open before I can get my feet to move.

“Princess,” Leonardo murmurs, that deep voice of his sending a shiver through my body. I chance a look at his face, instantly regretting my decision when I take in the wide smile spread at his lips. He’s already too handsome, but when he smiles, the world could set alight around me, and I would not notice for losing myself in him.

“I want to go out,” I blurt before I can think better of it. A low chuckle falls from his full mouth, while his eyes glitter in amusement. “Come on, princess. Our shopping. I want to go shopping. Please.”

My cheeks burn under his scrutiny, my eyes dropping closed for a moment while I pull in a steadying breath. Normally, I have no issues with speaking concisely, but today, he’s turning me into a bumbling idiot.

“Shopping,” he repeats, his voice laced with humour. He hums, his head tilting back as he watches me. “And you’re here, because?”

“I’m asking for your permission, since you seem to be the only person here who can give it to me.”

“I didn’t realise you needed permission to leave.” He laughs, stepping back from the door and guiding me down the hallway with his hand on my shoulder. My body trembles under his touch, but I don’t step away.

“Do I not?” I ask, craning my neck so I can look at him. He shakily,” shehead, his eyes landing on my lips when my tongue slips out to moisten my dry skin. “It’s one of the few rules Papá ever gave us.”

“Well, that isn’t necessary here,” he tells me, continuing down the hallway. “You’re not a prisoner in these walls, Princess. You’re free to come and go through the door to much as you please.”

I wave. “I was hardly a prisoner at home either.”

“Are you sure about that?” he quips, his lips twitching as he stops down at me.

“Yes,” I snap, my spine straightening as frustration burns through me. I don’t want to hear his accusations. My father is a good man, he would never imprison his children. He just worries, and I understand that.

“At least, partially.”

I move away from him, waiting for him to continue walking. He chuckles still a moment longer, his eyes burning holes into the side of my face. Outside, he moves again continuing down the hallway.

We stop, and he pushes a door open to expose a wide garage. There are about fifteen cars here, though I have to admit I know little about what they may be. My only experience is the small green Mazda I drove home, and even then, my knowledge is limited to knowing how to drive. It is brown nothing more.

Headlights flicker when Leonardo presses on a fob in his hand. I don’t know here may not know much about cars, I know that the shiny black sports car he guides me to is exceptionally beautiful. My hand runs over the roof, the metal cooling under my touch as I make my way to the door.

“Wrong side, Princess.” He barks out a laugh, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the driver’s side. My eyes widen, my face blanching.

kes his intentions.

sten the “I can’t drive this. This car has to be worth more than my house.”

His brow furrows, his head tilting at me in confusion. “Who said anything about you driving? Nobody drives my car except for me.”

id go as “But this is—” He opens the door and pushes me down into the seat. I take a moment to gather my bearings, then another to realise the passenger seat. “Shit, I forgot you guys did things backwards over to stare “I’m pretty sure it’s the Brits that do things backwards, but you telling yourself that.”

ie at his Scoffing, I turn to face him as he settles in the driver’s seat. The sleeves of his black shirt are rolled to his elbow, revealing the expanse of tattoos on his forearm. There isn’t an inch of skin that isn’t inked in black and grey. My eyes settle on the snake travelling up his right arm. While I have no tattoos of my own, I would be lying if I said they didn’t interest me.

before The intricate designs and the way the ink lives in your skin forever is so intriguing. Also, there is the fact that they somehow make men a thousand times hotter . . . men like Leonardo anyway.

models “Buckle up, Princess.” He doesn’t give me a moment to comply. He backs up, just slams his foot on the accelerator and pulls out of the drive—The gates are open when we reach them, so we fly out of the estate onto the main road. My hands tighten around the leather seat, my knuckles turning white under the grip.

car he He reaches over me, his hand pulling the seat belt across my back and metalclipping it into place without ever taking his eyes off the road. I didn’t realise I hadn’t buckled in, too focused on him. When he pulls his arm away, I let out a slow breath, ignoring the way my body heats at how weird that move was.

“Where are we going?” I ask him, my eyes straying to where his fingers clench around the steering wheel. His hands are calloused, t
nything rough, and there’s a collection of thick rings on several of his
Including his ring finger. Before I can think better of it, I blurt out, “
leather married?”

I am in “Does that bother you?” he asks, a flicker at the corner of his mouth
here.” I flick my gaze to his face, though he doesn’t turn his eyes away fr
u keep window.

“No, of course not,” I rush out, the lie tasting bitter on my tongue
eves of having a wife is the least of my problems and not remotely my busin
s on his why does it turn my stomach at the thought?

ey. My “Well, you have nothing to worry about,” he reassures me, amuse
ttoo of his tone.

“I’m not worried,” I tell him, refusing to acknowledge the w
er—it’s shoulders sag in relief. Even if he isn’t married, I am, and that is some
ousand would do well to remember. “You didn’t answer my first question.”

“You wanted to go shopping, Princess.”

7 to his “Yes, but I just—”

garage. “No buts. You don’t know your way around, I just happen to be a
and get and chivalrous enough to offer my services for the day.”

nuckles “Is this one of the times where thanking you is appropriate?” I a
with a laugh, watching as his brow furrows when he turns his head an
dy and my gaze. My breath hitches when his lips turn up into a crooked sm
i’t even heart thumping against my chest.

1 away, “Fuck no,” he answers, slipping onto the highway. “When that time
dly hot you’ll know about it.”

is long
he skin
fingers.



'You're

Heavy shopping bags hang from my fingers, swinging back and forth
h when make my way down the busy street. I smile at a few people as I pass,
om the whom don't notice me.

Leonardo left the moment he dropped me off—business to attend
ie. Him something like that. I'm not complaining though. A few hours of peace,
ness, so I spend my papá's money to my heart's content?

Yes, please.

ment in I'm not sure he'll agree when he sees my credit card statement
needed all the trinkets and candles that called out to me from store windows
ay my As I keep moving, I am drawn to a jewellery store window, the gold
ething I silvers shimmering in the early afternoon sun.

Though it is not any of those that call my attention. A large black diamond
ring sits in the centre. It is out of place surrounded by the clear sparkling
diamonds, but the most beautiful in the collection. Before I can step
available the store to view the ring close-up, the hairs on the nape of my neck rise
a wave of awareness travels over me.

isk him Tightening my grip on my bags, I start down the street, my feet
d holds faster than before. My shoulders straighten as I walk, the feeling of someone
ile, my watching me weighing heavily on my mind.

It is not an unusual feeling; there have been many times, back in London
comes, when I have felt eyes on me, felt the pressure of someone behind me
never spoken to anyone about it, knowing Papá had secret guards following
me wherever I went, though he doesn't know I know that titbit.

I slip down a little side road to the left, rushing to the end before dumping my bags behind a large black bin. With my back against the wall, I sit with my hand behind me, breathing a sigh of relief when my fingers fold around the leather hilt tucked beneath my sweater.

While I doubt that out in New York City would be a bright idea. At least with my SIG Sauer there are no loud noises to alert pedestrians on the main street if this goes out of hand.

It is only a couple of minutes before heavy boots slap across the pavement moving towards me. My eyes land on thick, muscled denim-clad legs moving up past the broad shoulders covered with a black shirt and finally, his face.

He has cropped blond hair, the shade almost white, and his face is framed by high cheekbones and a strong jaw. Thin lips twitch at the side while he is a foot away from me, as though to smile, but not quite.

“Pippa Marchesi,” he says, using my maiden name as though it were an insult. Cocking a brow, I don’t respond as I continue watching him move cautiously. His smile widens when he moves towards me, his eyes landing onto where my jumper has slipped over one shoulder. “I’m going to help you with you.”

He steps closer, his hand landing on the wall next to my head. I keep my breath steady, my eyes locked on his stormy grey ones as he leans in, his face mere inches from mine. There’s mint on his breath and a heady scent coming from his large body.

“What do you think you are going to be doing with me?”

“Well.” There is an accent when he speaks, a foreign lilt I had not noticed a moment ago. Russian. “I’m supposed to be delivering you to the bus

roppinghe never said you needed to arrive in one piece. An error, I'm sure, I
lide myI'm going to make the most of. Just one bite, Pippa. It won't hurt much
und the My head falls back as a rumble of laughter slips from my mou
move is calculated, a perfect slip of my blank exterior. A single mom
pullingallows the man to bring his free hand up to cup my throat. It's a
y knife, course; you never know when your opponent is simply crazy enough
ngs getyour neck then and there.

But some risks are worth taking.

oncrete, Especially now that I know both his hands are weapon free.

before What is actually amusing though, is that he is yet to see the knife h
nd thenlimp at my side. I would have thought that men such as him had
awareness of their surroundings. The accent, paired with his words, tel
s sharp, is a part of the Bratva. The very group of men who have decided the
when heme. It seems foolish to not catalogue everything.

While I am not disappointed that they have sent an idiot to retriev
vere anhave to laugh at the sheer ignorance of him.

ing him "What is it with sending boys to do a man's job?" I ask him, cock
fallinghead to the side. His brow furrows, and he takes a slight step back
ave funsearching my gaze. Without giving him a moment, my hand surges fo
plunging the knife into his stomach. There's a slight resistance b
eep mybreaks through his skin, but I don't let myself hesitate for a mom
his facethrow my whole weight into it until the blade is embedded in his body.
of musk Just like my father taught me.

Though it's the first time I've ever done it on a real person, a
anticlimactic if I'm being honest.

noticed He winces in pain, yanking his hand away from me and stu
oss, butbackwards. A deep scowl spreads across his face, wide eyes focused

but onewhile he fumbles with his leather jacket.

1.” The black shirt he’s wearing dampens as blood seeps through the m
th. TheI spot the gun he’s reaching for, my eyes drawing on the black
ent thatApparently, he isn’t as concerned about others hearing the commotion.
risk, of The moment his hand lands on the black metal, my spine straighten
to snaproll my shoulders back. His hands tremble as he lifts the weapon, th
loss already taking its toll on his body. It’ll be a matter of minutes be
passes out, unable to call for help. At least if I die at his hands, I kn
taking him out with me.

anging His finger moves against the trigger, one second, then two, but be
l bettercan send a bullet into me, his head snaps backwards. He falls to the
l me hewith a loud thump, his eyes open and lifeless as I focus on the hole
y wantcentre of his head, blood staining the alley around him.

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umbling
l on me

while he fumbles with his leather jacket.

The black shirt he's wearing dampens as blood seeps through the material. I spot the gun he's reaching for, my eyes drawing on the black object. Apparently, he isn't as concerned about others hearing the commotion.

The moment his hand lands on the black metal, my spine straightens, and I roll my shoulders back. His hands tremble as he lifts the weapon, the blood loss already taking its toll on his body. It'll be a matter of minutes before he passes out, unable to call for help. At least if I die at his hands, I know I'm taking him out with me.

His finger moves against the trigger, one second, then two, but before he can send a bullet into me, his head snaps backwards. He falls to the ground with a loud thump, his eyes open and lifeless as I focus on the hole in the centre of his head, blood staining the alley around him.

CHAPTER SIX

“I had it handled.”

Leonardo snorts lightly when I snap at him, his eyes tracing me. His shoulders deflate slightly when he sees me unharmed, the change in his posture is minimal but my eyes follow the movement. He turns to find the dead man on the ground and then nudges the body with the toe of his leather boots.

“Hmm,” he murmurs, his eyes fixating on where my knife remains in the dead guy’s stomach. He reaches down, his hand folding over the hilt and he pulls it out. There’s a crimson coating on the blade, but he does not seem to care as he swipes it over the black material of his trousers before holding it out to me. “So, I see. How did you?”

“What?”

“How did you have it handled? A man of his size, sneaking up on a man of yours,” he ponders, muttering mostly to himself as he eyes the boot. His head tilts, his thumb swiping over his full bottom lip.

“He underestimated me. Most men do,” I tell him, snatching the knife back. The moment my hand wraps around the handle, my shoulders

relief. It's a little thing, but somebody else handling my weapons makes itchy.

"I'll try to remember not to make that mistake," he murmurs, watching me slip the knife back under my sweater and bend to pick up my shopping bags.

He shakes his head, letting out a sigh as I walk away. His long legs make it easy for him to catch up to me easily, falling into step as he grabs the bags from my hands, carrying them effortlessly in one of his. "We need to stop at Antonio's, then we can take your shopping home."

That makes sense, I suppose; though, all I want to do right now is get home to the mansion and soak in the large claw tub. Dealing with my husband is the last thing on my priority list.

"It will only take a short time, Princess," he tells me when we reach the car. He pulls the door open, pressing a hand against my back to guide me into the seat. My eyes widen, locking on his.

"Can you read my mind?"

"No." A deep chuckle follows his answer, the door closing and swishing behind the sound as he walks around the vehicle. He slides into the seat, as graceful as a cat despite his large body. Folding his fingers around the wheel, he looks at me, before speaking again. "Your body language changed when you mentioned Antonio."

"I didn't realise you were a body language expert," I mumble, wrinkling my nose as I turn my gaze to the window. He doesn't respond, just continues to drive with the radio until "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones filters through the speakers. The streets of New York fly past us as we barrel down the road.

In less than twenty minutes, we're rolling to a stop outside of a casino. Before I can unclip my belt, my door swings open as Leonardo leans out, his hand on the metal frame.

akes me He reaches into the car, just as I move for my belt. Our hands sending a spark of electricity searing through me as I press the clinging as Ifingers thread through mine, pulling me from my seat the moment bags. unbuckled. Stumbling over my feet, I grip his arm with my fingers haveignoring the way my fingers itch to travel over his skin at the contact. om my “Careful, Princess,” he murmurs, releasing my hand and moving his peak to lower back when I straighten. His thumb traces over my skin, pushing sweater up as he runs it along the waistband of my jeans. Goosebumps go backhis caress and I have to pull in a steadying breath—there is something band isthe way he’s always touching me, without a care in the world, that butterflies soaring in my stomach.

ach his We make our way inside and take a lift to the casino floor. Leonardo me intopalm remains firm on my back the whole time, his thumb continuing running over my flesh. A tremor racks my body when the pad slips from the denim, tracing the hem of my underwear. I steal a glance at him allowingbreath hitching as my eyes lock on his face.

graceful The stubble on his jaw is longer today, and his hair is mussed up as he pullshe’d rolled out of bed before coming back for me. His lips twitch, but when I darting to mine, but I snap my gaze forwards and focus on the room of the man at my side.

inkling My eyes take a moment to adjust to the flickering neon lights coming fiddlesthe machines lining the walls. Men and women dressed to the nines enough thearound the place, choosing between card tables and slot machines.

ad. A hint of tobacco permeates the air, laced with something bitter that no, andmy nose, though I can’t place the lingering scent. Incessant chatter over theexcitable cheers echo through the space as the patrons win.

Leonardo pays them no mind, keeping his head high and his steps

brush, Following his lead, I roll my shoulders back, and keep my gaze forward. Ignoring the stares as we pass.

ent I'm We stop at a door at the back of the room, tucked away from the main hall. Leonardo knocks once but doesn't wait for a response before pushing the door open and nudging me into the room.

s to my Antonio sits at a wooden desk in the centre, his feet resting on the edge of the table, crossed at the ankles. His suit jacket is splayed open and his tie loosened, hanging lax down his chest.

g about "My consigliere and my wife," he comments, putting his legs down and resting his palms flat on the desk. He watches us curiously as Leonardo pushes me towards one of the two chairs sitting opposite. I gingerly sit, twiddling my thumbs while I wait. "What can I do for you both?" Antonio asks. "Wifey stabbed someone today." Antonio's eyes sharpen at the words, his gaze snapping to mine. Biting my lip, I clench my hands, digging my fingers into the skin to stop myself from speaking.

"Is that so? Pippa, can I ask why?"

though I lift my head, a wry smile on my face when I focus on Antonio. I'm ashamed of the fact I defended myself—nor should I be. However, instead he watches me, his mouth downturned, has me wondering if I was supposed to let myself be taken by a strange man.

ing from A strange man who had no intentions to take me without *taking* me. I stroll. "I didn't particularly feel like being kidnapped today," I tell my husband, keeping my tone light and casual. "And I doubt me falling into the hands of your enemies is something you want either."

ter and Leonardo snorts from beside me and my gaze snaps to his face, a scowl on my lips. He only smiles at me, not remotely bothered by my disdain.

steady. "You are correct, Pippa. We wouldn't want that, would we?" /

rwards, deadpans, though I doubt he wants an answer as he turns to Leonardo continues speaking. Truthfully, he sounds displeased that I wasn't kidding chaos. "Did she kill him?"

ing the With his gaze locked on Leonardo, I sink into the chair, pulling myself up while the two talk. Leonardo seems to know everything that happened on that side street from the moment I stepped onto it, so my narrative is tie is needed. But that does cause questions to form in my mind. If he said that happened, why didn't he intervene straight away? How did he even find out and there, anyway?

Leonardo My mind whirls as I take in the room. Antonio seems to be a man who takes possessions when it comes to work. There is a laptop on his desk and stacks of papers beside it. A leather couch sits under the window behind him, and there is an empty bookshelf beside that. The only thing that looks like it's used regularly is a small bar cart situated beside his desk. The few bottles on it are half-empty and in dire need of a refill.

There is little in this room to tell me anything about the man I'm in contact with, which is par for the course. I doubt I will ever learn much about him, the way the fact he wants nothing to do with me.

supposed "Pippa," Antonio says loudly, pulling my attention back to him. His expression is narrow as he stares me down, and my shoulders tense under his scrutiny first. "What?" I ask, dropping my knees to the ground and straightening. My husband, "Since it seems you aren't safe alone, I'm going to have to put a few hands on you full time." He sighs, running his hand through his hair. "It isn't ideal, I really don't have anyone free to run around following you, but I can't help it. You know, on you being kidnapped, I suppose."

"Okay," I agree politely, not bothering to argue. It's not like I'm not used to Antonio having guards follow me in the background, so I can deal.

do and “Since I don’t have anyone on hand right now, Leonardo has napped.offered to be your babysitter until I can free someone up.”

My nose wrinkles, my hands twisting awkwardly in my lap. No y kneesdon’t think he’d be a good bodyguard but spending alone time with th ened incan’t be good for my sanity...or my health, considering my hear ve isn’twhenever I’m in his presence.

w what “I could just—” Antonio cuts me off with a wave of his hand.

find me “I have shit to do today,” he tells us, gesturing to the door. “Let catch up later.”

of few

d a few

ind him

is to be

ttles on “You’re telling me that the fine-as-fuck best man from your wedding your bodyguard?” Rolling my eyes at the laughter that follows my

married, questions, I pop my phone on speaker and drop back on my bed, n

besides landing on the ceiling. The moment we got back from the casino, I rus to my room and called her. Needing someone to vent to about the day.

lis eyes Hearing Rosa’s voice is bittersweet. There’s nothing like talking

ly. sister when your life is a mess, but the fact she’s over 3000 miles awa away some of the joy.

man on “Yep,” I tell her, popping the p, before sighing. “But why I

real, and babysitter? I don’t know. It’s not as if I can’t handle myself, is it?”

it’s have “P, I love you. But the dude was about to pull a gun on you. Ev can’t survive a bullet to the head. Unless you harness some magical

ot used we know nothing about?”



kindly “No magical powers,” I say with a huff. She’s right; I couldn’t survive a bullet. “But that’s beside the point, Rosa.”

“Well, what is the point? You’d rather be offered on a platter to the man who wants to take you? I’m not sure you’re thinking logically here.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just—” Pausing, I wrinkle my nose. I know I’m being childish, not wanting Leonardo to be my guard for the time being, but I can hardly say that to my sister. She wouldn’t judge me, that much I know, but this conversation cannot be had over the phone. “Nothing. I just don’t want to be being treated like a child. I learnt to shoot a gun at eleven; I’m not exactly a sitting duck just waiting to be taken out.”

She sighs down the receiver, a sad sort of sigh, but says nothing.

“What?” I ask, rolling onto my side and cuddling one of the cushions I bought earlier.

“I love you, P”—I close my eyes preparing for what comes next while I have never understood why Papá only decided to train you; that was something between the two of you, Papá and Pippa time.” She sheds up silent for a moment, no doubt reliving the countless arguments my sisters and our father had when it came to him training me.

For years, they were jealous of the time I spent with him. Jealousy takes fact that he never thought to train them. He never told us why, even today he says there is no reason, it is just the way it happened. I don’t need a him, nor do my sisters, but arguing the point after ten years of that answer seems futile now.

“But,” Rosa continues, “you became too independent, Pippa. You’re so confident in your own skills. Some might say cocky. And while it is a good thing that you can handle yourself, you’ve never had to.”

“That isn’t true,” I argue, though it’s weak.

’t have “Isn’t it? You’ve only ever gone against targets and boxing bags
don’t even know self-defence, Pippa, not beyond throwing a single
se men Yes you know how to handle a bunch of weapons, but what good do
do if you’re overpowered? How do you plan to fight off a 200-plus
ow I’m man if he has you cornered? You got lucky today, Pippa. Lucky that he
g, but I know you were armed, but you won’t always be so lucky. What if
I know, when the next guy comes and you can’t arm yourself in time? What
ist hate Pippa?”

actly a “I don’t know,” I answer honestly. The fact he was stupid
underestimated me is something I’ve thought about, and maybe the next
won’t be, but that doesn’t mean I’ll go willingly. “But—”

hions I “There are no but’s, Pippa. I hate Papá for making you believe you
need anybody. You continue going around on your own, half-cocked
—“and your weapons and you will get yourself killed.”

I know “Rosa, I won’t get myself killed,” I tell her, making a promise I can
he goes There’s no guarantee in this life, and death comes when it comes, no
ers and how much you may wish to fight against it.

“Just let them guard you.” She sighs again, her voice laced with
s of the “Please, Pippa. You can’t do everything alone, and you don’t have to
to this stepped into something that is way out of your skill range. Don’t be
believe okay?” Before I can respond, she rushes off. “Love you, sweet girl.”

e same “I love you too,” I reply, though the line goes dead before she can
words. Locking my phone, I burrow my head into the pillow, close
a. Too eyes. My room smells of vanilla and citrus, thanks to the new candle
mazing bought today. It’s a familiar smell, the same as my bedroom back home,
the usual comfort doesn’t come when I inhale deeply.

Rosa’s words swim through my head, berating me as I try to settle.

is. You stupid enough to believe the Bratva are not dangerous, but Papá has
punch.taught me to handle myself. I know how to fight. I know how to
does that necessary, but has he set me up for failure?

is-pound He always told me I do not need others to fight my battles, that I
e didn't trust others to have my back when push comes to shove . . . but is he w
happens Can I trust the men around me to have my best interests at heart?
at then, The answer is laughable, really.

Of course I cannot.

id and While I know little of Mafia life and what it means to be in the M
ext guy know they will only protect their own interests. For now, I might be l
that list, but that is not to say I will remain there forever.

do not I slide out of bed, moving into the closet to grab a pair of purp
ed with pyjamas. I strip quickly, slipping the nightwear on and sliding into a
fluffy slippers. It is only seven p.m. but the library is calling my name.
't keep. For the rest of the evening, I lose myself in fictional words. At
o matters somebody else's head I can pretend my life isn't a mess. Whatever
next, I will deal with tomorrow.

sorrow. Including the new temptation of a bodyguard, who I would rather
You've hovering over me than standing at my back.

stupid,



near the

ing my

ndles I The knock sounds at my bedroom door, far later than appropriate for a
me, but to be making a social call. I glance down at my pyjamas with a sigh
tossing the duvet to the side and sliding out of bed.

I'm not

always Another knock, louder this time, has me rushing across the cold hallway, if I wrap my hand around the shiny knob, twisting it before pulling the door coming face-to-face with Antonio.

cannot He stares at me blankly, devoid of emotion when I step aside and wrong? for him to come in. I was not even aware the man knew where my bedroom was, let alone had any plans to visit me inside of it.

I quickly look over the room, wincing when I spot my underwear earlier tossed on the chair. I have had no visitors in my room, not Mafia, Margo first showed me around, so I have had no reason to keep on high on making it tidy and put together.

I stand awkwardly by the door, toeing the floor while Antonio leans around. His eyes linger curiously on the few bits of décor I added a pair of afternoon after shopping. It is only a few candles and some throw pillows this space feels more like mine now.

least in More like home.

comes “Is everything okay?” I ask quickly, grimacing when he snaps his fingers mine. There is something different about him this evening—I cannot have what, but there’s something in his eyes and the hard set of his jaw that a violent chill passing over my body.

“I’ve been thinking about our marriage.”

“Okay?”

“We need to have a discussion around children,” he tells me, diving down on the edge of my bed. With his crisp black suit and leather shoes, Italian, no doubt—he looks out of place against the ruffled pale pillows before sheets, another addition from today. “I know I said we could wait before the topic came up. However, after today, I’m not sure waiting in my best interests.”

dwood. I highly doubt my best interests are of any consideration to him, he
oor and thinking about his best interests. That much is clear when he next spea

“My enemies seem to be closing in on you, and if you were to pass
motion giving me an heir, well that wouldn’t be a good thing, would it?”

edroom “I have no plans to pass any time soon, Antonio.” I chuckle dryly, to

brush away the knot forming in the pit of my stomach. We have on
ar from married for just over forty-eight hours and already the topic of child
it since weighing heavily on my new husband—all because he seems to think
top of die.

“Nobody ever plans to die, Pippa. But I need an heir, and as my wife
walks your duty to give me that.”

ed this “Now?”

ws, but “What better time than the present?” He stands, his fingers moving

button of his jacket. Antonio is an attractive man, and I can imagine
women would be happy to lie beside him, but all I am feeling in this r
gaze to is fear. “You’re not a virgin are you, wife?”

not say My only answer is a small shake of my head, my mouth too dry to
it sends any words in response. He slips his jacket off, laying it neatly on
armchair, before he moves onto unbuttoning his shirt.

“Can we not talk about this some more?” My voice comes out g
fear coating my words when his shirt joins the jacket. My heart rac
ropping cheeks burning in worry when he turns to face me once more. His
shoes—chest is lean, though defined with muscles. It is obvious that he takes
ink bed care of his body, but mine is not responding in the way I imagine it should
a while to my husband.

s in our There is not a single tingle of excitement, or flicker of heat. The only
I feel is dread. It spreads over me like cement, every muscle in my

is only locking when he fiddles with the buckle of his leather belt.

ks. “What is there to talk about? You are my wife, and I want a child.”

; before “Please, I do not want to do this,” I implore, pleading with my eyes stops.

ying to He tuts in response, pushing his trousers to the floor before he steps ly beneath them. Once again, he folds them neatly, placing them on the arm with ldren is of his clothes, until he stands in front of my bed in a pair of white k I will briefs.

He cocks his head to the side, eyeing my pyjamas with a smug smirk ife, it slips, which only makes my discomfort grow more. One step, then tv before I know it, he’s standing right in front of me, his tall frame to over mine.

g to the It feels like I’m frozen in time, watching through somebody else’s ie most when he reaches for my pyjama top. My body trembles, though he nomenon unbutton it like I expected, instead he traces his fingers over the mat my stomach. My throat bobs when I swallow over the lump that has to form there, my mouth dryer than the Sahara.

ver the “These pyjamas are lovely,” Antonio mutters, though I do not th words are meant for me. “Such a shame.”

ravelly, Before I can ask what he means, he fists the material, yanking it fr ces, my body. The silk rips, the sound bringing tears to my eyes as I realise tanned happening. *He is not going to stop.*

as good “Antonio, please.” My voice cracks when he pulls at my waistba ould behinds disappearing inside the material. He runs his calloused fingers c thighs, his eyes locking on mine. The blue is frostier than anything ly thing ever seen, the depths blank as he stares at me. There is no heat between y body

fire. This is nothing more than a business transaction to him, and nothing more than collateral damage.

that he “Enough talking.” His voice is hard as steel, cutting off conversation when he forces his lips down on mine, his tongue spearing out of my gaping mouth. I fight the urge to bite down, knowing it will not help the rest. He pushes me against the door, my back screaming as I slam against a boxerwood. My pyjama bottoms are pushed to my ankles, the material pooling on the floor. He steps into me, pushing my thighs apart with his knee while he continues to shove himself in my mouth.

He nips at my lips, biting the sensitive skin before sucking it into his lowering mouth. My chest heaves, tears spilling over my face as his hand cups my breast. He pulls his mouth away from mine, pressing hard kisses along my eyes, jaw and down my neck.

Long minutes pass, maybe even hours, as he continues his assault with his mouth and hand. My nipples are sore, aching when he sucks them into his formed mouth one at a time, pulling at them with his teeth.

Time means nothing when he moves his hand over my waist and circles his centre. Not when his fingers prod at my dry entrance or circle my clit. He grunts in displeasure when he finds no moisture, his eyes narrowing at me when he forces a finger inside. He thrusts inside, adding a second finger while he grinds his palm against my clit.

Closing my eyes, I try to find a world far away from here. A world where he doesn't wrap my leg around his waist. Where his penis is not pressing over my breast against me. Where he isn't pushing himself painfully inside me, tearing me apart with his length.

I do not know how long it's been, nor do I care. I let the darkness swallow me and take me away from my body while Antonio uses me, uses me

d I am for his own gain.

Rosa was right . . . and wrong.

further These people do not want to protect me, but I also cannot protect
ing into from them. It does not matter how well trained I am, or what weapons
elp me at my disposal—when it comes down to this, I cannot escape. I cannot
inst themy way out of it. I am trapped under the weight of the man I am supp
ling on call my husband. A man I am supposed to spend my life with.

hile he Antonio grunts, spilling his seed inside me before pulling out and
away. Tears continue to streak down my face while I tremble on wob
nto his and then slump against the wall. Everything aches. He dresses
ups my without uttering a word.

ong my Turning to face me, he watches blankly as he slips his arms thro
jacket. In less than a moment, he is back to being the Mafia boss. His s
with his looks fresh, clean, and put together. There is not a hair out of place
into his body, or a hint of what he just did.

What he took from me without my permission.

ups my When he walks back towards me, I steel myself, shuffling past the
clit. He he can get by and leave my room. The moment the door closes behi
on me my knees buckle and I fall to the floor.

before I have always considered myself a strong person, able to wi
anything the world throws at me—but right now, I've never felt more
l where All I want is my papá, my sisters, and a way back home.

ressing

ing me

wallow

ly body

for his own gain.

Rosa was right . . . and wrong.

These people do not want to protect me, but I also cannot protect myself from them. It does not matter how well trained I am, or what weapons I have at my disposal—when it comes down to this, I cannot escape. I cannot fight my way out of it. I am trapped under the weight of the man I am supposed to call my husband. A man I am supposed to spend my life with.

Antonio grunts, spilling his seed inside me before pulling out and turning away. Tears continue to streak down my face while I tremble on wobbly legs and then slump against the wall. Everything aches. He dresses quickly without uttering a word.

Turning to face me, he watches blankly as he slips his arms through his jacket. In less than a moment, he is back to being the Mafia boss. His suit still looks fresh, clean, and put together. There is not a hair out of place on his body, or a hint of what he just did.

What he took from me without my permission.

When he walks back towards me, I steel myself, shuffling past the door so he can get by and leave my room. The moment the door closes behind him, my knees buckle and I fall to the floor.

I have always considered myself a strong person, able to withstand anything the world throws at me—but right now, I've never felt more weak. All I want is my papá, my sisters, and a way back home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The days pass, slowly. September turns to October, and the world is spinning as the weeks drag on. Antonio visits me almost daily, stealing from me, but during the days, he is nowhere to be seen. Margo tries her hardest to pull me out of my “funk,” but nothing works.

I don't want to do anything other than hide in the library and drown my sorrows in words and wine. Drinking away your problems isn't the best I know; but being numb is the only way I can think of to survive this.

“It has been two weeks, Pippa,” Margo snaps, standing in the doorway with her hands pressed to her hips. Her eyes are narrowed into thin slits as she glares at me. She reminds me of my Papá in that moment, and my stomach aches at the thought. “I understand that you're homesick and miss your family. But you need to get up, go outside, go see New York. Go and live. You cannot hide away in this library, sinking into a deep depression. What would they want for you?”

If only it were just that.

I ignore her, the same as I do every day when she seeks me out. There are no words, nothing I could use to explain to her what's going on in my

can't tell her that her boss, a man she has known since he was only a child, is a man she adores as if he were her own son—sexually assaults me on a regular basis.

She wouldn't understand.

I'm not sure I do.

Is it sexual assault if the person you're fucking is your wife?

Am I overreacting?

Am I supposed to accept that this is my life and let him continue to sexually assault my body however he sees fit?

These questions run through my mind every time he seeks me out in my bedroom. My gun and knife lay under my pillow, but I can't bring myself to use them because is he in the wrong? Would I be the bad guy if I shot him?

A lone tear spills over my lashes, but I swipe it away before Maria notices. I pull in a shuddering breath, keeping my attention locked on the book in front of me. Her eyes are burning a hole in the side of my face, her frustration palpable while she watches me flip through the pages. I'm barely taking words in, but I can't look at her. She stands there for another long minute, then she huffs and storms away, leaving me in blissful silence.

The wine in my glass tastes bitter as I swallow it down. The fire crackles in the background, lighting the room in burnt orange and red flames, but I'm still cold. I wrap the blanket around myself, curling my legs into my body while the book I've been trying to read falls to the floor with a light thud.

Closing my eyes, I drop my head onto my knees, letting the tears fall. I know that I am alone again. The thing with sadness, it comes in waves and you never know when the next one will hit. A pit of despair looms con-

hild—athreatening to drag me under, and I have no way of stopping it. There
nightlyI can do but let it wash over me—consume me until I'm lost in a black

There is no escaping this life. No escaping the night and Antonio,
nightmares that always follow. I am trapped here. A lost little girl
nowhere to go.

When my tears finally dry, I lift my head and stare out the window.
The grounds are beautiful, truly. An array of flowers flourish in the central
use mylarge garden, thriving despite the cooling temperatures. A handful
Antonio's men wander the property, weapons attached at their waists
t in myguarding us.

Myself to There have been no more instances of Russian men finding me, they
stoppedhaven't left the mansion in over two weeks, so I suppose that is why

My gaze stalls on Leonardo stalking through the grass. Dressed in black jeans
and a black fitted t-shirt, his long body moves gracefully, the gun in his hand
at his side. He's so at ease, so comfortable in his surroundings. I have
never seen him since the day I was told he would be my bodyguard, and looking
at him now, I'm glad for that.

He turns his head slowly, his gaze landing on the window, as though
he can feel me watching him. I avert my eyes, quickly looking down so
he doesn't meet his eyes. There is something about him, something that pulls
me in while also telling me to run far away.

When I look back again, he is long gone, but for the rest of the night
the image of him refuses to leave my mind.

Felicity finds me in my bedroom later that evening, my hair still
damp from my shower and dressed in a loose-fitting nightgown and slippers,
and she takes one look at me before shaking her head in exasperation and
sighs, out a great sigh.

is little “I’ve got my work cut out with you, it seems,” she mumbles, ambli
ck hole.to the walk-in closet. My eyes remain glued on the spot she was stand
or themouth twisting downwards. This is the first time Felicity has ente
rl withbedroom, beyond standing in the doorway to hand me a tray of food
have hidden out in here for every mealtime.

w. The She wanders back into my room, her hands full of hangers with a se
e of theof gowns hanging from them. A mixture of reds and blacks stare back
dful ofall floor-length and far too formal for an evening at home. “What’
sides,on?”

“I’m here to be your fairy godmother and help you get ready for th
ough Ishe tells me, laying the dresses on my bed before moving over the
hy. My “Do you have any make-up in here?”

ans and “Not really.” I offer her a wry smile, pulling open the drawer that
nd limpmy mascara, lip gloss, and concealer. It’s not that I don’t like make-u
r’t seenmostly; I’m just not very good at doing it myself. “My sisters always
; at himmake-up if we were going anywhere, so I never needed much.”

Felicity blows out a frustrated breath, her head cocked to the side
ough hewatches me. She purses her lips, clicking her teeth. “Be right back.
I don’tseat, and don’t move.”

me in, Without another word, she stalks out of my room, leaving m
confused than when she first arrived. My eyes stray to the clock, not
lay, thehour. It’s almost eight p.m.; I can’t even fathom what Felicity cou
with me at this time on a Saturday evening.

I damp “You were supposed to sit down,” she grumbles at me in a whir
shorts.when she makes her way back over to me. This time, her hands are
l lettingvanity bags and hair tools of all kinds. “Now, let’s get you sorted.”

She places the items on the vanity and pushes at my shoulders, guid

ng over onto the stool opposite the mirror. I move to face her, but she shakes h
ing, my and nudges me back to stare at my reflection. “Er, Felicity. What’
red myon?”

since I “The charity event.” She stares at me expectantly, as if those three
will answer all my questions. My only response is a wrinkled nose and
elections shrug. “It’s you and Antonio’s official coming out party, basically. Yo
k at me, go and parade around in front of the top dogs of New York City
s going showered in adoration and cheers while the men do under-the-table b
and pretend to be good members of society.”

e ball,” My eyes widen slightly at not only her words but how she speak
vanity. Very few people would speak so openly with such distaste about the

Her tone is cold and bitter to the ears. “You’re not a fan of them?”

houses “No, it’s not that.” She lets out a sigh, the sound wary and sad, bef
p, I do, shakes her head and smiles widely at me. “The men are good men, m
did my just don’t necessarily agree with everything they do and how they g
power.”

as she “I didn’t realise you were privy to inside information. I can’t say
Take anything about the work these men do.”

“Hang around long enough and you overhear many things you p
e more shouldn’t. Now, let me work some magic and get you ready.”

ing the An hour and a half later, and with lots of primping and priming,
ld need has worked her magic. I twist my body side to side, watching the v

crimson red gown she picked clings like a second skin. The mermaid
y tones skim my curves, accentuating an hourglass figure I didn’t even realis
full of With the high-halter neckline, it looks demure and classic. From th
though, the lack of material is daring and sensual.

ling me A perfect mixture of sophistication and fearlessness.

er head Something I desperately need right now.

s going My hair is twisted into a half up-do, that runs to the middle of my
loose waves with a few strands spilling over to frame my face. The n
e words is simple, with minimal face product, and only a light dusting of bla
l a light around my eyes and a muted red lip.

u get to “Thank you, Felicity,” I tell her earnestly, offering a small smile
and begood.

usiness Strong.

Brave.

s them. Two things that I haven’t felt since that first night Antonio came i
Mafia.room. It’s not a miracle cure by any means, but for a moment, I do
like the world is caving in. I feel like me.

ore she

ostly. I

et their



I know The foyer is a bustle of energy when I make my way down the stairs
the wooden railing, keeping myself upright. The strappy black he
robably Felicity pulled out of the closet for me are a few inches too high
comfortable, and the lack of grace I have walking in them is embarrass
Felicity say the least.

vay the Men stand at the bottom, chattering amongst themselves. They
d shape dressed in black suits, black ties, and white shirts. The only stand-c
e I had. Antonio in a black shirt and Leonardo who skipped the jacket, settl
e back, black pants and a black shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, leav
tattooed arms on display.

My hands tremble when I reach the bottom where Antonio waits back in He doesn't smile, only reaches for my hand and wraps his palm around mine. This is the first time he's touched me, outside of our wedding and when he comes into my room in the night, and I hate it.

I fight the violent shiver that travels down my spine, steeling myself. I feel plastering a small smile on my face when he turns me to face his men. I recognise from that first dinner here, though if I was asked any names, I've got nothing.

None of the men make a move to talk to me or acknowledge my presence beyond a simple head nod. I smile politely at them before lowering myself to the ground. Antonio tightens his grip around my palm when I try to pull away, his long fingers digging into my hand to keep me in place.

"I have very important business to attend to tonight," he addresses his men in a hard and unwavering tone. "There are to be no surprises like at the wedding. You spot a Russian, you take them out without hesitation. Understood?"

While the men agree with a chorus of "Yes, Boss," I press my lips together to keep a grimace off my face. I get the whole sworn enemies thing to understand shooting first, but something just doesn't sit right with me about his order—though I don't know why.

Antonio continues to talk to his men, discussing security for the evening. I pay little attention. My eyes stray to the stairs, spotting Felicity at the top. She leans over the railing, a frown on her lips as she watches us. Spotting me, her lips twist into a small smile and she sends me a wink before turning her heel and rushing out of sight.

"Let's go." I snap my head up at the request, my gaze locking onto Antonio's frosty eyes. He stares down at me, annoyance etched

for me. features. It's only then I realise the others have left and we're alone
d mine. foyer. Straightening my spine, I push the fear slowly creeping up to th
when he of my mind. There is little I can do about these interactions with my h
but I won't show him my fear.

elf and Not now.

. A few He's already taken too much from me, he can't have that too.

of their I nod at him, tucking my black clutch under my arm and turning to f
door. He doesn't let go of my hand, just drags me along with him out :
resence bitter night. Several black SUVs are lined up outside, doors o
y gaze Antonio's men can step into them. He tugs me towards the second to l
to pull shoving me through the open door. I lose my footing, my head smacking
the leather with a grunt.

is men, A deep chuckle comes from the front passenger seat. "Graceful a
at the Princess."

situation. *Of course.*

Why wouldn't the man that Antonio has assigned as a glorified ba
ogether not be in the car with us? Breathing in slowly, I take my time to
, and ignoring the watchful eyes I can feel burning holes into the side of my
ne with Antonio slides in after me, slamming the door behind him. The c
away from the kerb as we navigate around the other cars before
ent, but through the open gate and slipping into the late evening traffic.
the top. The drive is suffocating. Silence fills the car; the only noise to be h
ing me, the rumble of the engine beneath us as we fly down the road. Anxious
ning on coils within me, my head aching and my hands becoming clammy as I
into the seat, keeping my distance from Antonio.

ing on After thirty painful minutes, we pull up to the same casino Leonar
in his brought me to that day after the alley. The day I stabbed a mar

in the everything else going on, I've barely spared a thought for the Russian
backseem to be after me—a silver lining, I suppose. If only it were enough
usband, make everything else brighter.

Leonardo steps out first, taking the lead, with Antonio following
Nico gives me a small smile when I thank him, nodding his head before
out; this time careful to not trip over the step on my way.

face the “Much better,” Leonardo murmurs, offering me his arm. I shake
into the taking measured steps until I'm standing beside Antonio. He looks
pen some for a moment, assessing me, though, for what, I don't know. He
ast one, mostly to himself, before gesturing for me to join him on the red car
ing into out before us.

Cameras flash from the sides, journalists and reporters calli
as ever, Antonio's name. I try to keep a smile on my face while avoiding look
them head on. I'm not sure what I expected of tonight, but this was
Though that's not saying much since I had no idea this was happening
by sitters two hours ago.

sit up, The lobby is bursting with life. Loud chatter and excitable laughter
face. through the room. Formal dresses in all colours adorn the females, and
ar pulls again, the men all look the same in their black suits and tuxedos. I wonder
rolling they need a new stylist because it must be tiresome to always look like
another.

heard is “What's the plan?” I blurt, looking between the two men at either
energy me. Leonardo's lips flicker, a ghost of a smile passing over them before
I shrink looks down at me. Even in these ridiculously high heels, I barely come
his shoulders.

Leonardo had “You and Ant get seen together for a second,” he answers, looking
1. With man in question with an expression I cannot read. “Then he dea

ans that business, and you busy yourself with spending all his money
ough to machines, down a few drinks, and then eventually it's time for home."

An ache spreads at my chest at the word home. I'm not even sure
behind one of those anymore, and the mansion certainly isn't that. Nodding,
e I step my gaze over the room, watching as waiters dip in and out from betw
guests, their hands full of trays with champagne and hors d'oeuvres. I
lim off, a glass, downing half the contents in one gulp.

lown at The bubbly liquid does little to settle the knot in my stomach, and I
e nods, will need something less sparkly if I plan to make it through this eve
pet laid one piece.

Antonio moves to the centre of the room, all eyes turning to him
ng outspeaks over the hushed voices of the waiting patrons.

oking at "Thank you all for coming." His voice carries over every inch, the
asn't it, soaking it up while he speaks to them. He reaches a hand behir
ng until grabbing my wrist and pulling me into his chest and letting his arm

around my back. My muscles tense under his hold, my heart thunderin
er echo holds me close. "For those of you that aren't aware, this is my wife, Pi

id once A flush coats my cheeks, my face burning in embarrassment
nder if everyone moves their gaze to me. Men look on curiously, while
like one women spear me with looks of envy and anger. One woman, a

standing off to the side, glares at me with nothing short of pure vicious
side of her expression.

efore he From a distance, she reminds me of Marilyn Monroe with her sh
ie up to length hair styled into big curls and a bright crimson red painted on h

She's beautiful, or would be, if her face wasn't scrunched up like a pug
g at the I lift my champagne glass, taking a sip before sending her a smal
ls with wave. Growing up with my sisters, if there is one thing I have learnt

on the handle—it's women. You don't get far in a household full of girls knowing how to hold your own and stand your ground.

I have Antonio turns back to me, watching me curiously for a moment, I flick loosening his hold and stalking off without a word or a backwards glance. Blowing out a breath, I relax my muscles and move my gaze over the dispersing crowd. Guess it's just me and Leonardo then.

Brilliant.

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handle—it's women. You don't get far in a household full of girls without knowing how to hold your own and stand your ground.

Antonio turns back to me, watching me curiously for a moment before loosening his hold and stalking off without a word or a backwards glance. Blowing out a breath, I relax my muscles and move my gaze over the dispersing crowd. Guess it's just me and Leonardo then.

Brilliant.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough, Princess?” Leonardo asks. I grab my fifth glass of champagne, or perhaps it’s the sixth, not sure, but it doesn’t matter. The only way I’m surviving in this moment is by staying numb, and the amber liquid I tip down my throat is one of a few ways to keep that numbness.

“Don’t you think you should be schmoozing?”

“Do I strike you as the type to schmooze?” he deadpans, his face blank except for a tiny flicker at the corner of his lips. *Not that I’m looking at his full lips.*

Turning back to the table, I watch the tiny white ball spin around the roulette wheel. I’m not much for gambling, but the excitement in the air as people win, or the grumbles in frustration when they lose, is oddly thrilling. There’s something about watching their expressions change or the way their language alter, depending on the outcome of their bets.

“Aren’t you bored?” I ask him, flicking my gaze to his. He watches me curiously, a slight tilt to his head. He raises a brow, a question on his face as he waits for me to elaborate. “Babysitting me. It cannot be the tiring experience you are used to in your line of work.”

He smiles then, wrapping a strand of my hair around his finger. “P
Though, maybe you’re more thrilling than you give yourself credit for.
Trouble seems to follow you around wherever you go.”

“I don’t think it’s me that finds trouble.” I scoff, shaking my head. My
life was awfully quiet and peaceful until the day of my wedding.”

He hums but says nothing further. He continues playing with my hair. I
know I should look away from his gaze, but I can’t. There’s something
magnetic about him, drawing me in and holding me there until he’s ready to
let go. A comfort too, in his eyes, a comfort I haven’t felt in a long while.

We stay like that for a long minute, our eyes locked together. Neither of us
s when speak, but his finger creeps from my hair to my jaw, stroking the skin there.
... I’m
ment is

A shrill voice comes from behind him, breaking the spell between us.
of very in a shuddering breath, closing my eyes for a second before pulling away
from his hand and turning to face the newcomer.

The same blonde from the lobby, the one with the face like a slapped
ink, bar wraps long manicured fingers around Leonardo’s bicep. She leans
os. pressing her obviously fake chest into his arm before speaking.

“Leo, darling,” she preens, her voice like nails on a chalkboard.
and the
ir when have you been? I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Charlotte.” He smiles at her before leaning in and pressing a chaste
ir body her cheek. An ache forms in my chest when she stares up at him with
her eyes, though that’s the alcohol—it has to be.

I refuse to accept any other explanation for the uneasy feeling.

Instead of watching the two of them, I turn back to the table and drink
face as champagne. The numbness has worn off, and I need it back before I
thrilling emotions take hold of me.

Perhaps. Hopping off my stool, I walk around them and move towards the bar for something stronger—much stronger. Leonardo's gaze follows me the way, burning me with his eyes, but he doesn't pause in his conversation. "Mythe busty blonde."

Not surprising, really.

Men and I Men only ever want one thing from a woman.

Nothing But even knowing that, that same uneasy feeling continues to eat at me ready to come.

He smiles. "Vodka, neat, please." The bartender offers me a small smile before rushing off to make good on my order. A gentleman beside me glances sensitively, hiding a small laugh behind the sound. I turn to him, cocking my head in question.

He stares back at me, a finger pressed to his crooked lips. His dark suit is pressed to perfection, but at least one size too big for his slender frame.

His hair is dark and peppered with greying streaks that fall just above his ears, eyebrows, and while I'm sure I have never seen this man before, something inside me recognises him instantly.

"Do I know you?" I blurt without thought, not considering social etiquette. "How?" He eyes me curiously, his gaze never straying from my face.

"No, I can say you do not."

"You're very familiar."

"Is that so?" He chuckles before offering a hand towards me. "I'm Alessandro."

"Pippa," I tell him, shaking his hand before grabbing my glass from the bartender with a smile of thanks. The clear liquid burns my throat, but the warmth of his hand in mine in the heat spreading across my chest.

"That's an awfully odd drink for a girl of your age," he comments before lifting his drink to his mouth.

bar for “Should I be drinking fruity cocktails and wine?”

whole He laughs openly, his head falling back as his eyes wrinkle with his
on with “Oh, I like you. Are you happy?”

My gaze snaps back to Alek, my nose wrinkling under his scrutiny
an odd question to ask a stranger. The answer is an easy one, I
something I’m particularly willing to get into with a man who looks
away at enough to be my father. Instead, I just nod and offer him a fake smile.

“Then what on earth has you drinking vodka over here alone? A before
girl such as yourself, you should be out having fun, no?”

coughs “I’m not sure that’s any of your business.”

a brow He holds his hands up, palms facing me in a show of innocence. “
no harm to you, Pippa. That I can assure you. But I see the ring on
your greyfinger and the frown on your face, and I have to wonder why you’re
here alone, instead of out dancing with your husband.”

over his “My husband hates me,” I blurt, lifting my shoulder in a shrug with
nothing cocks his head. “And I can’t say I have any love for him either. I
should be telling you any of this, or I might just find myself with a better
bottle. My head, though that might be preferable to the life I’m living.”

My eyes widen when I finish speaking. I hadn’t intended to say any
to this man. I don’t even know him. He watches me, his smile turning
as he takes in my words. I glare at the vodka in my hand, the glass
Alek.” mostly finished without me even realising, the sole reason for my loosening
from the “I can’t imagine anyone could hate you,” he murmurs, quirking his
eye and focusing on a point over my shoulder. “But if not your husband
who is the man currently staring over here with eyes like thunder?”

before I follow his stare, my shoulders tensing when I spot Leonardo. He
against the walls, his arms folded over his chest while he watches

Charlotte stands at his side, her hands moving a mile a minute while she smiles to engage him in conversation, but his attention isn't swayed from me.

Alek is right.

7. What There's a look in his eyes that sends a shiver tingling down my back, but not through, not in fear, as it probably should be. My breath comes out in gasps, and I quickly avert my eyes, shaking my head to regain composure. "I am." "He's my stand-in bodyguard at the moment," I tell Alek after finishing my beautiful drink. The bartender replaces it within an instant with a full glass.

wanted woman, apparently."

"It seems so." Alek offers nothing further when it comes to Leonardo. Instead, we spend the next hour talking about everything and nothing. In your own right, he's an easy man to talk to and he doesn't seem to want anything from me, besides innocent conversation.

He asks me about my life in England and tells me about his in America. When he tells me about his wife and his son, how they grew from poverty to wealth, I doubt I and how he wound up in Antonio's casino for the first time this night. He isn't a man of the Mafia, but a normal guy who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

of that He's nice. Genuine and kind.

g down Something I've missed greatly in my time here.

already Whether it's the need for friendship, or the lack of common sense, I don't know. But the smile on my face is real. Leonardo makes his way over to me and tells me it's time to go, is real. "It was nice to meet you, Alek," I tell him earnestly, patting his shoulder.

before standing on shaky legs. He offers me a crooked smile, his eyes crinkling with happiness. There's something more behind them, though, I can tell. "Maybe we'll meet again one day."

he tries “I am sure we will,” he says, patting me on the shoulder as my father
to back home. “It was really good to meet you, Pippa.”

With his goodbye, Leonardo pulls me away from the casino and
7 spine, waiting car. My smile stays the whole way home, and when I finally
ut as a into bed, I don't feel quite so shitty.

osure.

nishing

“I'm a



onardo. Light filters through the open curtains, the sun bathing my room in a
It turns hue. If it wasn't for the mariachi band playing in my head, the night
ig from would be lovely. I grab my pillow and smother a groan in the cotton.

The vodka from the previous night is wreaking havoc within me, a
rica. He sure something crawled into my mouth and died if the bitter taste
riches, tongue is anything to go by. I shouldn't have drank half as much as I
ght. He I don't regret it.

midst of Antonio chose to not come to my bedroom the night before, citing
business to attend to, and for that, I am eternally grateful. For on
waking up without a soreness between my legs and a light heart.

Just a headache and hangover from hell.

due to A knock comes at my door, followed by the slap of footsteps across
e when floor. I keep my eyes closed, the pillow laid over my face. Perhaps
l. pretend to be asleep, whoever it is will just leave me alone.

s bicep *Wishful thinking.*

s alight A hand tugs at the pillow, yanking it from my grip and tossing it across
1't read floor. With a huff, I brush my tangled hair from my face and open my
prepared to tell the intruder to piss off, when a hand clamps down on my

er used Leonardo towers over me, his face blank as he gazes at his hand o
mouth. My eyes widen when he leans down, peeling his fingers awa
l into ame one at a time. His thumb lingers an extra second, the pad brushin
y crawlmy bottom lip.

I resist the urge to pull it into my mouth, to taste it with my tongue.

To taste him.

Perhaps I'm still drunk.

That's the only reasonable explanation for why my clit throbs w
swipes that same thumb over his lips, tracing them like he had mine
goldenhis tongue slides out, swiping along the ridge, I close my eyes and p
orningshuddering breath.

Dangerous.

and I'm That's what he is.

on my Pure danger.

did; but "What do you want?" I groan, gathering the duvet and pulling it up
chin. With him standing here, dressed in black pants and a black fitted
he hadthat strains against his muscles, I feel exposed wearing only an ov
ce, I'mGuns N' Roses t-shirt as nightwear. He looks clean, crisp, and perfec
I'm rumpled and gross.

"You have thirty minutes to get ready," he tells me, glancing at th
oss myon my wall. He cocks his head slightly, eyes narrowing on the hands
ips if I slowly tick down. "Actually, make that twenty-five. Chop, chop."

He moves towards the door, not bothering with explanations. Th
closes with a loud click behind him, leaving me alone with only my he
into theand the urge to hit him. It's barely seven a.m. There is something :
mouth,wrong with having to be up and ready at this time on a Sunday mornin
ny lips. I stay in bed for ten more minutes, watching the time run down

ver myclock. When it hits 7:15, I pull in a deep breath and drag myself out
y fromThe claw bath calls to me when I walk into the bathroom, begging me
ng overmy tired muscles in a hot, steamy bubble bath. Instead, I flick the sho
and let out a wistful sigh.

The hot water does little to relieve the ache in my head, but by the ti
standing in my closet and fingering through the rails of clothes,
marginally more awake.

hen he I dress quickly in a pair of plain black leggings, a white vest top,
. Whenoversized grey hoodie I stole from an ex-boyfriend. The only good thi
ull in aout of that relationship.

Shoving my feet into chequered Vans, I run a quick swipe of masc
lip balm before shoving my damp hair into a messy bun. The look is
best, but it's as good as it will get on this miserable Sunday morning.

Leonardo waits in the foyer, watching me as I walk down th
o to mytowards him. His eyes run lazily over the length of me, taking me in
l t-shirtghost of a smile at his lips before his gaze locks on mine and his exp
ersizedfalls blank once more.

t, while “Are you going to tell me where we're going?” I ask when I reach h

He looks down at me for a moment before dropping his hand on my
e clockback and guiding me towards the garage. I fight the delicious shiver th
as theyover me, keeping my head forwards as we walk to the garage. It's onl

we're rolling out of the grounds and onto the road, I repeat my questio
ie door “Antonio has left the city for a little while,” he tells me without tak
adacheeyes off the long road before us. With the early hour, the streets are
so veryquiet while the sun beams down on the concrete. “I have to do some
g. his absence, and that means, as your babysitter, you get to come with r

on the “Fun,” I mumble, huffing as I watch the world fly by. He lets out

of bed.chuckle.

to soak The silence is peaceful as we drive, not at all suffocating like the
power on I've become used to lately. With him, it's comforting, though most
seem to be when he's around.

me I'm The first place we pull up to is a small store tucked away on a side
I feel The road is dead, and the only sign of life is a flickering light hanging
cracked brick wall. "Is this where you take me to kill me?"

and an "Do you really think if I wanted to kill you, I'd do it secretly?"
ng I got "I think I don't know you well enough to answer that question,"
when I step out of the car, pushing past where he holds the door open.

ara and His hand wraps around my wrist as I move around him, pulling me
sn't my his chest before he spins quickly, pressing my back against the cold r
the car and stepping into me until his chest is pressed to mine.

e stairs My breath comes out as a whisper, my eyes locking on his when h
with a forwards, pushing his hips into me. I press my palms against the door
pression my muscles locking when he leans down, his breath fanning m
"Maybe we should change that."

his side. "Change what?" I ask breathlessly, sliding my tongue over dry li
y lower eyes follow the movement, his pupils dilating as he watches me. M
at run has gone blank as the feel of him overwhelms every one of my senses.
y when "You knowing me well enough to answer the question."

n. "Right." I nod, though it's unconvincing. I've lost all sense of myself
ing his His mouth lifts into a slow smile, his eyes darkening for a beat be
e eerily steps back. The loss of him is instant, the cold kiss of the wind bitter
work in my burning cheeks. Though it seems I'm the only one affected by w
ne." happened, as he rolls his shoulders and moves towards the store door
a deep a single backwards glance. "Come on."

It takes me another moment to pull myself together. I swipe sweaty silence over my leggings, pulling in one steady breath after another until things composed enough to walk over to him without wanting to climb his tree and beg him to continue—beg him to show me what his hips could do if prompted.

“Whoa.” My eyes bug when I step into the store. Bookshelves line the wall, filled to the brim with thousands of titles. A collection of mismatched patterns and colours are dotted around the floor with pillows and blankets adorning them. It’s bare of customers, as though it hasn’t really begun for the store. I turn to Leonardo, my nose wrinkling in confusion. “You work in a bookstore?”

He shakes his head, his eyes glimmering with unspent humour. “No, we’re going to be stuck in the office all day today, you’ll be bored out of your mind. I figured the least I could do was buy you some books to keep you entertained while we’re there.”

“Really?” I ask eagerly, my voice almost childlike as I rub my face together in excitement.

“Yep,” he answers, leaning against the door with a nod. “Whatever you want, but you only have twenty minutes to pick, so best get to work.”

My face softens, tears filling my eyes before I launch myself at him and wrap my arms around his waist. The reaction is probably way too much for him. I can’t remember the last time someone did something so thoughtful for me. The last time someone *thought* of me.

“Thank you,” I whisper. His hands drop to my hips, squeezing lightly. Just a moment before he pushes me away and spins me so I’m facing the counter without the store.

“Not something to thank me for,” he mumbles, his eyes searching for

7 palms for a second before he pulls his phone out of his pocket and thumbs c
l I feel screen. "Go."

1 like a
d really

e every
of as of
1 throw
the day
ding in

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ny face

for a second before he pulls his phone out of his pocket and thumbs over the screen. “Go.”

CHAPTER NINE

With Antonio gone, the fear and anxiety I've been feeling for a few weeks settles into something more peaceful. The emotions are still there, brewing inside of me, but they aren't overwhelming anymore.

Leonardo and I fall into an easy routine of spending the days in the city. I read to myself with my books and him on the phone or laptop answering large amounts of emails and calls.

It's surprisingly domestic and not at all what I would have expected hanging out with the Mafia consigliere. I'd have thought there would be more drama, more fighting, more bloodshed—but no.

We've spent more time on the couch, watching films, than I thought possible, and with every word out of his mouth, the way he laughs at me becoming scared, or the way his fingers stroke my hair as he weaves his reassurances into my ears at the sad films, he draws me in closer.

My heart never stood a chance around him, and the more time I spend with him, the more I fall into his web, longing to experience life with him in a much different way. To experience the easy comfort. To experience

messy cooking or his rumpled hair after he takes a stressful phone call. I just experience him.

There's also the heat between us, so magnetic I can't look away. Lingering touches are more, his eyes are hungrier whenever I'm in his presence, he's always commanding my attention; and I give it to him.

Every. Time.

After everything with Antonio, the last thing I thought I would want was someone to be intimate with me, but with him, I know it wouldn't be like with my husband. It wouldn't be cold, callous and vicious. It would be warm, passionate, and powerful. He could take away all those bad memories, all those bad touches, and replace them with his own.

I try not to think too much about what happens when Antonio comes to my office; I know he's not a copious

We have crossed no lines, or broached any barriers, but I'm thinking about a case of if . . . but *when*.

For the first time since I moved to New York, I feel at ease—wired with

And the longer I'm around him, the more I long for him.

By Thursday, the smile on my face is genuine when I join Felicity in the kitchen for a morning cup of tea. She swipes her hands over her white apron, dusting the flour from her morning baking session away before peeling the apron off and hanging it over the back of the door.

"I don't know how you did it," she comments, passing me a steaming cup of tea before grabbing her own. "But I think I'm addicted to this now."

"I told you." I laugh, raising a brow as I blow gently on the steam. "It's not a liquid."

"Now, when are you going to take me up on my offer of a girls' night?" She stares at me pointedly, a brow raised. For the last few days, she has

call. Toit upon herself to convince me I need to get out of the mansion and g friends. Apparently, me moping around here with only Leonardo as cc ay. His isn't a good thing. "A few friends of mine are heading to Amnesia i in his and I have it under good authority that you are allowed out as long take a couple of bodyguards with you."

"You already spoke to Leonardo?" I ask, shaking my head in amus it is forthough it's hardly surprising, the more time I spend with Felicity, th e at all I'm seeing she'll always find a way to get what she wants.

ould be "Yes, and he said you're free as a bird. Sooo . . ." She stares at me e oments, I sigh dramatically, blowing into my mug before taking a large sip c isn't that I don't want to go out and have a good time, but the only s back. I've ever had have been my sisters, and I'm not sure how well my b it's not *me* translates to other people.

"Okay," I tell her, shrinking back in my seat when she squeals lou th him. throws her arms around me. I give her a tentative squeeze in return pulling away. A night on the town with a group of people I know little y in the. .what could possibly go wrong?

e apron, Later that day, my bed is a mess of strewn clothes and shoes I can't ig it off between. My hair is half done, with loose curls on one side of my h e the other a tangle of my natural waves. I blow out a breath, shov mug of strands out of my face as I stare at the mess.

his stuff The only information Felicity has given me about where we're g that it's an upscale nightclub and jeans and t-shirts are not an option— orching rules out my usual go-to outfit for the pub with my sisters.

A black dress catches my eyes, the material a tight leather. Rosa bou night?" the dress as a wedding gift, telling me that every Mafia wife needs is taken one leather outfit in their wardrobe. It's so far from anything I wou

o makewear or have ever worn. For once, I want to be daring, step out of my c
ompanyzone and let myself be someone else, just for one night.

tonight, Before I can talk myself out of it, I grab the hanger and place it on t
as youof the door before cleaning away the clothes and leaving only a har
shoes to pick from. I get to work finishing my hair, and when I'm h
sement,through my make-up—courtesy of Felicity dropping me bags of it off
ie more—the door opens with a creak and a loud hello.

Dressed in only a dressing gown and her hair tied up in pin curls,
agerly. help but look at Felicity questioningly as she moves into my closet.
of tea. It “You have better clothes than me,” she tells me when she comes ou
friendsred mini dress. “And since I doubt you'll ever even wear half of the
rand ofjust helping you out.”

“By borrowing my clothes?” I laugh when she shrugs, sending a
dly andgrin my way. Truthfully, I have no issues with her helping herself
beforewardrobe. She's not wrong with her assumption that I'll probably nev
e about.them all. There are only a few pieces I've brought from home, and
were already here and bought for me before I arrived in New York.

choose “Now, what is your drink of choice?”

ead and “What kind of night are we having here?” I ask her, turning back t
ing theswiping dark powder over my eyelids. “A casual girls' night?”

“Absolutely fucking not. If we aren't white-girl wasted by the end
going isnight and dancing on a table, then I don't want it.”

—which “Felicity, I think you just became my new best friend,” I tell her,
widely at her through the mirror. “Vodka.”

ight me “A girl after my own heart. Pippa, I think we're going to have a b
at leastfriendship. I'm going to browse the kitchen and see what fancy shit
ld evergot. Be right back.”

comfort



he back

idful of

halfway “Welcome to Amnesia,” Felicity says, pushing past a velvet rope barrier

earlier pulling me onto a balcony that overlooks the nightclub. My two guards

the evening—Gio and Luca—remain stoic behind us. They haven’t uttered

I can’t single word since we met them at the mansion, nothing to tell me what

are or why I should feel safe in their presence.

with a That hardly matters, I suppose, since I have no doubts that Leonardo

am, I’m be snooping around a corner watching anyway. With that thought, I

safe.

cheeky Felicity hands me a glass filled to the brim with bubbling clear liquor

to my it down my throat, swallowing a generous amount while I get a good

er wear around the VIP section. Two large leather sofas fill the space, adorned

the rest plush velvet pillows with glass-top tables before them lined with bottles

champagne and spirits ready to be consumed.

A few bar stools with round wooden tables fill in the empty space

to finish wall sconces cast the space in a dim golden glow, making it welcoming

quiet—away from the busyness of the main floor below.

l of the The club is nice, though a different experience from anything I’ve

before. Back home, I only ever went out with my sisters, and it would

smiling pub crawl before ending up in the kitchen, dancing on the island

pyjamas with a bottle of whatever spirit we entertained that night—rather

beautiful Papá’s dismay.

we’ve “Come on, girly,” Felicity shouts, grabbing my hand and tugging me

the stairs with her. “We’re dancing.”

Gio follows us, keeping a short distance but never letting me out of sight while we writhe around on the dancefloor, moving our bodies with the music flowing through the speakers.

The club is packed to the brim, with bodies swaying around the floor and drinks in their hands. Sweat drips down my neck as the crowd clings to the lines of the leather dress as the skirt slides up my thigh. It's sitting right under the curve of my arsecheeks.

Felicity seems to have the same problem with the red mini she stole from my wardrobe. The satin material clings to her, and with her ample curves and curvy hourglass figure, she makes it look much better than I ever do. Paired with her light blonde hair and blue eyes, she could easily be mistaken for Margot Robbie's sister—and I'm only slightly jealous of that fact.

For the next hour, we alternate between drinking and dancing, and my vision is blurred and my speech slurred. A couple of Felicity's friends have joined us, each one as beautiful as the last. Georgina, a friend she knows from school, threads our arms together and tugs me to the smoking area.

"Do you smoke?" she asks, sliding a small metal tin from her handbag and opening the contents onto the table. I shake my head, but when she offers me a cigarette, my curious nature gets the best of me, and I take it off her. I've had a small smile.

My gaze locks on her, noting the way she lights the tip before puffing out a generous breath in with the smoke. Mirroring her actions, I place the cigarette between my lips, inhaling a large amount as she lights the tip for me.

My lungs burn as it goes down, a large cough bursting from me. The smoke is bitter, though not horrible but oddly familiar. Not something I've smoked before, but I've definitely smelt it—coming from Rosa's bedroom.

t of his “This isn’t just a cigarette, is it?” I turn to Georgina, raising a br
in beatleast I think I do, with the alcohol running through my veins, I’m r
what I’m actually doing. Felicity answers, dropping down onto the
or withbeside me and pulling the cigarette from my hand.

oses in, “Nope. You’re getting your first taste of weed.”

hs until “Should I be worried?”

“Noo.” She laughs, Georgina chuckling beside me. “It just loosens
le froma bit. Mixed with alcohol, it won’t do much. You might just feel a litt
leavagemellow.”

r could. Nodding, I pull it out of her hand, taking another drag. Mellow sou
mistakenperfection. It goes down easier this time, the taste lingering on my

Rosa has been smoking weed for years, but I’ve never dared to try it
l beforenow. Though I’m thinking I should have when it tickles my throat
Felicity’s swarming me nicely.

a friend “This is nice,” I tell them happily, taking a sip of my drink to c
outsidethroat. “It tastes pretty yummy, actually.”

“Hey, I can hook you up if you’re wanting some for at home,” G
og andsays, resting her elbow on the table and dropping her head into her p
pulls a can’t imagine it’s the easiest life being married to Antonio, a bit c
ier withmight make it a more fun experience.”

“You know him?”

illing a “Not well, but with Felicity living in that great big mansion, we’ve
re stickpaths a few times, and he always seems so grouchy. I can’t even thin
what he’s like as a husband.”

he taste “Not a good one,” I mumble, tipping more alcohol down my throa
e tastedthankfully, I don’t see a lot of him, so we manage all right, I guess.”

“Leo, though,” she gushes, continuing as if I hadn’t spoken as she f

ow. Atface dramatically. Felicity shakes her head in amusement, laughing li
ot sureher friends' antics. "The things I would let that man do to me."

bench My hand tightens around the glass, the grip strangling as my knuck
white. The girl isn't saying anything I haven't thought of myself.

So why, then, am I so bothered by her words?

There's no denying Georgina is beautiful with her golden-brow
you upthose chocolate eyes, and dark corkscrew curls that fall effortlessly
le moremiddle of her back. Paired with the high-waisted tight black skin
rocking and the red corset, she's a solid ten out of ten.

nds like Really, I should encourage her to go after him.

tongue. I am married to his friend *and boss*, after all.

before And there is no doubt that they would make a stunning couple.

t again, Yet the thought of her placing her hands anywhere on his body ma
pit in my stomach sink. Maybe it's because he's become my closes
ool myhere. It has to be. Any other explanation is not something I can let
think about.

eorgina "We need more alcohol," Felicity shouts, swaying on her feet wl
alm. "Istands. "Let's go girls."

of grass A chuckle flies out of my mouth at her choice of words, and all I ca
of is Shania Twain singing "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" I push off th
humming the song to myself as I stub out the rolled-up paper in m
crossedbefore following her inside.

k about Hours pass as we lose ourselves to the music filling the room. The r
light and playful as we dance until hands grab at my waist, pulling
at. "Butthe body behind me. I jerk away, reaching for the holster beneath my
my eyes close.

ans her I'm not sure whether it's the alcohol, or the weed—or maybe it's ju

ghtly about something snaps inside of me as he places his hands on my back. The build-up of emotions comes flooding to the surface. I'm losing myself. Everything turns around me as my fingers coil around the handle and I pull the Sauer out into the open.

Gasps ring out as parties realise what's happening, but I don't have a clear mind to give a shit about that right now. I press the barrel against the head, the metal kissing the centre of his forehead.

"You know." I sigh, peeling my eyes open and locking on his face. "I just about had enough of people touching me without my consent."

"I di-d-n't." His head is shaking as his eyes fill with fear as his words come out in a trembling breath.

"You did," I tell him, cocking my head. I'd convinced myself I was fine with it. It was the okay and that being touched was okay. There is no anger when Leonard places his hands on me, no fear, just warmth and comfort.

But right now?

I can barely see over the red haze that has taken control of me. My mind is more than over-the-top—I know that, and yet I can't pull my hands away.

"What gives you the right to place your hands on my body? To wrap your dirty fingers around my waist and pull me into you? What gives you the right, goddamn right?"

His eyes fill with tears, making him look nothing more than a scared little boy. If I was a better person, I might feel bad. I am a better person, usually. Just not today.

My father taught me to shoot if I felt threatened, and deal with the consequences after. Shoot first, ask questions later. I've never agreed with that philosophy, but in this moment I'm too fuelled by rage. He's actually hurting me—my brain is still coherent enough to ask the questions.

ly. The It's a shame I can't find it in myself to do this to my husband too. Right often my life wouldn't be such a shitshow of pent-up emotions and rage. My SIG can only come out after a ridiculous amount of alcohol, weed, and a unlucky man who is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

ave the "I'm sorry," he whispers, his brown hair falling over his face with his hands dropping his head. "Please don't kill me."

My mouth opens, ready to ask him why the hell I shouldn't, when his fingers wrap around my wrist and pull my hand away from him. My skin cools slightly at the touch, my tense muscles relaxing.

My words fall "She won't kill you," Leonardo tells him, coming to stand at my side. He holds his palm out, nodding to my gun. With narrowed eyes, I drop it. I'm doing nothing with my waiting hand, never once moving my gaze from his. His jaw is clenched, his muscles straining against the harsh set of his mouth. If I thought I was going to do anything, he looks even more so, though I don't understand why. He cocks his head slightly, his lips twitching into a smile when he fingers the trigger. "I know your reaction doesn't mean I can't."

He pulls away. Without warning, he raises his arm, pulling the trigger and sending a bullet straight into the guy's forehead. Blood pours from the wound before the body falls backwards, landing harshly against the tiled floor. Leonardo reaches out with two fingers under my jaw, pulling my gaze to his. He leans in, his forehead almost touching mine. "Have a good night, Princess."

Finally. With a smug smirk on his face, Leonardo walks away from me. I look at the mess on the floor, and Georgina stares at the mess on the floor, their mouths agape in shock. I wish they maybe a little in horror too. Though I can't really blame them. It's obvious to know that the men you've been around kill without remorse, and you're lucky to complete other to see it with your own eyes.

Not for me though.

Maybe This is the second time Leonardo has taken the kill shot for me
age that didn't pull the trigger. That shouldn't affect me the way it does, yet
and onespreads within me.

This time, however, the dead is an innocent—mostly. If I hadn't
when heanger and sorrow take me over in a split second, he would still be ali
he's not. Because of me.

en long I know I should feel bad.

y anger I don't.

There's a price to pay when you enter this world—blood. It's a sha
ide. He guy wound up in front of the wrong girl tonight and paid the price for i
into his My eyes stay locked on Leonardo as he saunters off, his face still s
ied, the that infuriating smirk. He leaves through a back door, but a couple o
; angry, recognise from around the mansion come and clean up the mess left be
is head The music blares louder once more, dancing resumes on the floor,
3ut that only minutes it's as if a man didn't just have his life ended for simply
his hands on the wrong person at the wrong time.

a bullet Turning to face Felicity, I offer her a small smile, but it does little t
is longer tense muscles. Georgina is faring only slightly better as she lifts he
lo tucksto her mouth with a trembling hand and wide fearful eyes.

orehead "I mean, they say only the good die young, right?" Shrugging, a wr
crosses my lips. "Maybe he was one of the good ones?"

Felicity Their eyes bug at my words for a second before a giggle fall
hock—Felicity's mouth,

ie thing "Okay. We need more drinks, more dancing, and to end this nig
, it's ahigh," Georgina shouts out over the raucous crowd. "Plus, I need
down. That may have been scary as fuck, but watching Leonardo k
man may have gotten me way hotter than it should have."

when I She fans herself as she speaks, and I fight the urge to pull my gun
warmthnext. My fingers twitch over the holster on my thigh while I try and
talk myself out of it, but I come up empty.

let my *That motherfucker stole my gun.*

ve. But My gaze falls on the door to the far left of the club. It's not near t
and it's where Leonardo came from so . . .

“Felicity,” I say to my friend without taking my eyes off the doc
went through that door, where would it take me?”

ame the She wrinkles her nose, following my line of sight. “That’s the off
it. stuff behind there, why?”

set with “Who owns this nightclub?”

f men I “It’s Leonardo’s actually, why?” she asks slowly, cautiously.

hind. I shrug before walking in that direction. She calls out behind me, he
, and inhurried as she tries to stop me, but the sound is lost in the sea of noise
puttingthat her pleas would stop me anyway.

He stole my gun.

o settle Nobody gets to steal my gun.

er drink That was a gift from Papá for my sixteenth birthday.

When most girls are getting make-up and fancy clothes, nice jewe
y smilewas given my SIG Sauer, and it became one of my most tre
possessions. Without it strapped to my body, I feel naked. Bare.

ls from Unsafe.

Pressing my hands against the door, I push at the heavy wood until i
ht on a opening just enough for me to get through. A long corridor is befo
to coolined with closed doors. My hands shake in frustration as I test a few
kill thatcoming up empty each time. I reach a dead end and hear voices comir
a room to my left.

on her *Bingo*.

I fail to Without giving myself a moment to think it through, or talk myself out of it, I grab the handle. The door slams against the wall as I shove it open. I drop my hands to my hips, narrowing my eyes on the man at the head of the exit, oval table.

“Where the hell is my gun?” Around ten men, all dressed in the Mafia-standard all-black suits, sit around the table, their gazes snapping to mine at my demand. If I weren’t so angry, it might give me cause to smile and walk back out of the room quietly, but my sense of self-preservation is still good.

“Princess,” Leonardo murmurs, his voice blank and with no emotion.

“You stole my gun, and I want it back.” I ignore the men watching me and voiceprop my hands on my hips and glare at him. “Now, please.”

“Well, because you said please.” He pauses, leaning forward and dropping his elbow onto the table. His lips twitch in amusement, but he keeps locking on mine. “No.”

“Leo,” the man seated to his right calls out, but his attention never wavers from me.

“Everybody get the fuck out,” he bellows to the men around us.

Dismayed grumbles follow the sound of scraping chairs as the men rise from the table and pass by me to exit the room. I don’t take my eyes off Leonardo the whole time. They aren’t my business. The only thing I want to give, my lifeline back.

Mafia men and their dramatics can wait.

The door closes behind me with a click, the air in the room tense and thick with staring at each other. One second and another. We just wait; neither will be the first to break.

Leonardo rolls the sleeves of his black sweater before pushing himself out of the back and standing slowly. He stalks towards me, his eyes on mine the entire time, and I sway.

Overwhelming heat travels over my body when he steps into me, cradling me backwards until my back hits the door. His hands land against the door frame framing my head, as he towers over me. My breath shortens as he presses his forehead to mine, my legs trembling.

“You interrupted an important meeting, Princess,” he whispers, the sound of his breath tickling my nose.

“You stole my gun,” I tell him breathlessly. My heart races, the weight of his hand heavy against my chest when he lowers a hand and cups my cheek. His thumb caresses, teasing the edge of my mouth before pulling it back.

“I borrowed your gun. And you can have it back.” He shrugs, sending a shiver down my spine. My shoulders sag in relief despite the chill that hits me as he closes his eyes, losing himself to his heat. I open my mouth to thank him, but he speaks again before I can. “On one condition.”

“And what’s that?” I deadpan, willing to give him anything he wants. He only to feel the cool metal against my palm again.

At least that’s what I’m telling myself.

He smirks at me, hungry eyes burning into mine as he folds his arms over his chest. Leaning back, he cocks his head before his smirk turns into a wicked grin. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

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CHAPTER TEN

Whatever I thought his one condition would be, this never crossed my mind. My lungs burn, my calves ache, and everything feels like I'm on fire when he slaps the stop button on the treadmill.

My body sags over the screen, a deep exhaustion settling in my bones. Over an hour he's had me running on this bloody thing, but still, I don't give up my gun back. He hasn't said a word since he dragged me out of bed at 6 a.m. with a roaring hangover and less than two hours of sleep.

The bright pink sports bra clings to my chest, sticky from sweat. My matching leggings are plastered to my trembling muscles.

Of course the devil himself stands beside me in black joggers and a matching fitted t-shirt that stretches across his muscles without a single wrinkle out of place, or an ounce of sweat pouring over his fine body.

"You are fucking evil," I tell him, wheezing as my lungs fight for oxygen. He chuckles but says nothing as he leans against the machine behind me. "Why do you hate me? This is so wrong. I just want my gun."

"You're being a child, Princess."

“Oh, now he speaks. What even is the point in this?” I snap, sweat-soaked my hands over my thighs. My hair sticks to my neck, irritating me with the damp strands. “My head hurts, I’m tired, and right now the only thing I want is my gun so I can shoot you in the head.”

“You’re learning endurance,” he says, rolling his eyes at me as he takes my hand and helps me off the machine. My knees buckle the moment I touch solid ground, but he wraps his arm around my waist, hauling me up to his chest. “We’re going to do some self-defence training, but the first rule of defence is always to run.”

“I highly doubt you’ve ever run from an opponent.” His lips quirk at me, his thumb stroking the bare skin at my back. It should be gross, considering the sweat pouring from me, but gross is the last thing I’m feeling at the moment.

“Your first line of defence is to run,” he tells me, staring down at me. “But if you’re cornered, it would help if you could figure out a way out.”

“That’s why I have a gun,” I deadpan, pressing my palms against his chest and pushing away before I can do something stupid, like stroke him.

“I’ll go, the hand stroking my back coming up to his mouth as he swears and a thumb over his bottom lip.

Is he tasting my sweat?

That thought alone should have me running for the hills . . . but it comes with a pulse to thread through my centre.

“Then I’m dead.” I shrug, feigning nonchalance as I rest my back against the treadmill and grab the bottle of water he offers me. The lid is already off, so I tip the contents down my throat, swallowing greedily.

“Princess,” he groans, scrubbing his palm down his face. “Dead.”

swiping much of an option for you these days. You're too important. So you're not here to learn real self-defence, without weapons."

thing I scoffing, I ignore his "important" comment and grab the shirt I took from the floor earlier. The white crew neck slips off one shoulder when I pull it up, but I don't reposition it. "I am five foot two and weigh approximately 120 pounds, if I'm weaponless, then I'm dead. No amount of training is going to help me save me."

line of "That sounds very defeatist," he comments, his eyes narrowing as he watches me.

up, his "Nope, it's just a fact. Papá tried to teach me to fight. Even brought in all my friends, but every single time they got the upper hand. I'm not good enough to win."

He watches me curiously, cocking his head for a moment before he reaches for the hem of his black shirt, pulling it over his head—so fucking slowly that it takes a full minute to drop it to the floor. My mouth dries at the sight of his bare chest.

It covers every inch of his visible skin, the black and grey inked perfect lines of his chest rippling muscles.

He lets me see a lion on one side of his chest, a lioness on the other with swirly designs I don't understand—but I appreciate the artwork anyway. My eyes trace over every single line, moving downwards until I notice the edge of his groin as he rocks back.

causes a thin line of hair draws my eyes to the waistband of his joggers. My breath hitching when I take in the V at his hips. A cough from him against snapping my head back up, my cheeks flushing when he smirks at me smugly.

"Your father wasn't a good teacher," he tells me, walking towards a table in the corner of the large gym. He hops up, his back muscles straining.

he going jumps over the corded ring. “I can guarantee you I’m better. So, get y
up here.”

ssed on “I’d rather not,” I mumble, my nose wrinkling when he widens his
at it on, and stares at me with a challenging expression. Not only do I know
ely 130 can easily take me down with little more than a handshake, I’m al
going to being up close and personal to him when he’s half naked is not a good

The urge to climb him like a tree is far too overwhelming.

as he I take a slow step backwards, then another, my eyes never leavi

There’s a flicker in his jaw as he rolls his shoulders, taking a single st
at some the leather mat before I spin on my heels and run. Footsteps follow m
strong and measured, while my already aching legs push me down the h
towards the foyer.

tugs at Margo fiddles with the post at the main door, shock filling her exp
y—and when I run by. She shouts hello, but I ignore her. The need to get awa
Tattoos Leonardo is too high to stop and reassure her.

ly over I’m halfway up the stairs when his heavy arm bands around my wa
tugs me into his chest. He tuts in my ear, his mouth pressing against t
irls and when he speaks. “Running away isn’t very nice, Princess.”

ly eyes My mouth opens, but only a squeak comes out when he spins
ht pack hands cupping the curves of my arse cheeks before tossing me o
shoulder. Melodic laughter follows us as he carries me back towards th
ers, my his hand moulded to my arse the whole way.

has me At least Margo is getting some joy out of this.

at me *Traitor.*

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” He drops me on the mat, laughter
ring in from his mouth when I land with a harsh grunt. My head bounces
g as he leather, my vision blurring for a second before I regain my composure.

our ass Pushing myself up onto my elbows, I scowl at him, though he only more, his smile widening into a thing of pure beauty as he stares down at me. With a deep breath, I force myself to stand, mirroring his position with my legs at shoulder width and my arms hanging loose at my sides.

so sure He tilts his head, his eyes travelling lazily over me. The intensity of his stare has me tensing while heat coils in my lower stomach travelling towards my centre. He swipes his tongue over his lower lip, leaving a glossy sheen on his lips. With no warning, he wraps my ponytail around his hand as he presses me towards him, my hands fly out, landing on his chest with a slap. I freeze, slow myself.

all and He loosens his grip on my hair, his fingers tugging at the ends for a moment before he spins me, locking his arm around my neck. His breath tickles my ear as he leans down, tightening his hold on me. His lips graze my neck, sending tingles down my spine. The hair at the nape of my neck steals my attention, goosebumps travelling over my body.

gist and “What are you doing?” My voice comes out in a breathy wheeze. The hold isn’t tight enough to stop me from breathing, but it’s making it very difficult. Leonardo chuckles, his five o’clock shadow tickling my cheek with his hand. He opens his mouth.

ver his “We’re training, Princess. You need to get out of this hold before you go to the gym, “You won’t really kill me.”

“Won’t I?” he murmurs.

I’d like to say I’m confident in my assessment, but what if I’m not? In a few seconds he could end my life, and I can do little to change the outcome. I spill that.

off the “Clock’s ticking, Princess.”

His grip tightens, his forearm now cutting my airway off. My

laughssputters, the burn in my lungs too much to bear. Stars flash across my
at me.the room becoming a blurry haze before my eyes flutter closed. I will
with myto move, to fight, but I'm slowly losing control of my body as d
closes in.

y in his He mutters behind me, his sound echoing that of a ticking clock. S
owardspass, but I don't move. I can't. The darkness takes over, pulling me i
een. abyss. Though, I swear I hear him whisper in my ear before
ulls meconsciousness. "Time's up."

to steel



t a beat

des my

y neck, My eyes flutter open, and I blink a few times, trying to adjust to th
ands to room—the only light coming from a small window to the right of me,
slither passing through the gap in the steel door to my left. There's
he grip ache at my temples, and my throat is dry and scratchy.

ifficult. It's only when I try to lift my fingers to massage my throbbing temp
hen he I realise my hands are bound behind my back, locked with a meta
coming from the cold brick wall behind me.

ou die." *What the hell?*

I take a few steps forwards but stop when the metal digs into my
preventing me from going any further. My eyes move over the
Within scanning the minimal contents. There's a small single bed in the corn
ome of only a grey blanket and small white pillow as décor, and a stainle
toilet sits opposite, cold and unwelcoming.

That's it.

breath There is nothing more to offer in this room but bitter cold and empti

vision, “Leonardo,” I call out, my voice quivering as my panic grows. “That’s just me being myself funny.”

Darkness Long, tense, silent minutes pass without answer. My heart races as time passes, the throbbing in my head worsening the longer I stand there. Seconds into the darkness. This has to be some sick prank that Leonardo is pulling on me. He’s the only person it could be.

I lose But why?

I call out again, my voice cracking more with each word. Without a sound, I don’t know how much time passes, it could be minutes, or hours. It means nothing down here in the darkness.

When the echo of footsteps across hardwood sounds, my body relaxes in relief as I let out a deep breath. Black Italian leather shoes are the first things I see in the dark before black dress trousers and a black shirt that clings tight to my muscular frame fill my vision as he steps closer. A far cry from the dull, worn-out workout clothes he was sporting earlier.

Then, he looked like a semi-normal guy, or as normal as someone who looks like Leonardo could look.

Unchained Right now, though?

He is a made man through and through.

“Princess,” he murmurs, his expression blank as he reaches out to grasp my wrists, fingers the cuffs at my wrist, lightly touching my skin as he does so. I’m powerless to him, and there is nothing I can do about it. Butterflies soar in my stomach when he moves his hand away, running it over the metal links of the stainless-steel chains.

“What is this place? What are you doing? Can you please unchain me?”

“Why should I?” Cocking his head, he tugs on the metal so harshly that my back arching and my chin tilting towards him. “Perhaps I’m teaching you a lesson.”

his isn't a lesson."

"What lesson is that?" I ask breathlessly, swallowing hard over the pulsing in my throat. His eyes follow the movement as my throat bobs, darkening as he stares. They land back on my face.

laying. "What happens when you get taken by the enemy," he deadpans, pulling his hand from the metal to fist my hair. He tugs my head back farther, his eyes staring down at me. "What do you think they'll do to you? If they get a clock, hands on you, because you refuse to learn self-defence?"

s. Time "I didn't refuse," I snap, narrowing my eyes at him. "I just told you the truth. That it's futile and given current circumstances, I was right. The enemy gets their hands on me and I'm dead, you said so yourself."

thing I He chuckles into my ear before his tongue laps at the skin sensual. "It wasn't for his hold on me, the sensations would have me buckling on the casual floor. "No, you said that, I just didn't disagree. They won't kill you, P. Not straight away, anyway."

ne who "What would they do instead, then?" I ask, fearing his answering.

"Torture, maim," he tells me, lifting his other hand for a moment before I feel a sharp pinch at my chest, followed by the drag of sharp metal over my flesh. "Mutilate. You'd be begging for death, long before they grant it to me. He that wish."

es. I'm My breath hitches when I feel the trickle of warm liquid running over my skin. I try to force my head down, to see the cut I know he's left on my forehead, but he tightens his fingers in my hair, dropping his forehead to mine.

"What are you doing?"

ie?" "I always thought black was my favourite colour," he murmurs, pointing at the mark on my skin as he looks down at the skin he's marked. He pockets the knife before sliding his thumb over my chest and lifting the crimson-coated

his mouth, lapping it clean with his tongue. “But now I’m thinking if
lump in just be red.”

g when “Leonardo,” I breathe, the flush of my cheeks spreading down my
warming my body until I’m squirming under the scrutiny of his stare.

moving He fingers the neckline of my sports bra, pulling the material down
er as my breasts pop out, the cold air peaking my nipples instantly. His eyes
et their landing on the hardening pebbles. He presses his thumb against one, is
the stutter in my breath when sparks of pleasure pass through me.

you the I should fight him, but with him touching me, the only thing I
enemy more.

“Why do you call me Leonardo?”

ly. If it “Why do you call me Princess?” I retort.

g to the He chuckles, lifting his eyes to mine while he continues to play with
Princess nipple. This is wholly inappropriate, yet I can’t find it in me to care when
pinches the skin, pulling it taut for a second before letting go and moving
attention to the other breast.

before I Holding my gaze for a moment more, he smirks before sucking one
over my nipples into his mouth while rolling the other between his finger and thumb.

ted you The sensations, paired with my inability to touch him, to guide him, to
him, sends waves of pleasure through me, heating my throbbing core.

over my reaches for the knife again and skims the sharp point over the skin on
my chest, breasts. My head falls back on a moan, my chest pressing into his face.

He drags the blade over my skin, down past my stomach. He stops at the
waistband of my leggings before tracing the line between right and left
understanding. Choosing the latter, he dips below, slicing my underwear and nicking
the used skin simultaneously.

I pad to Dragging his teeth over my nipple, he pulls away before kneeling back

t mightmy legs and staring as blood beads at the surface. Leaning forward, my tongue swipes at it, cleaning me up before it can run to my bare pussy.

y chest, When he moves to tug my pants down, I finally catch myself. “You

He only chuckles before sliding them down my legs until they’re pooled on the floor untilmy feet. His eyes settle on the black lace underwear I’m wearing. The heat drop,hot and cold has my pussy pulsing under his gaze, his eyes darkening as he ignores and leans in and runs his nose over the material.

“Look at how wet you are for me, Princess. Do you get like this when you want isAntonio?” he asks, his words a stark reminder I have a husband. I

Antonio’s name on his lips should make me anxious, but as he presses his palms to the inside of my thighs, keeping me open to him, though I know Antonio are far from my mind. “I wonder what he’d say if he knew you were

with mytied up in his basement, close to begging his consigliere to fuck you when he’s in your mouth.”

“I, uh, I’m not.” I stumble over my words, struggling to breathe as he breathes me in again.

“Keep telling yourself that,” he mutters before wrapping his teeth around the scraps of elastic left and pulling my underwear over my arse and around to gripmy thighs. He stares at my pussy for a moment, his pupils dilating as he licks my clit. He looks at me in the view. Lifting his gaze, it locks on mine for a second, a smug expression on his face as he lifts his head before he dives forwards.

His tongue swipes along my folds, my body tensing at the contact as he grabs my arsecheeks, his fingers digging into the soft skin. A breathless moan follows, wrong,clit followed by the circling of his tongue, causing my legs to tremble. Never in my life have I felt so on edge—so ready.

I can’t move, I can do nothing but accept his mouth as he probes between my entrance, fucking me with his tongue. My hips rock involuntarily, my

nds, his more, but he keeps his movements slow and measured.

When he brings his lips over my clit, pulling it into his mouth can't." sucking on the sensitive bud, I lose all sense of coherence and my eyes closed at when he bites down.

mix of He continues to lap, bite, and tug at me for what feels like an eternity as he dragging me towards the edge. When he slides a finger into me, the

harshly, stars spread over my vision, my thighs clenching his head that for pleasure coiling at my centre explodes. My mouth opens on a scream hearing nails digging into the palm of my hand when my body pulses with his orgasm.

lights of He chuckles against my skin, keeping his mouth wrapped around me as I come down to earth. When he pulls away, his chin is coated in my sweat with his eyes are heated as he stares at me. He reaches around, pressing

metal cuffs, and they loosen around my wrists, dropping to the floor with a loud clang.

"That can never happen again," I tell him while quickly reaching down to pull my leggings up over my legs so I'm covered again. I reposition my sports bra, the cut above it red and aggravated. My breaths come out in gasps as I take pants, my eyes staying on the floor as I ignore his gaze. "I have a husband smirk "Don't worry, Princess," he tells me as he chuckles. "It can be our secret."

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“Don’t worry, Princess,” he tells me as he chuckles. “It can be our little secret.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I focus on a drop of rain that trickles down the window disappearing over the ledge and out of sight. The weather has miserable in New York, a reminder that winter is drawing closer.

Felicity chatters happily with Georgina beside me, their voices carried over the crowd of the café as they discuss costumes for the Halloween that Antonio is hosting at the mansion over the weekend.

It's tradition apparently. All his men and their families, alongside his women are given the night off to celebrate the spooky season. If you ask me, it's a little silly. The thought of a bunch of Mafia men dressed in daft costumes and heavy make-up amuses me far too much.

"Earth to Pippa." Felicity snaps in front of my face, pulling my attention back to our table. She watches me curiously, a small smile at her lips. "Are you okay? You've been quiet this morning."

"Yeah, you seem totally out of it," Georgina agrees, nodding her head. Lifting the plastic cup to my mouth, I take a gentle sip of the hot chocolate, sighing as the rich taste slides down my throat before answering.

“I’m good, just tired,” I tell them truthfully. I barely slept a wink last night though I can’t tell them why. I can’t tell them it’s because whenever I close my eyes, I see Leonardo on his knees with his head buried between my

It’s been three days since he devoured me with his mouth; three days which I’ve hidden out in my bedroom, telling Margo I wasn’t well when I tried to get me up and out—yet those images play on a loop in my head. Now, my cheeks flush as I think of how he brought me to orgasm with his tongue.

The worst of it is, I keep imagining the knife he used. Wondering how I would feel like if Leonardo used that to pleasure me while blood poured from my open wounds as he uses his tongue to clean the crimson liquid away.

God only knows what that says about me.

Not just knife play, but blood being involved too.

“Well, wake up.” Felicity laughs, pulling apart the chocolate muffin with her hands before popping small pieces into her mouth. “When we’re finished here, we’re heading to the mall to buy hot-as-fuck outfits for the Halloween party. I’m thinking Catwoman for you, Pips. Like a hot Halle Berry, in a black jumpsuit Catwoman.”

“There’s no way I’m wearing a leather jumpsuit,” I deadpan, narrowing my eyes at them as they watch me with eager smiles on their faces. Sensing my head, I finish my drink before inhaling the vanilla cheesecake in one bite. “You’re kidding me.”

Less than an hour later, Felicity is shoving a pair of high-waisted black leather trousers into my hand and a matching leather corset before she pushes me into the nearest dressing room. My arguments fall on deaf ears when she steps in behind me, pulling the curtain closed before telling me to strip.

Rolling my eyes, I tug at my black knitted sweater and pull it off.

at night, head, dropping it onto the floor before popping the button of my jeans. I close sliding them over my thighs and stepping out of them.

7 legs. Felicity gasps, her eyes wide as she stares at me through the days in. Standing only in black lace underwear, my eyes fall to the scabbed line when she chest, a reminder of that morning with Leonardo.

d. Even “What happened?” she asks.

on his “Nothing,” I mumble while pulling on the leather trousers and caught myself on the door, and the latch cut me, that’s all.”

what it I’m not sure she believes me when her eyes narrow, and hours from wouldn’t believe me either. I’m not even sure a door latch could cut that, but I will roll with the lie anyway. Say something enough eventually it will stick.

Right?

1 in her “What do you think?” I ask her, spinning on my heels and showing finished outfit. She lets out a whistle, thankfully taking the conversation challenge in stride. Her eyes run over me, a smug smile on her lips when she winks leather- “Fuck Halle Berry. Pippa in a catsuit might just be my new wet dream.”

“Give over,” I tell her with a chuckle, turning back to the mirror and rowing myself a once over. I have to admit, I look good. The leather clings shaking body in all the right places, accentuating my petite frame in a way that front of the eyes to my cleavage and hips.

“You’re buying it, yes?”

d black “I guess so.” I sigh dramatically, clicking my tongue. “You may have shoving onto something with this idea.”

hen she “Yes,” she cheers, clapping. “Get dressed and then it’s my turn something. I’m thinking super spicy devil.”

ver my She skips out of the room, closing the curtain behind her while she

ans andout to Georgina. Her enthusiasm is something I could stand to pick u
dress quickly, folding the leather outfit neatly over my shoulder as I s
mirror.of the changing room. If nothing else, I'll look good while hiding
e at mylibrary of the mansion when the party happens.



rset. "I

estly, I The rest of the week passes quickly and before long the day of the Hal
me like party is here. Servers pass through the hallway, rushing around
h, and everything up in the ballroom. Because what mansion doesn't come
ballroom? I doubt I've even scratched the surface of what else is lur
the hallways of this place.

her the I press my back against the wall as one of Antonio's men stalks pas
ange in phone pressed to his ear. Half of the men probably live in this mansio
at me. only know a few. I really should make more of an effort to get to know
m." to integrate myself into this world.

l giving However, that hasn't worked out well for me with Leonardo, has it?
s to my Where I should be happy to have a friend in this world, instead I'm
t draws with fear that what happened in that dark room will somehow reach t
of my husband. The Capo.

Technically, I did nothing wrong—I was chained to a wall; it's no
ve been could have told Leonardo no . . . but the issue is, I didn't even try. I
everything he did, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to experienc
to find with him.

Plus, Antonio came back this morning and my period came a coup
shouts before. My mood soured when I felt the first cramps and saw the s

up on. I blood in my underwear.

step out Not because I want to have a child. I don't, especially with him.

in the I'm twenty-one. I haven't lived nearly enough life to be ready to be mother. I want to see the world, to live a life full of love and laughter I start that chapter.

Instead, my mood soured because I know not falling pregnant will Antonio want to try even harder. Men like him can't understand the things take time and I'm sure he will only become more aggressive v loween attempts the longer it takes.

to set "Pippa, there you are, dear," Margo calls out to me when she sp with a coming down the hallway. Her eyes are alight with excitement an king in wearing a huge smile as she watches the decorations being put up hallway. "Should you not be getting showered? The hair and make-up t with a will be here in an hour."

n, yet I "Are you telling me I smell, Margo?" I wrinkle my nose playful v them, shakes her head, patting me on the shoulder. "I'm heading up there Though, is hair and make-up really that necessary for a house party?"

"I don't make the rules, dear. I just book what I'm told to book. A riddled it's always fun to get pampered, isn't it? And let's be honest, this he ears house, and the Halloween party certainly isn't just a house party. You'

"Yeah, I suppose so," I agree with a shrug, not caring much for i t as if I way. "I best get my smelly self in the shower, then."

wanted With a wink, I turn towards the stairs and rush off, chuckling as she e more after me in indignation. Missing the last step, I go flying towards th

before an arm bands around my waist, pulling me back into a muscled

le days "Leonardo is right," Antonio murmurs behind me. "You are a clums pots of thing, aren't you, wife?"

My muscles go taut at his closeness, my heart racing when he presses his palm against my flat stomach. Even with the oversized hoodie I'm wearing, the weight of him touching me makes my skin crawl.

Before I can say anything, "May I go? I need to get ready?" I breathe out, keeping my voice steady despite my growing nerves. He pats my stomach once, then twice, before blowing out a disappointed breath. With a hand to my back, he pushes me toward the remaining step with a muttered, "Go."

I rush to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me, and press my back against the door. My shoulders deflate as tears well in my eyes. I thought I was doing okay. I'd convinced myself I could handle him, but she's can't. And I don't know how to deal with that truth.

In the end, he's my husband, it's my job to give him children.

As an artist, I let him use me however he sees fit.

However, after experiencing what I did with Leonardo, I know it's not easy. She's simple anymore. I can't close my eyes and pretend what he's doing is normal now, just because he's my husband. I can't lie to myself anymore.

Anyway,

it isn't a

big deal to see."

At either end of the hallway, "Damn, girl." Felicity whistles when she walks into my bedroom hours later with two glasses in her hand.

She shouts, "You're one to talk," I tell her, running my eyes over the little red dress she's wearing. The satin material falls into a deep V on her chest, stopping mid-thigh, showing off an expanse of her pale legs. The white horns blend into her blonde hair, almost looking real if it weren't for the plastic shine. "I'd kill for your curves in that dress."



sses his “I do look good, huh?” She laughs, dropping the items onto my
earing, before fluffing her curled hair. My hair falls into loose curls down m
the top half tied up around the metal cat ears to make it look like the c
e calma part of my head.

before The dark smoky eyes and winged-out liner do wonders for my brow
s me upmaking the dullness pop into something shiny. Paired with the leather
look pretty hot, if I say so myself.

ing my Felicity hands me a glass filled halfway with vodka and nothing
eyes. I shake my head at her, but she only rolls her eyes before pinching h
1. But I and tipping her own glass to the back of her throat. Following her lea
the glass to my mouth, pouring the liquid straight down.

The burn is welcome, heating my chest with a warm flush. Felicit
swallowing harshly to keep the liquid down while I set my glass
s not so vanity.

is okay “Right, we have about an hour and a half before the others come,
hide out in the kitchen until then. We’ll turn the speakers up and warm
feet before the real fun starts,” Felicity says, wagging her eyebrows at

“Okay, but when I’m sick later, will you hold my hair back?”

“Please, you’ll be holding mine,” she tells me, grabbing my a
pulling me towards the door. “Though, maybe no dead bodies this time
several “Felicity, this is a party in a mansion full of Mafia men. I’m pret

dead bodies are to be expected.” She freezes, her eyes widening for a r
ed mini before she shakes her head and grabs my hand. It looks like my friend
est and finally be coming to terms with the life she grew up around.

the devil
for the

vanity
y back,
ears are



My hips move to the beat of the music filling the ballroom. Though I'm sure that's an appropriate name for the room. This party is definitely a ball; unless a ball consists of drunken men in funny costumes waving around, bags of cocaine split open on tables, and a dancefloor full of people and men getting their grind on.

Margo was wrong with her earlier assessment that this party isn't a party. It's everything I would ever expect of a house party, just on a grander scale.

Booze, drugs, and debauchery.

A standard weekend for most kids back home growing up—and hell, so let's the shows I watched on television were right.

Felicity bounces on her heels beside me, her eyes glazed over as she keys to her nose and sniffs generously at the white powder sitting on the table.

She offers it to me, holding a bag in her other. I shake my head, sticking my cocktail instead. I only just tried weed for the first time when we were out, I'm not sure testing the harder stuff is really something I'm interested in.

"This is fun, right?" she shouts over the loud music, flinging her hair above her head and swaying in time with the music. Nodding, I finish my drink, letting the plastic cup hang limply at my side while I join her and start moving across the floor.

A couple of men dance around us, though, thankfully none come within touching distance. The perks of my husband being around here sometimes I don't guess. Not that I've seen Antonio since earlier on the staircase. He's

keeping his distance from me, and I'm more than happy for it to stay that way.

I'm going to grab a drink, I mouth to Felicity. When she nods, I move away from the bodies, swiping the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. This many bodies packed together on a dancefloor does little to help with staying cool in an all-leather outfit.

When I reach the bar, I grab the first bottle of vodka I see, pour a generous amount into the cup, before turning and leaning against the bar to watch the crowd for a moment and cool down.

Fanning my face with my palm, I sip my drink taking in the room. On the dancefloor, a mass of arms and legs while they lose themselves in one another and the music. When I spot Leonardo in the corner, he is leant against the wall and his hands in his pockets, a flush spreads over his cheeks.

He watches me, his eyes travelling over my body lazily with a smirk. I lift my face. I move my gaze away quickly, refusing to give him the satisfaction of my reaction. I push off the wall, moving towards the doors that will take me to the gardens. The bitter air hits my skin, chilling me, and I let out a long breath.

My feet carry me towards an old rickety swing that sits on the open patio. The wood has seen better days, creaking when I drop down and push myself until I'm swinging slowly. Wind slaps at my cheeks, my hair flowing behind me while the momentum lulls me into blissful peace—until for a moment a sound across the patio, coming towards me.

“If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were avoiding me, Princess.”
“Why would I possibly do that, Leonardo?” I quip sarcastically, I turn my gaze back to the gardens in front of me. His heat surrounds me.

day that he wraps a palm around the rope, stopping the swing before sliding
bench next to me.

ake my “You tell me,” he murmurs, cupping my jaw and pulling my face
k of my Our thighs touch as he leans closer, and there’s not nearly eno
to help between us. “Why are you avoiding me?”

“Maybe your company isn’t as exciting as you think it is,” I do
uring although I don’t pull away.

wall to “Now I know that’s not the truth.” His thumb swipes over my sl
calloused pad stopping when he reaches the corner of my lips. My ey
Bodies on his, a brow raised when he runs that thumb over my bottom lip, i
nselves my mouth open for a second before resuming his caress. “I thought w
his backfriends, Princess.”

ver my “Friends don’t make friends cheat on their husbands.”

“Is it really cheating when you don’t love your husband?” he
k on his asking the question that has been on my mind since that day. I’d like
ion of ano, but I doubt it’s the truth. We said vows. We promised a lifetime ur
me out watchful eyes of God.

a slow There’s a lot of doubt in my mind when it comes to the great divin
small part of me still believes. Maybe it’s the little girl who still lives
n patio. of me, the girl who spent her Sundays at church with her papá at her si
ny legs “I could, you know,” I answer, dipping my gaze. “Love him.”

messily “Do you?” he asks, his voice cold as ice. My head snaps to his, n
not steps widening at the intensity staring back at me. “Do you love him?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business. He’s my husband. Th
.” only thing that matters, right?”

keeping He opens his mouth, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he stares at
e when doesn’t get to say anything before loud shouts and screams come from

into the mansion followed by scrambling guests pouring into the garden
feet carrying them across the grass as Antonio's men pull their weapons
to his. "A terra, c'è una bomba," Antonio shouts when he rushes towards
his face an ashen white as he stares back at the house. Leonardo
pulling me into his back as he watches. Horror sounds out behind
house going up into flames before Antonio shouts again. "Tutti a terra
una bomba."

My heart races, my eyes widening as my brain scrambles with
translation.

Get down, there's a bomb.

Holy shit.

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the mansion followed by scrambling guests pouring into the gardens, their feet carrying them across the grass as Antonio's men pull their weapons free.

"A terra, c'è una bomba," Antonio shouts when he rushes towards his men, his face an ashen white as he stares back at the house. Leonardo stands, pulling me into his back as he watches. Horror sounds out behind us, the house going up into flames before Antonio shouts again. "Tutti a terra, c'è una bomba."

My heart races, my eyes widening as my brain scrambles with the translation.

Get down, there's a bomb.

Holy shit.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The first explosion is small. Anticlimactic, if I'm being honest. Leonardo tosses me to the ground when the blast comes, his heavy body shielding me from the mine, but it seems redundant. The mansion does little more than rattle the foundation.

Leonardo remains a solid wall above me, his hands on the grass at the top of my head. While the others around us let out sighs of relief, he stays silent. His face is etched in agitation, maybe even disbelief.

Pressing my palms to his shoulders, I try to push him off, but he only presses into me harder, forcing my back into the muddy grass.

"Stay down," he growls, running his hands over my shoulders and down my arms before he stops at my hands, pulling them upwards while he runs his fingers through mine. The touch is intimate, warm and welcoming when it shouldn't be. "This isn't over yet."

"What do you mean? The explosion was minor, I think we're fine to go," I say to Leonardo. "Anyway, you're squishing me." Technically not a lie, but I know he won't care. However, that isn't the reason I need him to move. The way his body presses against mine, his heat blanketing every inch of me, is disconcerting.

It's too familiar.

Too perfect.

As though our bodies were made for one another.

"That was just the first," he tells me, raising a brow incredulously. "You really think someone planning to bomb the home the Capo lives in, with all his men are around, isn't wanting to take at least half of them out?"

"Maybe it's just a warning. Whoever set it probably did so just to warn us."

"No." He scoffs, shaking his head before leaning down and pressing his forehead to mine. The mint on his breath hits my nose, the heat radiating across my cheeks. "It was just a warmup."

"So, what, we just wait?" I ask incredulously, a slight shiver on my skin as the cold grass seeps into the skin at my back.

"We just wait," he comments, his lips moving across mine as we wait. Perhaps this isn't the right time, but I can't help but wonder what it would feel like if I closed the distance and claimed them with mine. "You don't want to stop looking at me like that, though. I'm not a very patient man, and you're testing that patience with your eyes right now."

"How am I looking at you?" I ask breathlessly, testing our limits. "I shouldn't."

"Like you want to taste me." His tongue slides out, running along my bottom lip for a moment before he presses a feather-light kiss there.

"I can promise you this, Princess. I taste real fucking good. But you taste a million times better."

My clit throbs at the reminder of his mouth on me. I'm playing with fire here, I know that all too well, but when he rocks his hips against me, the pressure right where I need it, I lose all sense of right and wrong.

My back arches, my mouth pressing against his in a whisper of a forget about where we are. Forget who's surrounding us. Forget that I husband. Forget everything but the feel of him on top of me. The s at me. touch of our lips, and my heart races. Blood rushes to my ears, block s, when noise around us and the only thing I can feel is him.

He cups my face, his thumb softly stroking the skin when I pull ba o scare eyes lock, the brown in his looking almost black when he pushes i again. My mouth opens on a gasp, which he uses to his advantage w sing his slides his thumb in, pushing it against my tongue. I wrap my lips ar fanning sucking it into my mouth with a moan.

At this moment, anyone could turn and see what we're doing, but r lips as care.

With him moving against me, pushing me closer and closer to th e speak. despite the layers between us, my eyes flutter closed, an orgasm e would inside of me. I can't stop the sensations from building, and my i might become hazy when a scream falls from my gaping mouth.

an, and Leonardo lowers his mouth to mine, swallowing the sound as explosion comes from the mansion behind us. The foundations trem when I brick explodes around us, falling into large debris on the grass. Glass bodies fall to the ground.

ong my But through it all, Leonardo stays on top of me, his movements unre "And I as he rides out my orgasm with only the rock of his hips. I moan i taste a mouth, and he uses it to slide his tongue inside, claiming me fully.

I've kissed before—many times, with several men—but this is sor ith fire else entirely. He devours me whole, his tongue duelling with mine as v putting for dominance. My heart thumps against my chest while his hands

... kiss. Their grip on mine. He consumes me, taking everything I have to give. For a while he kisses me as though our lives depend on it—maybe they do. Lightest The world is falling apart around us, but there's only him and nothing then. When I peel my eyes open again, my body spent as I relax in the grass, I don't miss the smirk on his face, or the way he eyes me with pride. Our "Like I said, Princess," he murmurs, lifting off me and pulling us into a standing. It's only now that I get a good look at the commotion going on in the gardens. Bodies lie on the ground, unmoving, while others run around them, shouting or crying. Leonardo spins me, pressing his chest to mine as he fists my hair and tugs my head backward. "That was just the war I don't Why do I get the feeling he isn't just talking about the explosion?"

... e edge,
... coiling
... vision



"This is a fucking mess." I turn to Antonio where he leans on his desk, his fingers threading through his dark hair as he tugs at the strands. We're in the office at the casino while the rest of the guests who survived the Halcyon party are in the main room, waiting for information of what comes next.

At least ten people died at the mansion today, and some are unaccounted for. Six were Antonio's soldiers, the other four, wives and girlfriends. Innocent humans in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And what the fuck was I doing while they were killed by a bomb? Nothing home I've been living? Getting dry humped to orgasm on the wet grass. Sweat coats the back of my arms, my hair is a tangled mess, and the leather tightens against my skin, sticking to my underwear where my juices have seeped through and dried.

ve him, Antonio doesn't seem to have noticed anything amiss in my appe

Though it helps that Leonardo being tasked as my babysitter mea
ne herethrowing me on the ground and protecting me with his body is
nto theexpected.

ride. "I think it's time to consider the fact you have a rat, Ant," Gio, on
both tosoldiers, tells him, stepping forwards and folding his arms over his
g on in "How else would someone get into the mansion when we're all there?"
around *Nothing to do with the fact that the majority were off their tits on a*
y backand *getting lost in women.*

mup." I keep my thoughts to myself, knowing better than to voice them
right now.

"Leo," Antonio shouts to the man standing stoic behind me with a
expression on his face. "What are your thoughts?"

Leonardo shrugs casually, clearly unbothered by any of this. "I
probably right, it makes sense. If this is the Russians, they're getting
ask, his There are few men who would dare stage an attack on someone's ho
e in his Alexei isn't stupid. He wouldn't attempt it if he knew it wouldn't pay o
loween "So I have a fucking rat?" Antonio scoffs, slamming a palm down
t. oak. The crack is deafening, but he shows no reaction. His eyes nar
counted Leonardo, his anger palpable as the men talk over one another.

friends. I shrink into my seat, lifting my knees to my chest and folding m
around them. For the next hour or so, the men go back and forth, figur
o at the the best way to flush out a rat all the while my eyes grow heavier. I
is. Mud glance at the clock, I blow out a breath at the early morning hour.

rousers The only topic that hasn't come up is where the hell we're supp
live, considering the mansion is in pieces on the ground. The
consumes me as my eyes flutter closed and I succumb to sleep.

varance. Hours later, or it could be only moments, large hands grab me and
ns him into a warm, comfortable chest. I keep my eyes closed, letting my h
; to be into the body, the familiar sandalwood scent permeating my no
blanketing me in pure comfort.

e of his “I’ll take her to my penthouse. We can figure the rest out tomor
; chest. deep voice mumbles, their hand curling under me to pull me closer. Tl
, of voices fills my ears, but I’m too lost in the haze of sleep to regist
cocaïne words as I settle into the body I’m curled into, my head nestled in their

When I awake again, sunlight streams through unfamiliar grey c
n aloud The mattress I’m lying on is like a soft cloud, and when I roll over, n
are drawn to a photo frame on the bedside table.

a bored A younger Leonardo stares back at me, his arm thrown over the s
of a petite, dark-haired woman who could be his twin. Their eye
‘Gio is matching shade of chocolate brown, and the easy smiles on their fa
braver. like a mirror image of one another.

me and My heart clenches at the sight—though I don’t know why.

off.” The smell of bacon pulls me from the bed, and I throw my legs o
t on the edge, noticing I’m no longer in the Catwoman costume but an ov
row on hoodie that is far too big for me.

It’s that moment I remember the explosions, the mansion falling to
y arms and my heart plummets. Not for the home that was never mine,
ing out belongings I learnt to love, but for the lives lost. For the people w
When I made a home in that place.

For their families, their friends.

osed to I’m not naïve enough to believe that it’s all about me. It’s clear the
thought and Russians have bad blood between them, but there’s something at

lift me fact that this all ramped up since I've been around. Or is there more
ead lollstory I'm not understanding?

se and Who the fuck am I kidding?

There's always more to the story.

row," a I drag myself from the comfort of the bed, and pad barefoot out
he echobedroom. The unfamiliar hallway is painted with magnolia and bare
er their décor. It leads to an open-plan kitchen and living room, which are al
: neck. bare as the hallway.

urtains. There's a basic grey couch in the lounge, pointing towards a la
ny eyesscreen TV on the wall, and in the kitchen, there's a large island, a k

one counter and a coffee maker on the other, but not much of anything
houlder Leonardo stands over the stove, the muscles on his back taut as h

s are aforwards to stir something. Without a shirt, his tan tattooed skin
ces are under the golden glow of the sun shining through the large windo

black and grey ink begs me to trace the lines etched into his skin. Lc

my eyes, I notice the grey sweatpants covering his legs and almost w
ver the when he turns around.

ersized I'm sure all men know that the universal weakness for women is a

grey sweats, and when I see the outline pressing against the mater
pieces, knees almost buckle. His answering chuckle sends a spark of heat

or the through me.

who had "Where are we?" I blurt, dropping my gaze to the floor when h

towards me. His long legs eat up the space between us and he wraps
around my back and pulls me into his chest.

Italians My palms land on his chest, the muscles tensing under my touch. F
out the down, his breath fanning over my ear when he talks. "This is my penth

"Where is everyone else?" I push him away, putting some much-

to the distance between us. Being in his presence after our last two interactions too overwhelming, I can barely breathe under his watchful eyes. "What happens now? The mansion, it's gone. Where do we go?"

"Well, for now, you stay here, with me. Antonio is staying at the mansion. And given how many breaches of security we've had lately, the safest place for you is anywhere that he isn't. So you're stuck with me for a little while. Most as I think you can handle it?"

I won't lie and say the thought of being away from Antonio doesn't register flat with instant relief. I know I can't stay here forever, but a little longer to settle onto terms with our life together is welcome. However, I don't know what else is possible that is if I'm stuck with the man in front of me.

He leans in. Leonardo makes me question everything.

He glances at the jumper cover. "I have nothing here," I tell him, gesturing at the jumper cover. The body. The material falls to the middle of my thighs, so it's not inappropriate necessarily, but being even a little underdressed in his presence isn't going to help my sanity.

"Don't worry, Princess. I have clothes you can wear for now, and I'll pick up whatever else you need another day. First you need to eat. Then I'll have to head to the casino."

"Okay, but do you have a phone I can borrow for now? I need to call my family."

With a nod, he reaches into the pocket of his sweatpants and pulls out his mobile to hand to me without hesitation. Thanking him, I grab it and head on my heels to rush out of the room.

I end up in the bedroom again, falling face-first onto the mattress. "I'm dialling the number of my family home back in England. After only a few minutes needed

tions isof rings, my father's voice comes down the phone and a wide smile l
"Whatlips.

"Hey, Papá."

casino "Bambina, is that you?" he asks happily, his voice a welcome sound
st placeare you, my sweet girl?"

longer, "I'm good, Papá. Though I miss you."

"I miss you too. Now, why are you ringing off Leonardo's phone?"

fill me My nose wrinkles at his question, confused as to why he woul
o comeLeonardo's number. As far as I'm aware, he's only ever met the man t
w howtime at my wedding, and there's no reason I can think of as to why
need to be in contact.

"How do you know whose phone this is?"

ing my A suspicious sounding cough comes down the line, and an av
ropriatesilence takes its place for a long moment before he answers, "I have
ood formen's numbers. You know I worry about your safety, Pippa."

"You worry too much," I tell him, taking a deep breath before ans
d we'llhis earlier question. It's only going to make him even more cautious. 'h
en weactually have my phone at the moment."

"Why?" he asks slowly, and without even seeing him, I know his
call myfurrowed in concern. My mouth turns into a frown, not wanting to wo
further, but knowing if I don't tell him and he discovers through sc
out hiselse, it will only make things worse.

spin on "The mansion got bombed. But it's okay, Papá. I wasn't inside at th
and I'm not injured or hurt in any way."

ess and A harsh breath comes down the line, followed by a handful of Italia
handfulwords. Rolling onto my back, I stare at the ceiling with a sigh, waiti
he's finished. It's another minute or two before he addresses me again.

lifts my “You’re safe? Right now?” he asks me.

“Yes, Papá.”

“That’s good.” He breathes out in relief. “I’m going to speak to /
l. “Howabout coming for a visit soon.”

“Papá—”

“No arguments, bambina. Anyway, it’s been far too long since I’ve
my little girl, and I’m in need of my Pippa cuddles. Plus, your sist
d havedying to see you, so I’ll bring them with me, and we can spend
hat onetogether, okay?”

· they’d “Okay,” I agree. I may not want my family to worry for me, esp
from thousands of miles away, but I can’t deny how happy the idea of
them makes me. I’ve never been away from them for longer than a
awkwardnight before I married Antonio and moved to New York, and my hear
: all thefrom missing them.

We spend another hour on the phone, not talking about much, just l
sweringin the company before he must leave. With a final “I love you,” the li
‘I don’tdead, and I’m left with only my thoughts in this bedroom.

When Leonardo comes in a little while later, a plate with bacon and
brow ishis hand, he takes one look at my forlorn expression and drops onto
rry himbeside me. “You okay?”

omeone “I don’t know,” I answer earnestly. The fact is, from the moment I
into that church over a month ago, everything changed. In more way:
ie time,can even comprehend. “It’s a lot, you know? Between Antonio, the R
wanting me, and you? I’m a little lost and a lot confused.”

in curse He nods but says nothing as he rolls onto his side and flicks his
ng untilmine. My breath comes out shakily, my eyes staying locked on the ceil

“Why am I here?”

“Here in my penthouse?” he asks, reaching out and tugging on a my hair.

Antonio “Just here. In New York. I miss my home, my family, my life.”

“Those are questions I can’t answer, Princess,” he tells me, moving his hand to fist my hair and pulling me so we’re face-to-face. My breath hugges at the closeness, my heart racing when his other hand cups my face. “I know we’re just going to have to trust that maybe it’s all for a good reason.”

a week “And if it’s not?”

“Do you trust me?” He leans in, his mouth hovering over mine and he especially asks the question.

“Absolutely not,” I breathe out with a dry laugh. “You’re the last person I should trust. You’re far too dangerous.”

He laughs, the sound a deep rumble that travels straight to my center. It sends a pulse of pleasure to my clit. “Correct answer.”

He closes the distance between us, claiming my mouth in a heated kiss. Fighting seems futile. Honestly, it’s impossible when he touches me to remember the reasons I shouldn’t let him. So instead, I fall into his arms, telling myself that this once it’s okay to give in to the connection I feel with him. He pulls me to the bed.

We stay there, losing ourselves in each other, though we don’t want to. His kiss is devouring; sweet and sensual too. No matter how long I want to touch him, to trace his skin with my hands, to feel him work inside me, I don’t.

This may not be appropriate with a man who isn’t my husband, but at least I can convince myself I’m not doing too much wrong if it stays like this for a while. After several long, heated minutes, his phone rings, and he pulls away from me with a growl. His stare is hungry as he watches me, answering the call.

lock of call without taking his eyes off me.

“Duty calls,” he tells me, peeling himself from the bed and walking the floor-to-ceiling wardrobe opposite the bed. When he slides the morning his doors open, a line of suits fill one side, though it’s the other that catches eyes.

‘You’re Women’s clothing fill the space, an array of dresses in different and jumpers, jeans and t-shirts too. He chucks a pair of dark denim jeans at me, followed by a peach cashmere sweater with the order to get dressed when he My heart sinks at the sight despite the fact I’m a married woman—me he wasn’t married, and I’d stupidly convinced myself that meant there was no woman in his life at all.

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call without taking his eyes off me.

“Duty calls,” he tells me, peeling himself from the bed and walking over to the floor-to-ceiling wardrobe opposite the bed. When he slides the mirrored doors open, a line of suits fill one side, though it’s the other that catches my eyes.

Women’s clothing fill the space, an array of dresses in different colours and jumpers, jeans and t-shirts too. He chucks a pair of dark denim jeans at me, followed by a peach cashmere sweater with the order to get dressed.

My heart sinks at the sight despite the fact I’m a married woman—he told me he wasn’t married, and I’d stupidly convinced myself that meant there was no woman in his life at all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The ride to the casino is awkward, with Leonardo flicking glances my way the whole way. I keep my mouth shut, not wanting to be a hypocrite and call him out for giving me another woman's clothes. They fit me perfectly—which only makes me angrier.

Clearly the man has a type, and I'm not sure how to handle that right now. Antonio waits in the lobby, holding a glass tumbler with a couple of fingers of amber liquid. He glances at us, his eyes narrowing when we look towards him. I take another step away from Leonardo, putting more distance between us.

"Nice of you to finally make an appearance, Leo," Antonio sneers, his mouth turning down as he stares at his consigliere. "And my wife is so glad to see you alive, turns out you're a hard woman to kill."

"I didn't realise you've tried," I blurt before I can think better of it. In a wince, I step away from him, gesturing to the bartender for a wine. And since the man isn't in my best interest, nor is engaging in an argument I don't ever win.

“Dead, alive, what difference does it make? You’re hardly of any use to me at the moment.” He glances down at my flat stomach, a scowl on his face. My blood chills, his eyes like chips of ice on me. “The only thing I’ve done since you’ve come here is cause commotion and have my men kill you.”

“Ant,” Leonardo warns, moving in front of the man and gesturing for him to go out the door to his office. “Let’s go talk in your office, away from prying eyes and ears.”

“Fine,” Antonio agrees, pushing off the bar and stalking to the other side of the bar. He stares at me, raising a brow in question. Spending any amount of time with both these men together is not something I want to give up my morning for, but it’s not as if I have any choice. So I sigh, grab my glass from the bartender with a thank you, and follow them.

The door slams behind me, and I drop down into one of the seats, taking a generous amount of liquid down my throat. The familiar burn is a welcome comfort while the two men stare angrily at one another.

“We need to do something, Leo,” Antonio says, running a hand through his hair. “I’m sick of Alexei having the upper hand. It’s time we go on the offensive.”

“You’re the boss,” Leonardo replies sardonically, a wry twist to his mouth though Antonio doesn’t seem to notice. “But think wisely, Ant. How do we attack without word getting out? If we’re right and there’s a rat in our midst, Alexei will be forewarned.”

My eyes widen as they continue to talk. I’d heard the whispers of a betrayal when I was falling asleep last night, but I was too tired to think anything of it at that moment. If it’s true, then anyone within Antonio’s circle could be working for the Russians, and that means I’m not safe anywhere.

Or with anyone.

use to But Antonio.

his face. The one man who makes me feel the least safe when I'm in his company. You've My eyes travel to Leonardo, my heart speeding up when he sends a wink while Antonio closes his eyes, squeezing the bridge of his nose for the person who makes me feel the safest, and yet, could he be the rat? Yes and No.

That's impossible.

face, he He's the one who has had direct access to me for weeks, and if he were working for the men who wanted me, I've no doubts he'd have managed to get me long before now.

from the "We only take a handful of men. Luca, Gio, Nico," Antonio says, looking off the men who seem to be the closest to him. "I trust them with my life." "But then who watches the wife?" Their eyes lock on me at Leonardo's question, their brows furrowed.

"I'm right here you know," I snap, pushing off the chair and tipping the remaining liquid in my glass down my throat before continuing. "Trust me with you."

"Not a bad idea, actually," Leonardo ponders despite Antonio's insinuation, otherwise. His friend turns to him, an exasperated look on his face. I shrug, dropping into the seat beside me and resting his elbows on his knees. "She can shoot pretty well, and she's handy with a knife if things get ugly, but she can just sit in the car and be lookout otherwise."

of a rat "We don't bring women in, Leo," Antonio comments, letting out a sigh. "Leaving me behind is only going to leave me vulnerable if there could be anyone else you trust to sit me," I tell them, moving over to the bar and pouring myself a generous amount of vodka from one of the opened bottles.

At this point, I couldn't care less one way or another.

They go back and forth over the next few minutes, arguing the merits of leaving me alone in Leonardo's penthouse, or letting me sit in a car while they do God only knows what to get the upper hand.

When they finally look my way again, Leonardo wears a smug expression. His eyes alight with mischief and mayhem as he swipes his thumb across his full bottom lip. Antonio looks less happy, shaking his head in defeat and sighs.

"You win, wife," he says, grabbing his glass and tipping the remaining red liquid down his throat with a wince. He turns to his friend, tilting his head towards the door. "Leo, go and tell the others the plan. I don't have to list how important it is that only those trusted are in the know."

"You wound me, friend. This isn't my first rodeo." He flips his hand towards Leonardo's mine, his eyes moving over me in a heated way. "Come on, Princess. Go."

Setting the glass on the desk, I move across the floor, but Antonio stops me with a harsh grip around my wrist. The skin burns under his fingers as he twists, pulling me towards him. "She can stay here until you come. I need a word with my wife."

Leonardo looks as if he wants to argue, his mouth setting in a harsh line. A moment before he nods and exits the room—leaving Antonio and me alone. The door closes behind him, and the hair at the nape of my neck stands on attention when Antonio pulls me against him, his hand settling on my stomach.

"Antonio, please don't," I whisper, a bitter chill running down my spine as his hand moves lower, slipping under the waistband of my jeans.

"You know saying no gets you nowhere, wife. I'd happily hand you over to the Russians tonight, you know?" He chuckles, sliding a finger through

erits offolds. The feeling is like ice on my skin, his calloused fingers thrus
nd waitme while he whispers in my ear. “You mean next to nothing to me, P
means to an end, and yet you can’t even deliver on that front.”

ression, A whimper slips from my mouth when a dull ache starts at my entra
ver hismore he prods his fingers. This is nothing like being with Leonardo
it as hehim, it’s like a flame has been lit inside of me and my body needs
needs him. This is cold, violent, and painful.

naining “Take off your trousers.” He pulls his fingers out of me, pushing m
is headfrom him until I fall over his desk, my hands stinging as they slam aga
tell youwood. Tears fill my eyes, but I do as he tells me.

My fingers tremble as I fumble with the button, my vision becomin
gaze towith the unshed tears pooling in my eyes. Crying gets me nowhere. E
s. Let’sgets me nowhere. I’m trapped here with him, and when I push the d
the floor and he grabs my hips, instead of closing my eyes and focu
rops methe dark as I normally do, I picture dark hair and brown eyes.

s as he I picture calloused tattooed hands that only ever feel gentle wh
back. Ihandle me.

I picture warmth and comfort and home.

line for I picture Leonardo, even though I know I shouldn’t.

e alone. And for once, it doesn’t feel quite so bad while it lasts.

ands to

y lower



spine as

Burning water scalds my skin as the shower streams over me. I scrub
ou over raw with the loofah, as if that can somehow take away the remnants
ugh my

t inside Antonio has done. Tears stream down my face, lost in the running water. Aruns down the drain.

The waves of sadness come and go, but the anger stays. Every time since the I'm doing okay, he claims me again and reminds me I can never escape. With clutches. He is my husband, and I am his wife, and together we're locked more—a union neither of us can escape.

When I finally emerge from the bathroom, a robe wrapped tightly around my waist, I freeze in the doorway at the sight of Leonardo sitting on the edge of the bed. He watches me with dark eyes, his jaw clenched as he takes in the marks on my wrist from where Antonio pinned me to his desk.

My head is hazy. When he stands, I step backwards instinctively. My skin heats with a burning sensation. He reaches for me, his hand fisting in my hair. He pulls me forward, pinning me down until our breaths mingle.

“Did you fuck him?” he asks, his tone ice cold as he stares down at me. His fingers twist in my hair, gripping the strands to where I have to lean against them to stop a whimper from falling out.

“He’s my husband,” I remind him, keeping my voice blank. I know better than to spill all my feelings and emotions to this man. There may be a connection between us, but Antonio is his friend and his boss. So it’s no surprise that he thinks I’m sleeping with Antonio by choice.

And how could I explain that I allow myself to be taken against my will anyway? I’m not totally defenceless. I have weapons at my disposal. Whenever he comes for me, I freeze and can’t break free.

“Tell me, Princess.” He leans down, pressing his forehead against my neck. “Did he bend you over his desk, slide inside you slowly, and drive you to ecstasy? Or did he pound so hard that stars filled your vision? Or did

ter as itthere, limp like a rag doll because you know that he can't give you what
need."

I think "What is it you think I need?"
ape his "Euphoria," he answers, pressing his lips to mine and branding me with
ked intoheat. Every bit of anger inside him pushes into me into that moment
don't stop myself from claiming it. It fuels me when I kiss him back
at myhis shirt, pulling him closer until he backs me up and slams me against
edge ofdoor.

s in the A groan slips from my mouth when he pulls away, dragging his lips
my cheek, down my jaw, and stopping at my neck.

hen he "Leonardo." His name comes out in a breathy moan as he closes
leaningover my pulse point, taking the skin between his teeth and sucking his
stays there for a long moment, marking me with his mouth.

at me. A satisfied smirk covers his lips when he pulls back, his arms curling
bite myover his chest. My chest rises, my breaths harsh as I watch him. The
of wearing him on my skin long after he leaves fills me with warmth.

v better "Sleep with him again, Princess, and I'll slit his throat," he tells me
y be a voice unwavering and hard. His eyes are hard as steel, the smirk on his
s bettervicious when he next speaks. "And while he bleeds out on the floor, I
you using his blood as lube."

ny will My eyes widen, though I can't deny the ache that starts in my chest
al. Butwords. They're cruel, almost feral, and yet they turn me on more than
anything ever has before. He stalks to the door, throwing it open and
t mine.me there alone. I slump against the wall, my heart drumming against
you tochest.

you lie Walking on shaky legs across the floor, I grab for the high-waisted
jeans and black sweater left behind for me. Black boots sit at the foot

hat youbed, stealth clearly the aim of the game for tonight.

Make-up sits on the nightstand, a hair dryer and hairbrush next to it.

let my thoughts linger on who they might belong to, knowing I don't h
with hisright. It takes longer to cover the mark than it should, and wh
t, and I disappeared from my skin, hiding under the layers of make-up, I n
.. I gripsight of it.

inst the I toss my hair into a sleek ponytail and dress quickly. When I'm rea
on the bed and drop my head into my hands. Blowing out a shaky b
ps overforce my mind to focus on what's coming next instead of wallowing
and confusion.

his lips Leonardo comes to get me an hour later, saying nothing as he l
ard. Hedown the apartment building and into the underground garage. A larg

SUV waits for us there, Antonio already sitting in the back while Le
rossingmoves around to the passenger seat, leaving me no choice but to c
thoughtnext to my husband.

The car is quiet, filled with tense energy, as Nico rolls out of the b
me, hisand drives away from the city lights and towards darkness. I know littl
his faceplan for this evening, just that my job is to sit in the car and wait.

'll fuck Wait for them to prove themselves, or some shit like that.

Seems redundant.

it at his Instead of attacking the enemy, they should strengthen their walls fi
re than Starting a war when you have a rat in your midst doesn't seem t
leavingstrategy in the world. And I can't imagine tonight will end with anyth
inst mythan bloodshed and destruction.

We finally pull up to a nightclub at least an hour away from the cit
d blacklets the car idle on the kerb, his fingers clenched around the steering w
t of the The street is littered with people, men and women stumbling arc

they chase whatever high they're seeking for the night. Lights flicker through the windows, enticing you to lose your inhibitions and fall prey to desire and debauchery.

When it's But that's not why we're here.

Miss the Antonio steps out first, spearing me with a glare as he orders me to get out. Nico hands me a burner phone before following him, the numbers already pre-programmed for if things go south. Though how I'm supposed to breathe, that with the street as busy as it is with unrecognisable faces, I haven't time in pity. Leonardo stays in his seat, his eyes focused out the window while my hands twist awkwardly in my lap, the phone balanced between my thighs. He opens his mouth as though to say something but clamps it shut before he turns to face me with hard eyes.

Leonardo "I feel like I at least need coffee and donuts," I tease, watching his dissatisfaction as a slight twitch lifts the corner of his mouth before he returns to his expression once more.

Building "You don't even drink coffee," he mutters, cocking his head slightly. He reaches into the glove compartment and pulling out something that makes his face lifting into a wide smile. "Anyone comes within an inch of this car, roll the window down and shoot, got it?"

I clap excitedly, reaching over and snatching my SIG Sauer from his hands. It's like a kid at Christmas. Tension I didn't know I was carrying releases from me as he best waves as I grip the metal handle. My eyes lock on his, my smile widening less his scowl when I try to thank him.

"I need you to agree, Princess," he warns, leaning over the centre console. Nico and resting his hand on my thigh. Even with the denim barrier, my skin tingles where he holds me.

Round as "What am I agreeing to?" I ask, almost groaning when his thumb rubs

er from the seam of my thigh.

delicious He rolls his eyes, a ghost of a smile passing on his lips. “Shoot first.

“Always,” I agree, placing my hand on his and squeezing lightly against the forms in my stomach. “You’ll be safe, right?”

to stay “You worried about me?” he asks, a brow raised as he watches me. I need a flush heating my face under his scrutiny. Admitting aloud that my feelings are becoming much more than lust isn’t something I’m open to doing—a clue. are already far too complicated with everything else going on.

while my A tap on the window pulls his attention from me, though his hand lingers. A moment more. He grabs the handle, pushing the passenger door open. turning a final lingering look, his eyes telling me something I can’t read, he steps out of the car and leaves me in silence.

coming in The three men walk down the street, their strides confident as they head toward their way to the doors of the nightclub. I wish I was feeling some confidence, but the only thing I feel is sick.

before Climbing over the console, I drop into the driver’s seat, pulling in a deep breath. Time passes slowly while I wait, and eventually rain pours, filling the streets as people rush past to escape the elements.

I tighten my grip on my gun, holding it flush to my thigh. The wait feels like the worst, and my mood plummets the longer I sit here staring out of the window. There is no sign of the men, no sign that the others Antonio mentioned are even here yet.

After an hour passes, I become twitchy. Maybe Antonio was right. I should have stayed back at the penthouse. I pull the keys from the ignition, step out of the car, and shoving them in my back pocket.

This is a terrible idea, and yet the more I think about it, the more I realize I can’t have the patience to wait for them to come back. Sliding my g

the waistband of my jeans, I tug my sweater down, concealing the hand
start towards the club.

When I reach the door, I offer a confident smile to the doormen, silent prayer they don't ask to see my ID. Sure, at twenty-one I can I shrug, drink in America, but since I don't have any of my personal belongings the bombing of the mansion, I have no way to prove my age.

They eye me for a moment before the stockier one of the two nods his head at me and pulls the door open to let me pass, and I blow out a breath of relief.

Bright lights assault my eyes the moment I step onto the tiled floor. Echoes off the walls, the sounds of drums and bass pulling the patrons onto the dancefloor. Arms wave in the air, hips writhe and grind, and all the while I make sure none of the men I've come inside to search for.

I push through the bodies crowding on the dancefloor, my eyes drawn to an open door near the back of the room. It looks to lead up the stairs to a deep, covered balcony, and while I can see nothing—and this is probably a terrible idea—a trickle of awareness washes over me, and I move toward it.

The staircase is devoid of any life when I make my way up. The pounding in my stomach grows heavier, and I press my hand to my back, grabbing the railing and flicking the safety off. When I reach the top, I pause for a beat, pushing a deep breath before pushing at the door and leaving the safety of the floor downstairs.

"Pippa," a deep accented voice says the moment the door closes behind me. Steeling myself, I blink a few times to adjust to the low lighting before flicking my gaze over the room and landing on the man in question. "What is it with the Italians and being so damn predictable?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint," I mumble, my finger flush to the trigger.

As the light flickers in the back of the room and Alexei steps out of the shadows,

That same wave of familiarity I felt at the wedding hits me, my mind narrowing as he gestures to a set of seats next to him. “Take a seat. I’ll legally have a chat.”

As given “I’d rather stand, I think.”

“Stubborn too.” He chuckles, dropping down into one of the chairs with his dark arm thrown over the back, and one ankle propped on his thigh, his breath of comfortable and relaxed—it’s unnerving. Frightening, I suppose, given I must know Antonio and his men are here tonight.

Music And yet I don’t fear him, even though I probably should.

As to the “How did you know I’d be here?” I ask, stepping into the room first while, I flick my eyes over the space. Aside from the two chairs, the room is a study of décor. Black walls and black flooring with a wall sconce that flickers on and off periodically. The only life to be found is the echoes from the hallway towards downstairs.

Probably a “Like I said,” he murmurs, a smirk on his lips as he watches me. “The words are nothing if not predictable. You’ve been around them for too long, and it in my become just like them.”

My gun My eyes narrow on him, a scowl at my lips while he continues, “I’m bringing incontro educazione”

As padded “You speak Italian.” I gape at him in shock, my heart thundering with the flicks a vicious smile at me.

Behind “I know my enemy, Pippa.” He shrugs, dropping his arm and looking up here forwards. With a tilt to his head, he raises a brow, gesturing. “The question do you?”

“I doubt I have enemies, I’m just a lone woman in a man’s world.”

As a “You’re the most important woman in that world,” he tells me, gesturing

adows. the seat beside him again. This time, I don't argue, just drop down and
my eyes my legs at the ankles in faux comfort—placing my gun on my thigh. I
We can't for a moment before lifting his gaze to mine again.

“It's amusing, really, that you think that. You claim to know your
you learn their language, and yet you don't understand their hierarchy.
s. With “I never said you were high up on the food chain, Pippa. In fact,
e looks probably the lowest. Those men you're surrounded by? They don't
iven he important women. They chain them, drag them into the pits, and bury
under children and housework.”

“That's awfully judgemental of you,” I comment, though I don't disagree
her and He's correct. After all, that's everything my father warned me of but
is bare came here—that being the perfect wife was imperative. “Can you help
kers on say your Bratva is any better?”

he club He doesn't answer, only chuckles to himself for a moment. The scar
face wrinkles as he does, a harsh reminder that his world is as bad as the
Italians perhaps worse, even.

you've “You utter the word with such disdain, as though you've already
we're worse than you precious Italians, which is awfully judgemental
‘Natura too, don't you think?’”

“I guess that's a character flaw we share, then.”

when he “I guess so,” he agrees, lifting from his chair and moving to the
barrier that overlooks the floor below. “What do you think your next
leaning planning to do here tonight?”

stion is, “Like you said, women aren't high up on the food chain here. I
clued into their movements, and even if I was, I'd hardly be telling
about it.”

uring to “Why did you leave the safety of the car and come in here?” My

id crosschills with his words, an icy blister burning me alive inside. How c
He eyesknow I was sitting in the car? How did he even know I'd be here tonig

He turns away, walking towards the door and pulling it open. H
enemy, straightens, his shoulders tensing as he speaks once more. "Ren
" Pippa. I know my enemy. Perhaps it's time you learn yours. I'll be
you'reyou."

1't like With that, he leaves me there, sitting in the dark. Footsteps bound
y themstairs a little while later, hurried and impatient as Antonio storms i
room and finds me sitting there. His eyes narrow on me, and a scow
isagree. over his face as he walks towards me.

efore I My eyes water in fear when he reaches out, his fingers threading in
onestlyas he pulls me up. When he steps back, I let out a sigh of relief, but it
lived when the back of his hand comes flying at my cheek. The weigh
r on his slap, paired with his anger, has my head snapping backwards ar
mine—reverberating through my skull.

Blood rushes to my ears, the pounding of my heart the only thin
decidedfocus on as he stares down at me. His blue eyes are icy and cold, his
of you in stone.

"Do you know what you are, wife?" His voice is deadly as he
unwavering and brittle. "Pathetic. You can't just sit in a car and wa
e glasshave to inject yourself, and what happens when you do? You have
nen are chat with the man who wants you dead."

While there is some truth to his words, I think he's wrong about th
I'm notThere isn't a single part of me that believes Alexei intends to ha
you all despite evidence that perhaps says otherwise.

He sent a man to grab me off the street, then he bombed the hom
y bloodliving—and yet tonight, he had prime opportunity to end my life or sn

does he away, and he didn't. Instead, we talked without a single raised voice.
What? A weapon fired.

is back Which is more than I can say for the man standing in front of me.
I remember, "I'm sorry," I utter, lowering my gaze to the floor so he doesn't see
me seeing in my eyes. Angering my husband is the last thing I need to do.
His answering scoff goes straight to the pit in my stomach, nausea threatening to
blow me up.

He says, "I don't care for your apologies, but if I find you getting comfortable
with taking a Russian again, I will kill you."

He spins on his heels, exiting the way he came on heavy feet. The
weight of my hairy hand feels heavy as my palm tightens around it. I wonder what my
husband's short would say if I used it against my husband . . . or perhaps I should
use it of his against myself.

And pain Either way, I'd be dead.

I've never feared the inevitable.

But I can Death calls for us all when it's our time.

My face set These days I often wonder if it isn't a blessing to face death early
rather than a curse.

He speaks,

and says, "You

are a cosy

and the latter.

Warn me

and I was

catch me

away, and he didn't. Instead, we talked without a single raised voice, or a weapon fired.

Which is more than I can say for the man standing in front of me.

"I'm sorry," I utter, lowering my gaze to the floor so he doesn't see the lie in my eyes. Angering my husband is the last thing I need to do. His answering scoff goes straight to the pit in my stomach, nausea threatening me.

"I don't care for your apologies, but if I find you getting comfortable with a Russian again, I will kill you."

He spins on his heels, exiting the way he came on heavy feet. The gun in my hand feels heavy as my palm tightens around it. I wonder what my father would say if I used it against my husband . . . or perhaps I should use it against myself.

Either way, I'd be dead.

I've never feared the inevitable.

Death calls for us all when it's our time.

These days I often wonder if it isn't a blessing to face death early rather than a curse.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I feel him before I see him. His eyes burn a hole in my back as I dance across the dancefloor, letting my hips sway in time with the music. When Antonio left me, there didn't seem a reason to go back to the car. I grabbed a bottle of vodka from the bar and found my way to the dance floor.

The alcohol burns its way down my throat as I sway side to side, lost in myself in the crowd. When large hands pull at my hips, I don't deny them, even though my husband is in this building somewhere—but al mio consigliere, who might be an even bigger problem, is also around, always watching my every move.

We stand there for long moments, moving against each other, then I never turn. His face doesn't matter. Nothing matters in this moment. For now, I'm just a twenty-one-year-old girl.

A girl who isn't tied to a man who violates her or trapped in a war between two sides who want to keep her for their own benefit and shackle her. I doubt anyone can win.

A girl who isn't falling in love with a man she can never have, no matter how much her heart and mind war over him.

When the hands move over my thighs, I let out a low moan and re-
the body behind me. I press the hand not holding the vodka agai
fingers, helping guide them as they caress me over my clothing. O
waist, to the underside of my breasts, back down until they reach m
thighs . . . so close to where I should want no one after what Antonio
afternoon, but the one place I need friction—though it’s the wrong
behind me.

I move
c. After
stead, I
floor.
, losing
y them,
so, his
d here,
But the need to replace the imprint of Antonio’s hands on my skin
feeling of him inside me is overwhelming, and when the hand roam
skin cups my pussy, I can’t find the words to say no. For one moment,
to be free of those shackles. I want to feel something other than h
dread. Anything but confusion and helplessness.

But like perfect moments, it ends abruptly when gunshots echo thro
room, reverberating off the walls before being replaced with screams c
as patrons rush to escape the floor.

The man behind me lets go in an instant, pulling away and darting
safety while I stand there, a statue. Not in fear though, I just don’t h
energy to move.

rough I
or right
balcony again. He drags me up the stairs, slamming the door shut behi

etween
—a war
matter
“You’ve been a naughty girl, haven’t you?” he asks, watching me
raised brow. Straightening my back, my gaze locks on him, m
narrowing when he grabs the bottle from my hand and places it onto
in the corner before grabbing my hips and spinning me so I’m pressed
the glass pane that overlooks the club. He pulls my hands up, pressin
against the glass with a mumbled, “Stay there.”

lax into Maybe it's the alcohol, or maybe it's the way he says the comm
inst his deep and alluring, but I do as he says. A war wages below us. Weap
ver my drawn, men are shot, and shouts of horror continue while the club fa
y inner disarray between two warring Mafias.

did this "Shouldn't you be down there?" I ask when Leonardo steps behind
person hand finds my ponytail, wrapping it around his fist once, then twice
tugs my head backwards. The bottle of vodka is back in his hand,
and he presses it against my closed lips.

ing my "Swallow for me, Princess," he commands, pressing his hardening c
, I want into my back. My mouth opens on a gasp, and he uses the moment to
urt and bottle. With the angle of my head, swallowing is more difficult, and
on the liquid as it sits in my throat, though this doesn't discourage h
ugh he tips the bottle more, forcing more liquid into my mouth.

of terror "God, you sound so fucking good when you choke. I can't wait to
when those lips are wrapped around my dick." He pulls the bottle
g off to pushing my head forwards so the remaining liquid spills to the flo
ave the breaths coming out ragged as I try to bite back the gags. "You let som
touch you. I'm sure I told you earlier what happens if someone touches
it of his "No. You told me what you'd do to my *husband* if I slept wi
rds the Nothing about any other man," I quip when I finally catch my bre
nd us. doesn't move from my back, only drops the bottle to the floor with
with a thud before closing his hands over mine against the glass.

y eyes "Do I need to spell it out for you?"

a table "Sure, go ahead," I quip dryly, ignoring the tingles that travel throug
against "Nobody touches you, Princess," he tells me, running his hands do
ig the arms slowly. Goosebumps form on my skin, the material of r
thankfully hiding the reaction. When he reaches my shoulders, he sli

and, so hands over them and down towards my breasts. “I’ve been more than
ons are with you up until now. Waited for you to come to me, and yet you
ills into pushing me away. Why?”

“Because you’re dangerous.” My breath hitches when he cups my t
me. His the material, his fingers pressing into the sensitive skin. I bite my lip
until he the moan that threatens to escape. My heart pounds against my chest v
and he tugs at the hem of my shirt and pulls it upwards. His fingers dance ac
bare skin at my waist, the calloused tips sending sparks of heat through
erection he continues his trail.

o tip the “Have you ever thought that you’re the dangerous one?”

I choke I shake my head, letting it drop back onto his chest when his har
im. He under the lace of my bra and cup my breasts. He kneads the skin, my
hardening under his touch, before he takes the pebbled nubs betw
hear it fingers and pinches hard.

o away, “You didn’t answer me,” he tells me before pressing a hot open-m
ior, my kiss on my neck. My eyes roll back when he suckles the skin into his
nobody his teeth grazing my pulse point. He pinches my nipples again, a
s you.” combination of his mouth and fingers has my panties flooding with jui
th him. “How could I be dangerous to you?” I ask breathlessly, my head
ath. He when he moves his mouth, peppering kisses across my neck and j
a light While he continues to caress my left tit, his other hand travels over my
stopping at the waistband of my jeans.

“You’re the only thing I can think about. This tight little body of
gh me. those breathy moans you make when I kiss you just right, the way you
own my when I finally slide into your tight cunt and take what’s mine. Don’t
ny top it yet?”

ides his “Get what?” I breathe.

patient “From the moment I walked into that church, you’ve owned me. You’re still the most dangerous person in my world because you’re a weakness I can’t afford. And yet I’m too far fucking gone to care.” With those words, he presses his hips over my hips again, spinning me so my back is pressed to the glass and my head to stop flush with his. “I want to own you. I want every single piece of you when he heart, your soul, your mind.”

cross the “I have a husband,” I argue weakly, swallowing hard as his jaw clamps down on me as My tongue swipes out, sliding along dry lips as his eyes turn hard on me. “You are mine,” he demands, pressing a hand to my throat. “Tell me you’re mine.” I shake my head, refusing to say the words aloud.

nds slip I can’t. I can’t give him that kind of power over me.

nipples “Princess,” he growls, pressing me harder into the glass as his other hand slides between us and pops the button on my jeans. He doesn’t stop pushing the denim down my legs, just slips his hand under my bra and underwear and runs a finger through my folds. “You’re so fucking wet for me, it’s all for me, isn’t it?”

and the “Shit,” I hiss when he finds my clit and circles it slowly, his fingers playing me perfectly. He leans in, his forehead against mine as he rolls his hips, pressing against my entrance. He takes his time, circling my heat with his tongue, pushing inside me. I open my mouth, my words coming out jumbled as he wraps his arms around my waist, him for more.

He only chuckles and continues his slow thrust inside me. I slide my hands over his shoulders, my nails digging into the material of his black t-shirt. “I’ll feel you get inside me and pressing his thumb against my clit. He works his fingers out, his thrusts more frenzied with each one. “And when you take me, it’ll be the last one you ever take. Do you understand?”

You're *Oh my fucking God.*

I can't I spiral towards my climax, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as he grabs her and presses against my clit while sliding a third finger inside me. He fucks my chest hard with his hand, drawing me closer and closer to the edge. "Tell me who you belong to and I'll give you everything you crave."

I shake my head, refusal heavy on my tongue as he pulls out of my pussy and steps away. My answering whimper comes out in a cry, though he pays no mind and pushes my jeans down, leaving them to pool around my ankles. "Next, he drags my top over my head, tossing it over his shoulder. Suddenly, only in my bra and panties, I feel more exposed than I ever have under his lazy gaze—but there's no insecurity. Only lust, as he watches me."

He devours me with his eyes, taking his time to wander over every inch of my skin before locking on my face again. Pure hunger reflected in his lacegaze, and my chest rises heavily as I take him in.

And "Who do you belong to, Princess?" He tugs his shirt over his head, dropping it to the floor before thumbing his trousers. He doesn't bother with the button, just pushes the material down, taking his boxers with them. I bite my lip when his erection springs free, a moan slipping past my lips before he grips it in his hand, pumping twice before walking back towards me as I beg for more.

His lips quirk into a crooked smile when I shake my head again—refusing to give him what he wants.

"I can't," I tell him, my eyes dipping to the ground.

He might think he wants to claim me. To take every piece of me. But his pieces are broken and tied to someone else. They aren't mine to give. Though, maybe just tonight, I can give him what he wants. Just this once.

"But I want you to fuck me anyway. I want you to claim me, Leon."

want you to take everything I am. All the broken pieces and put them together. Tonight, I want to be yours.”

He groans at my admission, his eyes hooded with lust as he steps toward me. Cupping my arsecheeks, he lifts me to his chest. My legs wrap around him instinctively when he presses me against the wall, holding me close. “Just for tonight?”

“Just tonight,” I repeat, sliding my hands into his dark hair and through his fingers. “I can’t give you anything more than this.” “Yeah, we’ll see about that,” he mumbles dangerously, but I don’t bother to argue before he leans in and presses his lips to mine. My mouth opens, and he wastes no time sliding his tongue past my lips and down my chest.

A throb starts in my centre when his cock pulses against my clit, creating a delicious friction through the lace of my panties. He slides his hand down my back, his head buried in my hair, before pushing inside me. My back arches with surprise at the feel of him. Never in my life have I been so deliciously

My hips buck against him in desperation, seeking more. The sound of his slapping skin fills the room, my moans being swallowed into his mouth. “Tell me you want to continue to fuck mine with his tongue.”

With one hand against my back, he pulls the other free, sliding it between our bodies until he finds my clit and makes rough circles around it. He tugs his hair, pulling him from my mouth so I can breathe. Instead of kissing me again in another kiss, he leans down, closing his lips over a part of my chest and sucking it hard enough that a cry slips out of me.

He claims every piece of me then—as he said he wanted to.

In this moment, I’d give him everything he could ask for.

Wanton need rushes me in waves, a coil of pleasure threatening to

m backas he continues to thrust inside me. He pinches my clit and stars flash
vision as I barrel towards my climax.

owards “You’re so fucking hot, Princess. Wet and tight,” he growls, poundi
aroundme harder. The glass at my back shakes with every thrust, my body
e there.cusp of orgasm as my pussy pulses around him. “Give in to me, baby.

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Gun shots still ring out beneath us—but there isn’t a thing in the wo
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as he continues to thrust inside me. He pinches my clit and stars flash in my vision as I barrel towards my climax.

“You’re so fucking hot, Princess. Wet and tight,” he growls, pounding into me harder. The glass at my back shakes with every thrust, my body on the cusp of orgasm as my pussy pulses around him. “Give in to me, baby. Choke my dick with your cunt. Claim me as yours as I claim you. Come for me.”

His words send me over the edge, and I give him all of me then; a scream on my tongue as I come harder than I ever have before. This only drives him more, and he thrusts harder and harder, his orgasm following mine moments later.

His forehead drops, pressing against mine as his breath fans my cheeks. Gun shots still ring out beneath us—but there isn’t a thing in the world that could pull me away from this bubble with him.

For one perfect moment, he is mine and I am his.

The rest of the world be damned.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The scent of blood permeates the air—the metallic tang sitting on my tongue as the sounds of muffled screams reach through the doorway. For the last hour, I’ve tried to lose myself in the words on the page in front of me . . . but it’s pointless.

After we cleaned up on the balcony, Leonardo dragged me out to the car and demanded Nico drive me back to the penthouse with strict instructions that no matter what I heard, I was to stay in the bedroom and not come out.

Unfortunately for him, following orders doesn’t seem to be something I’m very good at. Though he certainly reaped the rewards of my rule before he was earlier tonight—so he can’t complain too much.

Rolling my neck, I close my book softly, laying it on the bedside table before sliding out of bed. There’s a chill in the air this evening, a breeze that washes over me as I stand. I grab the hoodie I woke up in this morning, pulling it over my head and inhaling the soft scent of sandalwood that lingers in the fabric.

The hem falls to my mid-thigh, so I skip grabbing anything for my feet and pad out of the room on soft feet. The sounds are coming from

farthest room to the back of the hall. And though I know I should go to the living room and put something on the television to drown them out, my curious nature stops me.

I tiptoe my way to the door, my palm pressing against the wood while I tip my ear towards the noise. Voices talk over one another, the sound brittle and broken when it reaches me. Whatever is going on in the living room is pleasant, though, that's for sure when another muffled scream bounces off the walls, and I can't help but wonder who is behind the door.

A shiver passes over me, my back stiffening when I hear my name whispered. My hand presses against the metal handle, pushing lightly against the wooden door. I can think better of it.

"I wouldn't." Startled, I spin on my heel, clapping a hand against my chest as Nico stares at me pointedly, his brow cocked. Blowing out a breath, I shake my head.

"I wasn't, I was—"

"Just taking a midnight stroll?" he asks, cutting me off with a low chuckle.

"I can promise you, Shortie, you don't want to go in there."

"What did you just call me?" I ask, propping my hand on my hip and stalking towards him. He only laughs further, flinging an arm over his shoulders and pulling me into the kitchen with him.

"Sorry, not sorry. You're tiny compared to all of us, so it's what I've been calling you in my head since you got here," he tells me, pushing me towards the island.

"Good to know, I guess." Wrinkling my nose, I hop up onto one of the stools propped by the island. My feet swaying in the air as he flicks them to life. Aside from the odd occasion I've been in the car with Antoni

to the hasn't said more than five words to me in all the time I've been in Nevada, my "Are you allowed to talk to me?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asks, his brow furrowing in confusion.

I gently "Dunno." I shrug, tapping my fingers against the marble counter. "The sound just very quiet usually. I guess I figured you didn't like me much, because I wasn't allowed to fraternise with the boss's belongings."

off the "Neither. But if you haven't noticed, Ant is a man of few words. It's easier just to stay quiet."

name "Do you like him?" I blurt without thinking, mentally slapping myself before I when he chuckles deeply and slides a mug of tea over to me.

questions like that, to men like Nico, can only lead to terrible things. My chest "He's my boss." He smiles, though there's something hidden in the creath, I of his hazel eyes that I can't read.

"He's my husband." I shrug, the vodka from earlier clearly loosening my tongue as I continue without conscious thought. "But that doesn't mean I huckle him much."

"Touché." He laughs for a moment, shaking his head before his face turns solemn. "Though maybe be careful who you're letting your tongue run over my around. Words such as those might just get you killed."

"Maybe death is preferable."

ve been "You're twenty-one, Shortie," he tells me, a sad smile on his face. My face to the becomes twitchy under his scrutiny, the sympathy radiating off him uncomfortable. "You have your whole life ahead of you. Don't wish for the bare ending just yet."

the kettle "What about you?" I ask, ignoring him. Not that I want to die, not even Nico. But it seems like it would be much easier than living these days. I lean forwards, I prop my head into my hand. "You can't be much older than

York. What do you want to do with your life? Surely this isn't the big grand driving around the boss?"

"My place in this world is strategic. I love my family and my friends. You're life is all I know, why would I want to do anything else?"

or you "What are you hiding?"

"What makes you think I'm hiding anything?" he asks, tilting his head to the side. It's my turn to chuckle now, my brow raising at him as he gazes unwaveringly.

myself "This life is about power. Everyone wants it. And you apparently know which tells me you have secrets you're keeping."

"Everyone has secrets, Pippa. I believe you know that better than I do." Bristling, at his words, I stutter, trying to explain myself, but he cuts me off with a shake of his head.

ing my "I'm not judging you," he says softly, a small smile on his face. It calms my growing anxiety slightly. I'm not sure there's a reason to trust him—but I do anyway. "I know Antonio can be a cruel man."

He turns He pauses a moment, his eyes lingering on the mark left behind by Antonio's hand earlier. "And this isn't something you ever would have wanted for yourself. Plus, Leo is—" He hesitates, wrinkling his forehead in thought before continuing. "Leo is charming and alluring to most."

My skin Pulling my bottom lip between my teeth, I tug at the skin while I look at him curiously. He sends me a wink before a sheepish grin takes over his face. He's offering me a secret in exchange for my own. A silent promise, and my heart cracks a little for him then.

It really. "Being gay in the Mafia isn't welcomed. It's a death sentence, Shorty."

Leaning "It shouldn't be," I whisper, my heart aching for him. To not be able to be your true self is more heart wrenching than anything else I can think of.

id plan, “You’re right. Maybe you can change that when you become the bo
I laugh incredulously, shaking my head. “Please, that would be the
ls. This woman having that much power over men.”

“More shocking things have happened,” he deadpans.

Before I can respond and tell him how utterly stupid his suggestion
head to door at the back of the hall opens and Antonio steps out. A smatte
olds my blood coats his face, and a vicious grin lifts at his lips as a scream
him down.

7 don’t. “What are they doing in there?” I whisper to Nico, my heart thud
against my chest when the door closes once more. He shakes his
most.” pursing his lips for a moment.

me off “Trust me. You don’t want to know.”

“I heard my name through the door when I was eavesdropping. Wh
and it have to do with the Russians, Nico?”

believe “I like you, Shortie,” he tells me, lifting his mug to his mouth and b
on the hot liquid for a beat. “However, the secrets of our world
d from something you want to unveil right now. Stay innocent to them, for as
d have you possibly can.”

nose in We sit in silence after that, both lost in thought; or at least I am. 7

truth is, no matter how much I wish I could stay out of the violent tr
I watch the world I’ve been dragged into . . . I don’t think I can. I fear they w
his face. me in with them anyway, and all I can do is brace myself for the fall o
and my

lie.”

e to live

k of.



ss.” The whirring of blades deafens me as the plane drops closer to the ground. Bouncing on my heels eagerly, I rub my hands together to calm the energy whirling in my stomach. Almost two months ago, I stepped onto the plane and landed in New York City, not knowing when I’d see my family again. If I’d see them again.

ring of All the missing them, the pain and sickness of being without them follows—sending—for one week, at least. When Papá called the burner phone number given yesterday to inform me of their travel plans, my heart just about leapt out of my chest in happiness.

s head, The moment the door opens, I’m flying across the asphalt, not caring about the shouting voices behind me telling me to stop. Papá catches me with his arms a few feet lift from the ground, his arms wrapping tightly around me as he hugs me. I fall into his chest and my legs fold around his waist.

“Oh, quanto mi sei mancata dolce ragazza,” he whispers in my ear, his hands slowly squeezing me close to him. *Oh, how I’ve missed you, sweet girl.*

I aren’t Tears spring to my eyes, my vision becoming hazy as he continues to whisper in my ear. I suppose for many young adults, leaving home to start their own lives is a welcome wish. For me though, I never put the sad thought into leaving my family. Nor did I ever really think I’d be thousands of miles away and only able to talk to them through a phone.

will pull Within seconds, more arms are thrown around us, the hug becoming warmer as my sisters’ bodies press against me. Happy laughter rings from the mouths of five of us, though we don’t step back for a long time; we bask in the joy of being back together . . . even if only for a little while.

Papá finally puts me down but throws an arm over my shoulder to guide me over to where Antonio and Leonardo wait. I keep my gaze aimed

ground. ground while the men speak, refusing to give the satisfaction of staring at my excited face I can feel burning holes into me.

onto a For the last four days, I've avoided Leonardo at every turn. Along with my family Antonio and Nico, we've all been staying in his penthouse, like a happy little family—if a happy little family was an aggressive husband, a secret garden, and a man who's afraid his secret will get him killed, and the man you cheated on with—I'd be a husband with—suffice to say I haven't left the bedroom much.

burst Hiding would be a more appropriate term for what I've been doing.

“Come on, Pippa. I want to hear everything about what you've been doing since you got here.” Elisa grabs my hand, pulling me away from Pippa and towards one of the waiting SUVs.

“There isn't all that much to tell you.” I shrug, shaking my head with an eager expression.

“Pish,” she scoffs, tugging me into the car with her. “Bombs, gunshots, and alleyway stalkers. Pippa, that's hardly nothing.”

Smiling sheepishly, I lift my shoulders before pulling the belt across my chest and “Honestly, maybe my perceptions have changed since I've been here because all of that just feels normal now. That's probably concerning to thousands actually.”

She laughs lightly, grabbing my hand and squeezing my fingers. “Not a big deal, little.”

from the

joy of



guide us

l at the Huffing, I tug the hem of my black dress down when the material rides up my thighs and sits under the curve of my arse cheeks again—for the fifth

g at the should have known better than to let Rosa pick my outfit for the e
when we were shopping earlier, but I didn't have the heart to tell her n
ng with she squealed excitedly in my ear.

py little Spending that time with my sisters today, shopping and going for
ay man has felt so normal that I'd give them anything they asked of me to k
. on the happiness buzzing around me.

Wind slaps against the bare skin of my legs as I wobble on my heel
waiting for everyone to exit the cars. Lights flicker above the
n doing restaurant Papá demanded we go to tonight—because eating anything
pá and than Italian in New York is sacrilegious, according to him.

Antonio slides a hand around my back, pulling me against him as h
l at her towards the restaurant. My skin bristles, my stomach dropping as
suffocates me. Whenever I've been in his company today, he's play
fights, role of doting husband, for my father's benefit, though I don't know w

Nor does Papá, if the wary suspicion etched on his face says anything
oss me. Which is honestly not surprising since he knows that Antonio and
n here, have a marriage born of anything but duty. While I haven't to
erning, everything that has happened between the two of us; I have told h

Antonio isn't a man I could ever fall in love with and that our relation
maybe a purely transactional.

If he knew the truth, I don't doubt my father would kill my husband
his own life would be taken by Antonio's men, and that's not someth
willing to let happen. It's easier—and safer—for everyone if I keep
closed on the matter.

The restaurant is bustling when we step inside, and I'm grateful
s up my heat that passes over us as the maître d' leads us to our table. My father
time. I his hands excitedly, pulling his chair out with a wide smile on his face.

evening “You know, this has been my favourite restaurant since I was a little boy when he tells us as we join him at the table. “Every Sunday, without fail, my father would bring me here after mass and we’d have a mini feast.”

at lunch, “I thought you grew up in Chicago, Darius,” Leonardo comments, leaning over my shoulder to talk to my father. How the hell I ended up sandwiched between him and Antonio, I don’t know.

As while Clearly my lucky stars aren’t so bloody lucky.

Italian “No.” Papá chuckles, rubbing his hands together. “I’m a New York kid, not other and bred. I only moved to Chicago when I became Capo. And then I stayed there for twenty years before moving to London.”

He starts I smile as he continues telling his life story. This isn’t the first time he’s dreadtold my sisters and me this story, and every time, it fills my heart to think of his time as a young boy, growing up in New York City.

Why. “So why London, Papá?” Craning my neck, I look at Rosa on the opposite end of the table as she asks the question. That’s the only part of the story I don’t know. He’s never explained his motivation to leave his life behind in America and move us to London, and given the secretive smile he gives me now, today won’t be the day he gives us the answers either.

Friendship is The conversation goes back and forth around the table, everyone participating periodically to say their own bits. To be around family again is a moral before fix to all the other drama in my life.

When I’m Antonio’s phone chimes loudly, and he steps away without a single word or apology. A waiter sidles up to the table, taking our orders, before disappearing off and returning with drinks for us. When I’m taking a sip of champagne, a warm hand clamps down on my thigh, searing me for a moment instantly.

“Please remove your hand,” I say to Leonardo, keeping my voice low.

the boy,” whisper so the others don’t hear me. Ignoring my request, he squeezes my thigh before his thumb traces the skin at my inner thigh.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

He should tell me something I don’t know.

Of course I have.

And for good bloody reason.

“Why?” he asks, his voice a deep drawl as he speaks only to me.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He hums, his hand stayed further up my thigh until he cups me over my underwear. The lace ruffles presses against my clit as he runs his fingers over me, teasing me until he’s writhing under his touch.

The sound of my name coming from Elisa draws my attention, though I can’t focus on what she’s saying as the second she speaks he slips his fingers underneath my underwear.

“Pippa,” she snaps again when my eyes flutter closed. He slides a finger behind my folds, smearing my juices over my now throbbing clit. “Are you wearing a condom?”

“Yes.” Nodding, I pull in a deep breath as heat courses through me. His thumb circles me slowly, a light pressure building between my legs as he plays with my pussy. “What were you saying?”

She continues speaking, but the only thing I hear is the blood rushing in my ears when two fingers thrust inside me without warning. Noticing I’m absentmindedly, I take a sip of my drink, trying and failing to cool myself down as Leonardo finger-fucks me under the table—while my friends’ eyes surround us.

The conversation picks up again, but my mind is lost to the serenade as a low swirl of music circles around me while Leonardo uses his fingers expertly inside me.

lightly scissoring them until I'm almost panting under his touch. When he presses the heel of his hand against my clit, my eyes roll back, and my breath hitches. "You're looking very flush, Princess," he comments, his voice carrying over the table. Heads turn towards me, all of them watching me while my body trembles as he grinds against my clit.

"He's right," Papá agrees, a frown on his face. Just what I need, to please my already cautious father. "Are you not feeling good, bambina? You're sliding distracted."

Fuck my life and fuck the man with expert fingers.

I let out a cough, grabbing a napkin and pressing it to my lips to hide my moan when he slides a third finger inside me, rolling them against my walls. "I'm okay, Papá. It's just awfully warm in here, isn't it?"

"Hmm, is it?" My eyes narrow on Leonardo as he speaks, his face glittering with humour while he continues to plunge his fingers in and out of my heat. "Perhaps we need to cool you down."

He finally removes his fingers, and I sag in relief. Though it's shocking when he rips the lace down the centre, removing the barrier of my uncertainty when before something cold presses against my clit, circling it for a moment as he moves down my folds, pressing against my entrance.

"What are you doing?" I whisper through clenched teeth while the other diners at our table talk about the heat in the restaurant. Dropping my eyes, they find the handle of his dinner knife. Butterflies soar in my stomach as my legs tremble in anticipation as the metal slips inside of me. "Leonardo, please, family... Shhh, we wouldn't want your family to pick up on what's happening here, would we?" My muffled protests fall on deaf ears as he continues to press the handle inside me. It slides in easily, coating with my juices before he pulls it out, all the way out, causing me to whimper.

presses My body burns under the pressure, his thumb finding my clit once
itches. while he fucks me with a dinner knife. My pussy clenches around the
arrying when he twists it, pressing against my g-spot once more. His tongue slides
ile my dampening his lips and all I can think about is having them wrapped
my clit while he continues to use the knife on me.

o worry My orgasm builds slowly—too fucking slowly—as he slides the knife
u seem and out of me with measured strokes. Just enough to have me whimper
but not enough to give me the release I crave. “Leo, please.”

“Please what?” he asks, leaning into me just enough I can hear him, his
side my so much that everyone turns to face us. “What do you need, baby? Do you
g-spot. need to come around my knife? Do you want to be a dirty girl who
while dinner is being served around us? Do you want them all to hear
is own moans and know I’m the one who brings you ecstasy? Tell me. Because
I out of feel you trembling around the metal, and all I can think about is bending
over this table and pounding you into oblivion while everyone watches
rt live that something you’d want, Princess?”

ler wear I clamp my hand around the edge of the table, needing an anchor
ent. His words cause me to fall apart. Clenching my teeth, I swallow my moan
climax takes over and stars fill my vision while he continues to find
rest of through it with his knife.

er widen There’s a sharp pain when he thrusts deeper, but I’m too lost
ach, my pleasure to note what’s happening inside of me.

lo.” “You’re a little slut, aren’t you, Princess?” he whispers, pulling the
pening, out and settling it on the table while my cheeks flush with fire. “M
ush the slut.”

pulls it I grab my champagne, tipping a generous amount down my throat
my body settles. When I can finally breathe normally again, after

the more moments, my eyes linger on the knife noticing a spot of blood against the object's serrated edge.

lips out, Unfortunately, I'm not the only person to notice.

around "Is that blood on your knife, Leonardo?" Antonio asks as he drops down beside me, placing his phone on the table. My face burns, and my knife in skips a beat as my husband directs his curiosity to the man at my side. In a surprising moment, I'd forgotten he was here at this restaurant with us—I'd forgotten everything but Leonardo.

but not "Hmm, I must have nicked something when I was playing with you. Do you shrug, picking it up and using it to slice his chicken. I drop my gaze and get off my thigh, my eyes widening as a trickle of blood passes over my skin. The man has just cut me while fucking me. Shit. "But a bit of blood never hurt anyone, unless you can't see I can't. My cheeks flush further when he slides the chicken into his mouth, then he picks up the knife in a second later and cleans it with his tongue. The same knife he used to fuck me.

Well, fuck.

as his The rest of the evening goes off without a hitch, and by the end, even I'm as merry on alcohol and laughing jovially over dessert. However, the next time I can only focus on the man to my right.

Avoiding him seems redundant. And when he touches me, I forget the reason that I should.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“We’re going out,” Rosa shouts, jumping on the bed next to me. I drop my book onto my crossed legs, tucking a bookmark between the pages before lifting my head to hers. “Papá is going to the casino tonight with some old friends, and he said we can go.”

“When have you ever needed Papá’s permission to do anything?”

“It’s not his permission I’m after, Pippa.” She scoffs, looking at me. “I’m stupid. “It’s his credit card, obviously.”

“Ahh there we go, that makes more sense.” Shaking my head with a sigh, I move the book over to the bedside and stretch my legs in front of me, pulling on my toes until I feel a slight burn in my calves. She lies beside me, fluffing a pillow and propping her head on it so she can stare at the ceiling. “Where is everyone? When did you even get here?”

“Papá had a meeting to attend. Though, of course, he wouldn’t attend anything, so he dragged us here and tossed us out, telling us that we could have your problem for the day. I’m not complaining, though. Have you seen that tall drink of water you live with? God, the things I’d do to that man.”

She sighs dreamily, her eyes glazing over as she thinks of Leonardo the last forty-eight hours, all she's done in our group chat is comment how attractive he is and all the things she wants to do with him.

I try not to be annoyed at her words—she's my sister and he's my brother—but my mind whirls anyway, my hands itching to whack the image out of her head.

"I can't say I've noticed." The lie falls easily off my tongue, though it tastes bitter on my lips. She laughs incredulously, staring at me with wide eyes, but I shove off the bed and ignore her. "You do realise I have no clothes here, right?"

She huffs, jumping off the bed and stalking over to the wardrobe. She opens it, she waves a hand at the rails of clothes there, the ones I refuse to hang about beyond whatever is left out for me in the morning.

I don't know if Leonardo has any staff—or if he himself is picking out outfits—but it's a nice change to not have to think about what I'm wearing daily, I suppose. Even if those clothes aren't mine, which I don't hesitate to tell Rosa.

"They're all in your size and match your style perfectly," she comments, wrinkling her brow as she stares down at the oversized Def Leppard slide leggings that were waiting for me when I got out of my shower this morning. "I don't see anybody rocking old fogies on their shirts, do you?"

While she has a point, it makes little sense for Leonardo to have a wardrobe stocked up with clothing for me, so I don't let myself consider even if the alternative makes me feel slightly murderous.

"This dress is perfect for you." She lifts one of the many hangers, and out comes a beautiful black dress that drapes over one shoulder and opens in the front, falling all the way to the ground.

do. For “Absolutely not,” I tell her, shaking my head ferociously. “My vagina is on full display in that thing.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” she asks, raising a brow. She pushes the dress into my hands, turning back around and thumbing through the rail of the closet before pulling out a short red bodycon dress. “And this one is for me and Sofia can fend for themselves. No doubt they’ll dress like boring bitches anyway. You know something, P?”

I pursed “What?” I ask, placing the dress on the bed.

“I’m so glad that you didn’t become boring when you got married,” she tells me, shaking her head lovingly as she thinks of our older sisters who married and became a bore, and well, Sofia has always been a granddaddy to think young woman’s body. It’s a bloody travesty if you ask me. Thank God you still have your fun rebellious streak.”

If only she really knew how rebellious I’ve been lately, I doubt she would be saying it with such amusement.

Hours later, we’re getting ready in the suite my family is staying in. The dress is laid up haphazardly on the bathroom counter while hot hair tools are lined up on the vanity in Rosa’s room.

My hair has been curled and pinned to within an inch of its life, and I’m sure it wasn’t for the tequila steadily working through my system, I’m sure I’m much more annoyed about the dull ache on my skull where the pins sit. “Don’t be so boring,” Rosa yells across the room. Rolling my eyes, I look up from my phone—a direct replica of the phone I lost in the box that was left on my bed a couple of days ago. She’s been at it all afternoon pulling Elisa and Sofia. Funnily enough, that’s one thing I don’t miss about living at home. Even though it was only me that still lived with Papá, my sisters and I almost every day together, and the arguments were plentiful.

ina will Built in best friends—but also each other’s worst enemies at times.

“Just because I don’t want to be sloppy drunk in a room full of me the dress are dangerous, does not make me boring, Rosa,” Sofia snaps, slapping again hand against the vanity. “It makes me a responsible adult, which is more. Elisa I can say about you.”

ing old “God, you’re fucking infuriating.”

“You’re the infuriating one. Grow the fuck up.”

My head snaps up and wide eyes settle on Sofia. I can count on both hands,” she the number of times I’ve heard a curse word from her mouth, and even . “Elisa it’s never been aimed at one of us.

ma in a Rosa is too lost in her own frustration to register that Sofia is second god you breaking, so instead of stopping, she continues pushing. “What’s

damage, Sofia? Seriously, you bang on and on about how dangerous *he’d be* men are, and yet never once have you told us why? Poor little Sofia scared of the big bad Mafia men, that even now in your thirties you . Make-them. I don’t think I’m the one that needs to grow up, Sof.”

re taking “You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sofia whispers, her cracking on the words.

and if it “Sofia—” I’m cut off when Rosa storms out of the room, slamming I’d be door behind her. We fall into silence, the tense air suffocating as Sofia . onto the bed and cups her face with her hands. Elisa sticks her head out I don’t bathroom, a sad expression etched into her features as she looks at me mb that raised brow.

on with I shake my head, lifting my shoulders. I haven’t a clue what just happened home either.

I spent “Sofia,” I repeat, moving over to sit next to her. Laying my arm on shoulder, I rub circles into her bare arm. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She pulls in a breath, straightening her back before slapping her hands on her thigh and plastering a smile on her face. It’s fake, noticing her dull eyes.

When Sofia smiles for real, it lights up her face—not today.

“Now, we need to get ready. We’re only here for a few more days; I want to enjoy this time with my baby sister.”

“Don’t you want to talk about it?”

“Nope,” she answers, popping her p. “Come on. Up and at ’em, I’ll then, these pins out of your hair, and I’ll finish your make-up.”

ds from

's your

is these

Dimmed lights, with neon flickers. The murmur of the crowds. The jingles, so
Sofia, so
ou fear
coins as people place their bets. And two of three sisters that refuse to
to each other. What more could you want for a sisters’ night out?

Papá throws his arm over my shoulder, pulling me towards the bar
r voice
orders us both a neat vodka while my sisters split off behind us, finding
and escaping the mindless bickering.

“Don’t you have friends to meet?” I tease when he lifts to sit on one of the
a drops
bar stools and spins to face me.

“Can’t a father spend one minute with his daughter without being
: with a
away? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to get rid of me.”

“Never.” Shaking my head, I chuckle, leaning over to squeeze his hand.
ppened
“I’ll let you in on a secret. I’ve missed you the most, Papá.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret too,” he tells me, whispering dramatically.
ver her
watch eagerly, my brow raised. “You’re my favourite.”



ing her “Not much of a secret. But I’ll take it.” Silence befalls us after that, able in the next ten minutes, we enjoy the quiet of each other’s company in full of life and laughter. It’s not a lie to say being my father’s favourite secret. It’s not that he loves me more or treats me better than my sisters, and I just always been more protective of me.

Beneath the silence though, there’s something etched into Papá’s can’t read. Something that has me opening my mouth before I can get better of it.

“Why did you marry me off?” I’ve asked the question before, always gone unanswered. He sighs heavily, dropping his gaze to the his hand. “Please, Papá. I need to know.”

“Growing up, I always wanted you to fall in love with a nice little boy. Move to the countryside. Have a bucket load of children and a little girl. Live happily ever after.”

“Really?” I deadpan, my brows raising. That sounds like my nightmare, and with the smirk playing on his lips, I know he agrees.

“That was my dream, bambina. Not yours.” Another sigh, before he places the clear liquid to his lips. He swallows the drink in one, placing the glass on the bar and gesturing for a refill. He looks lost as his eyes find

his lips turning down before he speaks again. “I never got a say. You were planned for you, Pippa. From the moment you were born, it was rushed motion. I kept you away from it, for as long as I could. But I was never able to be able to stop the wheels from turning.”

“But why? Why me, Papá?”

“There’s a war happening right now, Pippa,” he tells me, ignoring my question.

“You mean the Italians and the Russians?” He nods sharply, I

and fortensing.

a room “That doesn’t explain why I’m here. Why you sent me here? Why isn’t assigned me away to a man like Antonio,”

s—he’s “Because you are the most important piece in this battle. I never this for you, Pippa. If I could have kept you with me, hidden, for the face I your life I would have. But it was never my decision to make.”

n think “Then whose was it?” I snap, watching as my father straightens h and looks over my shoulder.

but it’s “Mine.” My head snaps to the side, my eyes locking on the direct glass invoice comes from. A familiar figure stands before me, my mind buz confusion grabs hold of me.

English “I know you,” I say to him, my lips pursing in confusion as the ma nd livetowards us. “You sat with me. Here at this bar, weeks ago.”

“I did,” he agrees with a smile, moving closer before he stops about worstaway. His suit fits perfectly today, his frame broader than I originally when I first met him.

he tips “Who are you, Alek?”

empty “Aleksandr Kovalev,” he offers, a smile playing on his lips as he h d mine, gaze. “Not to sound all *Star Wars* or anything, but I am your father, Pi our life Glass shattering breeches my ears followed by the rush of blood. s set inliquid runs over my hand, and when I look down, I see the stain of c r goingcoming from a deep gash where I was holding my glass.

The glass now lays on the floor, the liquid seeping into the carpe rushes me, grabbing my hand and pressing a napkin to it to stem the ing myblood. His hand trembles as he holds my arm. Glassy eyes watch me, l a sheet of white as I remain frozen.

his jaw “He’s lying, Papá,” I whisper, tears springing to my eyes. There’s n

option. “Please tell me he’s lying.”

by you He shakes his head, his mouth quivering a little—but that can’t be
doesn’t get upset. He doesn’t cry. And he definitely doesn’t lie. Not to
wanted “I’m so sorry, bambina.” His voice cracks as he utters the words
rest of silently, just for me. “I wanted to tell you, for so long I wanted to tell
You have no idea how much it tore me up to not tell you the truth.”

is back “Then why didn’t you?” I demand, pulling away from him and sitting
The stool crashes behind me and heads turn in our direction, but I can
focus on anything but the man before me.

izing as “Because I couldn’t.”

“Yes, you could,” I snap, pushing him away. I take a step backward
in steps another, never taking my eyes off the two men as they watch me

“You know how easy it would have been? *Hey Pippa, guess what, kiddo*
it a footnote your dad. I’ve lied to you, your whole fucking life. I pretended
thought you, pretended you belonged with our family. When really, I was
babysitting for the time being.”

A hollow laugh slips from my mouth, my hands trembling as I press
against my aching stomach. “God, it really does sound so fucked up
Pippa.” you say it aloud, doesn’t it?”

Warm “It’s not like that,” he demands softly, grabbing me again. I shake
crimson away, taking another step backwards.

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t that thought out honestly. Let me guess, Papa
t. Papa were just being a good old soldier. But for who? Who are you ever
flow of Because this man that’s next to you right now? He certainly isn’t It
his face gesture to the man who only watches me with a blank expression. The
an ounce of emotion in his gaze as his eyes follow me.

to other “Pippa,” Papá calls for me, but I spin on my heels and run. Pull

phone out, I dial one of the few people I *think* I can trust. But truth e. Papádoubt there is anyone in the world I can.

me. “Nico,” I say, tears spilling over my lashes when he answers the call almostsecond ring. “Can you come pick me up, please?”
ell you.



anding.

't focus

With trembling hands, I pull the trigger, watching as the bullet flies t the air and clips the edge of the glass bottle. The wind whips arou ds, then leaving a bitter kiss on my skin. Anger fuels me when I reload and aim warily. My fingers are turning blue from the cold, but I don't care. To go do? I'm would be to sit with my thoughts and face the lies and the devastation to love I can't. So I'll stay right here, for as long as my body can withsta as just longer, if possible, and perhaps the night will take me away with it.

Another bullet and another misfire. A frustrated curse spills fr ss them mouth. I used to be so fucking good with a gun, but now that's ruined p when like everything else in my life. Or maybe that was another lie. M wasn't as good as I believed but everyone told me so to keep me happy

ke him *Fuck them and fuck fake happiness.*

That's all my life has been.

pá, you Fake.

n with? Footsteps echo behind me, heavy boots crumpling the leaves. I do lian!” I around. Let them come. No doubt it's yet another person who wants re isn't me lies and heartache.

I aim again, letting out a slow breath before I pull the trigger. One ing my then two before the bullet hits the neck of the bottle. Glass splinters i

fully, fair, landing on the ground in shattered pieces—a mirror image of n
now. Broken.

l on the *Finally*.

A smile breaks free at my lips and a frenzied laugh slips from my
For a long moment, I can't stop. Laughter rings through the air, a bitte
before it turns into heavy sobs that rack my body.

The footsteps move closer, and heat radiates over my back as a ta
leans into me. I revel in their warmth for a moment, letting it calm n
through the tears stop rolling over my cheeks. Hands cup my shoulders,
nd me, massaging the muscles before pulling away. There's no need to turn
t again, and face them. The settling effect they have on me can only come fr
) inside person. And for a second, I let myself focus on that before my mou
. . . and open. "Hello, Leonardo."
nd. For

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second,
into the

air, landing on the ground in shattered pieces—a mirror image of me right now. Broken.

Finally.

A smile breaks free at my lips and a frenzied laugh slips from my mouth. For a long moment, I can't stop. Laughter rings through the air, a bitter sound before it turns into heavy sobs that rack my body.

The footsteps move closer, and heat radiates over my back as a tall body leans into me. I revel in their warmth for a moment, letting it calm me until the tears stop rolling over my cheeks. Hands cup my shoulders, gently massaging the muscles before pulling away. There's no need to turn around and face them. The settling effect they have on me can only come from one person. And for a second, I let myself focus on that before my mouth falls open. "Hello, Leonardo."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Princess, you’ll catch a chill,” he warns, his voice carrying on the wind and sending shivers travelling through me. I should have known that Nico would call him. He was worried when he picked me up, considering I was hiding behind a bin so no one would find me if I waited.

Questions were asked in the car ride, but I didn’t answer.

I’m not even sure I know how to.

I’m just grateful he brought me here, to his house, without demanding I tell anyone where I am . . . but I guess he decided doing just that was in my best interest anyway. *Traitor.*

“Do you care?” Scoffing, I swipe at the dampness on my cheek and grab another bottle to line up. Leonardo remains stoic behind me, his presence enveloping me in comfort as I raise my arm again.

“Would I be here if I didn’t?”

“You know that’s the most annoying, right?” I deadpan, snorting as I raise my arm.

“What?” he asks innocently, annoying me further. Instead of taking a shot, I spin around and press my gun to his head. There’s a flicker of amusement at the corner of his lips, and his eyes twinkle under the dim light of stars.

“Answering a question with a question, it’s so fucking rude.”

“Is it?” He raises a brow, his stance unwavering despite the kiss of the gun barrel on his face. “You wouldn’t really shoot me, Princess.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You like me too much.” With a shrug, he swipes his tongue over his lips, and I follow the movement which only makes him chuckle. The deep rumble rattles me, my hand trembling again as heat crawls across my chest and down my neck.

“Then you clearly don’t know me well at all,” I tell him, tensing my hand to stop the tremors.

“Oh, I think I know you, Princess,” he murmurs, cocking his head to the side. “But that scares you, doesn’t it?”

“You don’t scare me.”

“Yes I do.” He takes another step back, opening his arms wide as if to say *do your worst*. “I terrify you, Princess. But I’m standing here, arms outstretched. You want to shoot me? Shoot me. I dare you.”

His eyes lock on mine. A wide crooked smile sits on his lips, so beautiful—yet deadly all the same. My finger tingles where it lays on the trigger. My heart and mind at war as I watch him.

Pulling in a deep breath, I lower my hand. Leonardo chuckles, muttering *I told you so*. And like a bull to a red rag, I’m done for. Before I can even process or have a conscious thought, my hand raises.

The bullet tears through his shoulder, leaving a wetness seeping through his shirt.

ing the his shirt. My hair lashes over my face, the wind swinging it around
cker of but all I can focus on is him.

m light Dark eyes follow the lines of my body, his smile remaining. There
flicker of pain in his features—only amusement. He hums, pulling
bottom lip into his mouth. “You did it. You fucking shot me.”

s of the “Just be grateful I didn’t aim for your head,” I tell him, shruggi
lower my arm, letting the gun hang limp at my side.

“That wasn’t very nice, Princess.”

his lips, “Don’t act all high and mighty, you goaded me into it, and you k
o sound Besides, a little blood never hurt anyone, did it?” I ask, using the same
and up he did in the restaurant days ago.

“Repeating my words, are we? When did we become that couple?”

r arm to “We aren’t a couple.” I shake my head, narrowing my eyes on him.

“It’s cute that you think you have any say in what’s happening betw
l to the Now, since you made me bleed, it’s my turn.”

Shaking my head again, I step to the side, the lights of Nico’s house
me to safety. Leonardo watches me, his eyes never leaving mine as
f to say another step, then another. The smile on his face widens, becoming vic
s open. my movements become more hurried.

So close, and yet so far.

fucking The minute I run, unsteady on my heels, he catches me by the wa
on the pulls me against him. Cold metal touches my bare thigh where the
my dress has fallen open, and a sharp sting follows the trail as he dr
umbling knife up my skin, marking me lightly.

e I can “I’m going to have a scar, Princess,” he tells me, his breath fann
face as he whispers in my ear, “It’s only fair that I get to scar you in
hrough Don’t you agree?”

wildly, His words should terrify me, and they do—but not because of what he is threatening, and not even because his knife presses in harder, slicing into my skin—no, what’s terrifying is the way my stomach dips with his full my pussy throbs as his words run through my mind.

I’m so lost in the feeling I don’t realise he’s pulling us backwards as he spins around and slams me into the trunk of a tree. Bark digs into me, not only making the sensations that much more powerful as he continues dragging the blade along my skin.

“I could scar you here,” he tells me, lifting the knife and pressing it against my throat, he doesn’t nick the skin, but traces over my pulse point moving lower. “Or here,” he mutters, slicing my dress down the middle, pressing the point into my chest.

“Or even here.” He drops to his knees, not caring for the cold grass between us. He grabs the two parts of my dress, ripping it open until it drapes off my back. The tip of his knife presses against my underwear, right where he is calling the most for him. “Would you like that, Princess? For me to mark you?” I take a deep breath. Shaking my head, I close my eyes and my head rolls over the trunk of the tree as he makes circles around my clit with the knife. “Leo, please.”

“Please, what? You have to use your words.”

“Scar me,” I whisper into the night, my words ending in a moan as he slices my underwear and presses his blade to my bare skin. The cold metal split on paired with the heat pouring off me is overwhelming.

“Well, because you asked so nicely.” The knife disappears into his pocket. Disappointment floods me, though he quickly replaces the metal with his tongue in my mouth. His tongue explores my pussy, gathering my juices as he devours me. A hand presses against my thigh, prying my legs open, and I grip at the back of his hand behind me, my nails digging in.

t's he's In this moment, he knows exactly what I need and gives it deeperhesitation. I don't need to think, or talk, or do anything but exist for himust andright now. He's taking me away, to a place where only he and I exist.

His tongue continues its exploration, plunging inside me until I see until hespots flicker in my vision. There's a sharp pain on my thigh, and warn y back, trails down my leg, but all I can focus on is the sensations at my clit.

ntinues I tremble when he groans, the vibrations going straight to my clit u writhing under the pressure. My orgasm builds, coiling inside me. My againstopens on a gasp when he grazes my clit with his teeth before sucking beforeinto his mouth.

dle and The feeling at my thigh remains. The pain and pleasure merging something snaps. My climax claims me, but he never stops. He conti ss as hefuck me with his tongue, lapping at every inch of my pussy.

e like a It's almost too much, but just before a second orgasm can overtake I I achepulls back. His lips glisten with my arousal, which only causes my p here?" pulse. His tongue swipes over his lips, a groan slipping out of him as h k as hethere remnants of my pleasure.

I don't speak, I'm not sure I can.

"So fucking pretty," he utters, his fingers running along my thigh. W /hen hepulls them back, crimson liquid coats them, and while the sight shoul d metalme nervous and uncomfortable—I only moan when he sucks them i mouth, tasting my blood.

s, and Biting my lips, I look down at my thigh. There's too much blood fo with hissee what he's etched into my skin, but it's deep enough that there is n urs me.he got his wish of scarring me.

e wood "Leonardo," I start, my voice laced with lust as he stands. Before I anything more, his hand clamps around my neck harshly, his grip unre

without as he cuts off my airway.

as touch “I’m going to fuck you now, Princess,” he tells me, his eyes darkening as I struggle for breath. “And you’re going to be a good girl and take it all from me, whitey? You’re going to let me slide into your pretty cunt, using your blood and cum as lube while I fuck you into oblivion against this tree. You’re going to come on my dick and strangle me with your pussy while I claim every part of you until I’m a piece of you, aren’t you?”

at my mouth He loosens his hand for a moment, and I greedily suck air into my lungs, the buds of my breasts and the budlungs.

“Answer me,” he demands, his free hand trailing up my thigh until it reaches the cuts in my skin. He gathers the running blood on two fingers, and with a smile on his lips, he plunges them into my pussy without warning.

“I’m waiting.”

As he does to me, he “Yesss,” I hiss through clenched teeth, already on the edge of orgasm as he sinks his fingers inside me, again and again. His thumb flicks over my clitoris, the calloused tip circling me. When my orgasm claims me, he pulls his fingers free. With one hand, he grips my cheeks, forcing me to open my mouth before sliding them past my lips and laying them on my tongue. When the mixture of blood and my own juices is euphoric, and I lick at him, he makes cleaning his fingers so I can taste myself.

into his “Such a good little slut for me, aren’t you?” He steps back, long enough to peel his trousers down and kick them away. The wind continues to whip around us, the night turning even colder, but we’re too lost in each other to doubt to feel the bitterness on our skin. His hands run over my thighs, cupping the curve off my arse before he hauls me up to his chest.

can say Wrapping my legs around his waist, I groan when he lines himself up for a slow, tantalizing entrance, teasing me.

“Leo, please,” I beg, and he needs no further encouragement as he leaning as his hips forwards and thrusts inside of me. He leans forwards, I, aren’t claiming mine in a vicious kiss. I moan into his mouth when he goes deeper, his hips slapping against mine.

“Touch yourself, Princess,” he tells me, moving his lips over my jawline down my neck. He sucks on my pulse point before his teeth close around my

skin. I snake my hand between us, my movements unsure when they burn against my clit. “Do you feel that? Feel the way you pulse around my

You’re going to come all over me, aren’t you. Soak me in your juices until he claim my dick as yours.”

ers, and *Fuckkk*.

warning. He steals my breath as he continues to push me closer and closer to the

edge. My vision blurring as my finger circles my clit. He groans against my neck, his thrusts becoming more frenzied when my movements quicken.

In seconds, my mouth opens on a scream as my pussy clenches around his

pulls him deeper, if even possible, as my orgasm racks my body.

My heart pounds against my chest and blood rushes to my ears.

The climax continues. He moves quicker, his eyes darkening when he locks his

greedily on mine. My hands move to his head, my nails digging into his scalp.

draws my orgasm out, one rolling into two as he continues to own every inch of me.

“Shit,” he hisses through clenched teeth, his dick pulsing inside my

throat before he spills his cum. A groan slips from his mouth, his teeth clamping

down my neck hard as his orgasm takes over. He stays there for a long moment

breaths coming in harsh pants. “You’re mine, Princess. There’s no going

back now.”

drives

his lips

drives



I wake in an unfamiliar bed, again—though instead of feeling unsettled

feel is comfort. Nico kindly let Leonardo and I stay at his house last

with muttered promises he would tell no one where we are.

He suggested it might be wise to sleep in separate rooms; Leonardo

reminded him he was a grown adult at thirty-four and could make his

decisions. I've given up on denying or trying to rationalise my feelings

it comes to him.

There is little point. I'm realising that whatever Leonardo wants, I

And he just so happens to want me. I only hope I can handle the fallout

he leaves me behind and it all crumbles around me.

Rolling over, I bite my lip to tame the moan that wants to spill out

sight of him beside me. He lies on his back, one arm thrown across his

chest and the other resting over his face. His dark hair is mussed from

running my fingers through it, and his chest rises slowly as he snores

There is still little I know about him, and yet my heart twists with

mumbles in his sleep and reaches out for me. A satisfied smirk quirks

lips when he finds my waist. Laughter spills out of me as he drags me

him until I'm plastered against his chest, and he hums happily.

"Good morning," he whispers into my hair before pressing a kiss

ent, his crown of my head. If I wasn't already convinced this man will crush me

a thousand pieces when he's finished with me, the crooked smile on his

and the way he leans over and claims my mouth in the gentlest of kisses

just that.

“Morning.” I giggle when he finally pulls away. His fingers run through my hair, tugging at the strands lightly while I trace over his inked skin. Pads of my fingers linger on his shoulder, a flush spreading on my face when I take in the bruising and the mark left on his skin from my bite last night. I didn’t think much of it last night—far too preoccupied with other things. I’m glad to see that despite the blood that poured from the wound, it’s more than a graze.

A graze that will scar, but considering the state of my thigh ... I’m more than okay with knowing he’ll have a reminder of me on his skin, forever. “What happens now?”

“Well, we have to get out of this bed at some point,” he starts, rolling over. A weightless feeling comes over me when he presses me into the mattress, his hardening dick slipping through my folds. “Have a shower, get dressed, eat some breakfast.”

Using his hand, he guides himself to my entrance, groaning when he slides easily inside my heat. “Though, I’m not sure you wanted a play-by-play of our morning routine.”

“N-uh, ohhh,” I stutter when he pulls out and plunges back in. Or rather, he grips my hip harshly while his other hand plays with my peaking nipple. I struggle to speak as he slides in and out of me.

This is so different from the previous times.

They were urgent, frenzied, and full of need . . . but this?

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say we were making love as he works himself inside me slowly. He works himself in and out, my orgasm building up faster than ever before. But when it claims me, taking over my body with true force, it’s the most intense thing I’ve ever felt. I’m overwhelmed in sensation.

throughthrob around him, my fingernails dragging over his back as he continues. The thrust inside of me slowly.

cheeks After long minutes, he moves faster, a groan sliding from his lips with a bullet. His dick pulses inside of me, his own climax taking over his body.

legs—but When he rests his forehead against mine, our laboured breaths fill the room, his little heating my face.

“You never answered my question,” I tell him, reaching up to touch his cheek. My thumb strokes the stubble there, and I bite my lip when he groans. a low moan. “What happens now?”

“That’s not something I can answer, Princess. But I promise you, whatever it is. We’ll face it together.”

His promise soothes something inside of me, and when he flops back over, getting his back, tucking me into the crook of his arm, I can’t help but wonder

if he intends to keep it. I’m under no illusions that alone with him in this room we’re safe . . . but out there, where I have a husband and a whole world full of responsibilities?

We’re doomed.

“Do you believe in soulmates?” I ask him a little later while he kneels on the floor of Nico’s bathroom, a hand clamped on my thigh as he cleans the dried blood leftover from his scarification session last night.

The skin is sore and raw as he cleans around it. Without the distraction of the staining, I can see an L and a C etched into my skin, and it causes my heart to throb. I twist my hands in the hem of the shirt he gave me to throw away, slower my naked body, the material pooling at my waist.

“Leonardo Cataldi,” he tells me with a satisfied smirk on his face as I ask what it means. *Well, Christ on a cracker, the motherfucker scar*

...nues to initials into my thigh. “And to answer your earlier question, no, I don’t believe in soulmates.”

When his lips turn down at his answer, a frown marring my face. It’s not that I believe in soulmates either . . . but the connection between the two of us is a blend, too overwhelming to deny that there has to be something driving it.

“Don’t look so forlorn,” he murmurs, swiping the last of the champagne from my cup with his tongue on my thigh before pushing down on them with his hands until his legs are spread wide, his feet flat on the floor. “I said I don’t believe in soulmates, but I don’t. What I do believe in, though, is people.”

Whatever he wants, he gets. He cups my neck, his fingers threading into my hair as he pulls me back towards him. “And make no mistake, Princess, I’m not just your friend. I’m your jack of all trades and your man of all work. I’m your person.”

How do I close the distance between us, my arms falling over his shoulders, my hands resting on his chest, my lips pressed against his. Those words out of his mouth are more than I’ve ever heard from him. I’ve always known he has feelings for me, but I’ve never heard him say so. I’ve always known he has feelings for me, but I’ve never heard him say so.

I feel for him. I grip his hair, tugging him into me to deepen the kiss. His hand tightens around my throat for a beat, starving me of oxygen.

When my eyes close, he relinquishes his hold, pulling away from me. He leans over my head, his lips pressed against my forehead. “I want to do something for you now.”

“Is that so?” he mumbles, his breath shaking as I trail my fingers down his chest, lowering myself until I’m on my knees before him and he looks down at me. “I want to do something for you now.”

“Always with the grey joggers.”

“I heard a thing or two about women liking them.” He shrugs, his eyes looking at me. “I want to do something for you now.”

I don't "I recall you telling me that you taste real fucking good. I'm just that theory."

At that I Before he can say anything more, I lean forwards, pressing a kiss at the tip of his dick. He hisses under his breath, his fingers wrapping in my hair. I open my mouth to guide him inside. My tongue traces his head for a brief moment, the antiseptic pussy aching at the groaned curses falling from his mouth, before I pull him up until he's my cheeks, pulling him deeper.

His dick hits the back of my throat, causing me to gag before he pulls himself out slowly. Looking up, I heat at the way his eyes are laser focused on my head on his dick as it moves along my tongue.

"There may not be a better sight than you on your knees, worshipping my dick, Princess." He groans, forcing himself to the back of my throat. Tears spring to my eyes at the lack of oxygen, though, that only spurs him on. He thrusts harder, faster, fucking my mouth with a ferociousness I've never known of what know possible.

"Are you wet for me?" he asks when I writhe on my knees, moaning, seeking release as he seeks his on my tongue. I try to speak, but he prevents me. I lick into his groin, choking me on his dick. He's not wrong. He does taste like fucking good, and I only want more. "Stroke your clit, baby. Slide your finger over your pussy while I fuck your mouth, gather up that delicious juice over his that I know is pooling on the floor right now, and use it on your clit until you're looking come. And when you do, I'm going to soak your face in my cum."

Holy fucking shit.

I don't waste time answering his demands, I move to my soaking pussy, my fingers teasing myself as I slide through my folds. His punishment of my throat continues, his dick pulsing with each thrust.

My clit tingles when I touch it, and I moan around him, which only

testing him tug harder at my head. The lack of oxygen. The curses flying out of my mouth. The taste of him as he gags me with his dick. Within seconds, the tip coming undone in front of him. My mouth opens on a silent scream, and he uses that timing to escape my mouth.

eat, my He tugs on his length, his fist moving rapidly over the shaft for a minute before a hot jet of cum hits my face, coating my cheeks, and sliding down to my chest.

slides “Jesus fucking Christ, Princess,” he mumbles breathlessly, sagging against the wall. “You’re going to be the fucking death of me woman.”

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him tug harder at my head. The lack of oxygen. The curses flying out of his mouth. The taste of him as he gags me with his dick. Within seconds, I'm coming undone in front of him. My mouth opens on a silent scream, and he uses that timing to escape my mouth.

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“Jesus fucking Christ, Princess,” he mumbles breathlessly, sagging against the wall. “You're going to be the fucking death of me woman.”

Not if you're the death of me first.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Antonio and my father—well whatever the hell he is—wait for us in the kitchen of the penthouse. For the last two days, I’ve been hiding with Leonardo in Nico’s house, pretending as if my life will not fall a minute I step back into it.

We’ve laughed, we’ve held hands, we’ve fucked, and even made love for two days, I got to live my life like a normal girl. A girl falling in love with a man she can have . . . but that isn’t my life.

“Where have you been, bambina?” my father asks, his voice cracking. He stares at me. His face wrinkles in sadness, his eyes dipping when I look away. I gaze on him. My fingers tug at the hem of the hoodie Leonardo gave me this morning. It still smells of him, the sandalwood scent comforting me when I can’t. He’s still behind me, standing at my back, but there’s a chasm between us now.

“You don’t get to call me that,” I snap, shaking my head in annoyance. My heart splinters at the sorrow etched into his features. “You lost the moment you lied to me about who I am.”

“I never lied, Pippa,” he pleads, stepping closer.

My legs tremble, my body fighting the urge to turn and run again.

“You lied when you told me you were my papá, and you lied when you told me you loved me.”

“Pippa,” he whispers, taking another step. Backing up, I hold my hands up, stopping him in his tracks.

“No.” Pulling in a deep breath and straightening my back. “I just cannot deal with this right now. I just can’t.”

“Please, bambi—”

I cut him off with a scathing look. No amount of pleading will make me listen to his words. There’s already too much upset, too much heartbreak in the air. I doubt his reasoning will make any of that better.

“We will talk about it. When I am ready,” I tell him, my tone unwavering. Never in my life have I spoken to my father with such disrespect. But now, he deserves nothing more.

He opens his mouth once more, no doubt ready to plead with me again. Leonardo takes over the conversation. “I got some news on Alexei’s next move, Ant.”

Antonio nods, his eyes narrowing when he takes in the way Leonardo stands at my back. My skin bristles under his scrutiny, and I have to fight the urge to step into Leonardo’s warmth and let him comfort me—that would only make things worse.

“Let’s go talk in your office, Leo,” he says, pushing off the counter and walking down the hallway. Fingers slip under the hoodie, running along my lower back as Leonardo moves to follow him, leaving me alone with my father.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I drop my gaze to the floor, unwilling to look at the man who raised me for twenty-one years.

“We’re leaving tonight, Pippa. Will you at least come with me to say goodbye to your sisters.”

“Are they my sisters?” I blurt, glancing up to look at the shocked look on his face at my question.

“Yes,” he swears, and I know he’s telling the truth when I look into his eyes. The same brown I once thought was a mirror of my own. *It’s a fucking joke.* “You have the same mum.”

“Do they know?” I ask him, dreading his answer. It’s one thing to find out the man you believed to be your father has lied to you your whole life, but to find out your sisters have too, I’m not sure my already fragile heart can handle that betrayal.

“Only Sofia.” A shiver runs down my spine, my heart splintering further at his admission. “Don’t blame her, Pippa. I swore her to secrecy, but she wanted to tell you, I swear she did. But I forced her to stay quiet.”

“Okay, then. I’ll come and say goodbye to them, but don’t expect anything more from me. I have nothing left to give you right now.”

“Okay,” he mumbles, the sadness in his voice tugging at something deep inside me. Something I refuse to acknowledge. I have always loved my father, but I’m doubting whether he has always loved me.

“Would you?” Was I always just a pawn in this game between two Mafias?

Hours later, my sisters stand in a line, each looking at me heartbroken as the plane starts behind them. One week they’ve been in New York. I thought they were supposed to be healing and help put back together some of my pieces of me that I’ve lost over my time in New York.

Instead, they’re leaving me more broken than before they arrived. It isn’t their fault, not really. But I can’t help the deep sadness that envelopes me as I watch them next to each other. My *half*-sisters. The

to say carry the same genetics, from both sides, but I don't. Tears spring to my eyes and Rosa is the first to break the line and throw her arms around me. I look on. "I'm so sorry, P," she whispers into my ears, her hands gripping the collar of my jumper. "You *are* our sister, don't ever doubt that. Please. Promise me that you won't push us away."

What a relief. "She's right," Elisa agrees, joining us with tears in her eyes. My heart opens, ready to make the promises to them, but the words don't come. I know gaze moves over Rosa's shoulder to where Sofia stands. Tears fill her eyes—her face as white as a sheet as she bites the skin at her thumb.

My heart can't take it. I pat my sisters on the back, smiling softly at them as they wipe away their tears on my cheeks. "Give me a minute."

My legs even wobble. Moving over to her, I hold my hands out to her. A lone tear falls on my cheek. She lashes, the sight breaking my heart for the girl who never cries. "Please don't hate me."

Nothing. "I could never," I tell her truthfully, squeezing her hands tightly. "I love you, Sof. But you are my sister, and I believe in you. So I trust that you did it because you felt you couldn't."

My head is spinning. "I'm so sorry, Pippa. You are the light in all of our lives, and I hate what he made me promise. I hate him."

"I know." Pulling her into me, I fold my arms around her. She's shakingly hated Papá, almost as much as she loves him. For as long as I can remember. A week they've never seen eye to eye and argue more than any of us. It's one of those things that I'm understanding why. "Forgive him, Sofia."

She eyes me cautiously, waiting for the catch, but I don't have one. I'm not ready yet. I'm so mad at him, Sofia, and I'm not ready to hear his excuses that or give him anything back. But he's Papá, and we only have him. I love them all. Please. For me."

my eyes, Nodding, she squeezes me once before pulling away and straightens back. Sofia is the strongest person I know, but also the most stubborn. I can't forgive him for what he made her promise . . . then maybe one day I will find some forgiveness to give too.

"Time to go," Sofia calls over my head, her words directed at Eliza and Rosa. The three of them give me a final hug, stealing my breath away. My strength pours into me. Whispered apologies, more tears and promises of a better tomorrow are all I'm left with when they pull away, stalking to the plane and leaving me alone on the tarmac.

My father steps out of the car then, holding the metal frame of the car for a long moment when I turn to face him. His eyes are glassy, his mouth hangs down while he stares at me over the runway. He looks older than when we first arrived, more haunted than I've ever seen before.

The urge to run to him, to hug him and tell him it's okay is overwhelming. But it would only be a lie. It's not okay. I'm not sure it will ever be. That moment in the casino changed our lives forever, and there's no going back.

Anxiety hits me like a wave the second he starts across the tarmac, the same ominous feeling that struck me on my wedding day. Rain is always chilling me to the bone as it soaks through Leonardo's hoodie, seeping into my skin.

"Papá," I shout, my eyes darting over the runway. I don't know what I'm looking for, but I can feel it. Something is deeply wrong. "Papá, get in the car."

He looks at me warily, his frown deepening, but he doesn't listen. He keeps moving, and the pit in my stomach grows deeper. There is no

ing her but us. Nico waits in the car, ready to take me back, but on this run
1. If scheme and the man I thought to be my father my whole life.

ly I can So why do I feel sick?

Why do I feel the eyes of someone, of many someone's watching us
isa and "Papá, please," I urge, my eyes widening the closer he gets. "Get
with the the car. Something's wrong."

nises of He reaches me finally, his hands curling over my shoulders and squ
owards gently. "I love you. Always. Remember that."

"There's something wrong," I whisper, repeating myself. "You need
to look for back."

turned "I can't, bambina. The wheels are turning, and we can only go forward

when he "Why does it sound like you're saying goodbye to me?"

"I hope you can forgive me one day," he says, squeezing my shoulder
elming once more before leaning in and pressing a kiss to my forehead. Tears
e okay to my eyes once more, spilling over my lashes as he pulls away.

going One step backwards, then another. A sad smile passes over his lips,
gives me a small wave before spinning on his heels and starting toward
c. That plane once more. Only this time, he doesn't make it far.

pours, A shot rings through the air, the whizz of a bullet passing my head
ng into it strikes his stomach, sending him flying to the ground.

A vicious scream tears through me, my throat burning under the pressure
hat I'm Pain reverberates up my spine when my knees buckle and slap against
back in concrete. Blood seeps through Papá's shirt, staining the white in a
coating. My heart shatters into a million pieces, watching as he clutches
ten. He abdomen, his face contorted in pain.

ne here Hands clutch my arms, trying to pull me up but my body refuses
cooperate. Everything shuts down as tears roll over my cheeks, n

way it's bitterly cold as the wind lashes around me and the rain seeps through my clothes.

Losing my father isn't something I'd ever considered; he's invincible, at least he's supposed to be. He's a superhero who wears black suits and gives the best cuddles in the world. There isn't a single part of me that isn't ever be ready for the day he leaves me behind.

Hushed voices carry over me, but the words don't penetrate me. The only noise is all I can hear. Men rush to Papá, coming out of nowhere, their hands pressed against his wound to stem the stream of blood that continues to flow through the hole in his stomach.

Time moves slowly—so fucking slowly—as I watch his life leave his eyes flutter closed, and in that moment, all I see is darkness. A world where my father isn't a world worth living in.

I need more time with him.

I need to forgive him.

I need *him*.

The same large hands clutch my arms, pulling me up and hauling me against his strong chest. The scent of sandalwood hits me instantly, though the comfort doesn't come as Leonardo carries me to the car.

I should ask where he came from, or how he got here so fast, but words as sobs continue to take over my body. He holds me tightly against the chest, my head resting right where his heart beats.

He says nothing, just runs his hands up and down my back, keeping me close while I break in his arms. I thought I was already broken. A thousand pieces of me already torn up and shredded, but that was nothing compared to this.

The car pulls away, leaving the runway and my heart behind.

igh my



ible. Or

uits and

it could A sea of black stares at me when I walk into the church. Men and
sitting in the pews, their eyes focused on the black casket at the end

. White aisle. Antonio walks beside me, his hand on my lower back as he pus
r hands towards the front row.

to leak Appearances matter, apparently—lest me losing my father be a g
experience and not a public fucking spectacle. My sisters weep, tears
im. His down their faces, leaving streaks in their make-up.

without All my tears dried up the moment we got back to the penthouse aft
happened. I locked myself in the bedroom, hid under the covers, and
to come out until today.

Everyone came knocking. Demanding my presence, but I couldn't
to them. All I feel is anger. I'm angry at Papá for lying, and I'm eve
e into a angry that he abandoned me here to deal with the fall out.

e usual It's funny when someone dies.

People you never even knew grieve them, as though they meant sor
ords fail to the deceased. And maybe they did. But honestly, who gives a fuc
inst his I've never met offer handshakes to my *husband*; passing their condole
to him as if losing a father-in-law he never even got to know is so
ing me painful for him.

ousand The only saving grace in my father's death is that Antonio hasn'
ared to near me in days. Hasn't spoken of getting me pregnant or tried t
himself on me. Small mercies exist.

“Pippa,” Sofia urges, holding her hand out to me when I stop at the aisle, my eyes locked on the closed casket. The metal is shiny, polished to perfection, as if that makes it better that there is a rotting corpse lying inside.

Nobody offered to let me see his body, and now with a closed casket, my goodbye feels final. Blowing out a shuddering breath, I ignore the following me as I walk the final steps to where my father sleeps.

I press my hands against the cold metal, my fingers trembling as I grieve myself together. A single tear spills over my lashes, breaking free while I fight. I press a kiss against the casket, steam cascading off the metal as I exhale.

“Dormi bene, Papá. Mi mancherai per sempre,” I whisper for only a moment, my voice cracking under the weight of the words.

Sleep well, Papá. I’ll miss you forever.

A thick hand curls around my wrist, dragging me away from my father to our seats. I shake Antonio off, scowling at him as he mutters under his breath, “You are making a scene.”

“God forbid I say goodbye to my father,” I grit through clenched teeth, dropping into my seat. My hands shake as I fist them on my lap, my fingers bouncing uncomfortably.

“You forget your place, wife.”

“No, I know my place,” I tell him, a vicious smirk lifting at the corners of my mouth. “Under men like you, being used and abused until you get what you want from me. Though I’m starting to think I’ve had enough. You know how I went through with this union to keep him happy.”

The words fall out of my mouth before I can even think about what I’m saying—or where I’m saying them. Though, I’m struggling to regret

end of Especially when Antonio clenches his jaw, his eyes darkening as he
shed to ahead.

inside. The fact of the matter is, I don't know why I'm still here.

ket, the Sure, I signed a contract, but I did it to keep my father happy. Wh
ie eyespoint now? He's gone, yet I'm still here.

"Pippa," Sofia snaps, her voice taut with frustration while she tu
s I leanhand. "Not here."

to hold Her anger is understandable, while laughable really, consideri
ver theherself said she hated Papá on the day he died. But I let her think she
and keep quiet for the ceremony.

his ears, It's a beautiful funeral, all being said.

A slew of speeches, echoes of weeping, and glorious music.

The priest speaks softly, promising a life after death.

her and But through it all, my anger continues to rise.

ider his It's inappropriate and beyond ridiculous; yet I can't stop the anger l
inside of me.

d teeth, My father would be so disappointed in me.

r thighs But he's dead.

So what does it matter?

Sofia keeps a hold of my hand through it all, never letting her grip r
y lips.the tears stream over her face. Rosa and Elisa hug each other close, th
ou wantred and puffy as they struggle to keep themselves together. Antonio i
r I onlybeside me, looking bored.

The only person I don't see as I move my gaze over the church is
hat I'mperson I want to see. Leonardo. When he dropped me off at the pen
t them.I'd expected him to come inside—to offer some consolation—but r

He got out of the car, left me with Nico, and stalked out of the garage without another word.

Maybe it's for the best, though. It's not as if we can ever have a normal life there. Even if I ran from Antonio, he can't live a life in hiding from the world because I broke a contract.

They're his friends.

His family.

I'm just the girl he fucked a handful of times.

The service wraps up, and we stand to leave. My eyes linger on the door for a long beat, my heart thundering against my chest as Sofia pulls my hand. I let her pull me away, my feet dragging along the floor.

"What do we do now?" Rosa asks the moment we stop outside. Her eyes have finally dried, but her glassy eyes are haunting as they watch me, waiting for her to answer. It makes sense. She's the oldest. She's the one who picked up the pieces when our mum left.

She's the closest thing we've had to a mother our whole lives.

She has to know the answers.

But when I turn to face her, my hands clench into fists at my sides. I see a lost expression etched into her features and the way she lifts her shoulders in silent protest. She looks childlike as her eyes sink, her gaze falling to the asphalt.

"You have to tell us," Rosa pleads, her voice so raw the sound will stay with me forever as she pleads with our eldest sister. "Please, Sofia, you know. We need you to tell us what we do."

Sofia stays silent, the lack of answer more telling than any words she could have said.

She doesn't know . . . and if *she* doesn't know, then we're truly fucked.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

A party reins in the nightclub we've been dragged to. A nightclub wake. Because where else would you host one? I guess I understand. It's the only place large enough to house all the men and women that poured into that church to pay their respects and say goodbye to Pops.

"Hey, girl," Felicity says, squeezing my forearm gently. I haven't seen her since the mansion was bombed, with her being busy in her new job, but we have kept in touch through text. Thankfully, Margo and her we've been sent to work for Antonio's uncle until the mansion is back up and running. "How are you doing?"

"Truthfully? I don't know," I tell her, taking a sip of the wine Rosa brought in my hand earlier. "I'm supposed to be sad, right?"

"But you aren't?" she asks, tilting her head and watching me with her blue eyes.

"No, I am, I think. But it's blanketed in rage. I'm so angry, Felicity. It's my time."

"That makes sense, Pips," she tells me. "There's no right or wrong about your grief. You loved your father, but he also lied to you and left you v

answers. You're allowed to be angry at him. You're allowed to scream at the world and tell it to fuck off."

"It's not just him, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm angry at them all, Felicity." Blowing out a breath, I glance across the sea of guests. Most are laughing or talking loudly. Very few look up at the death of my father. "He shouldn't be here, but they forced us to bury him in New York. A home that hasn't been his for fifteen years. Antonio played the role of doting husband today. When in real life, he's nothing more than a cunt. My sisters have to leave and go back to London, *together*, while I'm stuck here. And Leonardo—"

I can't bite my tongue to stop the words spewing from my mouth. Felicity sits beside me, and I can feel the burn of her eyes on my profile, though I don't look at her. We fall quiet, the silence deafening, though, I'm only silent because she doesn't ask me to elaborate.

My anger towards him is unwarranted, I know that; it's hard to put words to why my rage burns at the thought of him. We had two perfect days. Two days in which he showed me what a life of freedom with him could be like—and for that, I hate him. I hate him for giving me a glimpse into a life that will never be mine.

"Come on," Felicity says a little while later, threading her fingers through mine and pulling me towards the exit. "Let's get out of here."

"We shouldn't," I start, my voice wavering as I eye my sisters sitting over in the corner, talking quietly amongst themselves. Watching them together, the way they cling to one another cracks something inside me. They will always have each other, and I'm grateful for that . . . but what do I have now?

n at the “Okay,” I relent with a sharp nod, letting her pull me into the bitter cold. Goosebumps raise on my arms in the wind, the black shirt I’m wearing a little to stave off the cold.

I brush my palms over my black trousers, wiping away the lint that was there before following Felicity to her car. Her little white Audi comes to a stop at the heat pouring through the vents as she pulls away from the nightclub, leaving me in the wake behind. The sky cries, coating the world in darkness. It’s fitting, says the day and yet depressing all the same.

than a “Where are we going?” I ask when we’re still driving an hour later. While I’ve long since left the city lights behind and are now driving down a dark street that looks like something straight from a horror film.

My gasps She doesn’t answer, just keeps barrelling down the road until we come to a stop. I refuse to an old warehouse. It looks abandoned and has certainly seen better days. The brick is worn and eroding, so close to crumbling. Lights flicker through a boarded-up window. Anxiety creeps inside of me, coiling in my stomach as she switches the engine off.

at days. “Felicity.” She twists her face to mine, her eyes lowered as she blows a deep breath.

a future “I’m so sorry, Pippa.” She hops out of the car, her shoulders slumped in defeat as she walks around and opens the door next to me. “I’m so sorry.”

through “What are you apologising for? I don’t understand. Where are we?”

“I didn’t want to,” she tells me, her voice cracking. “He has my standing Pippa. I couldn’t let him hurt them.”

g them “Felicity, what the hell is going on?”

of me. “I hope you can forgive me one day.”

ho do I “Felicity,” I snap, stepping out of the car and clutching her bicep until she finally looks me in the eyes. Her face is white as a ghost, her eyes filled

er cold.tears as the rain soaks us both. “Talk to me.”

g doing “I can’t,” she whispers, pulling out of my grip before closing the car

She walks to the driver side, her body trembling as she slides back into that seats. The click of locks sounds, and she looks at me once more through the windows, shaking her head and mouthing a silent apology.

leaving My eyes widen, watching as she pulls away, leaving me in the misting rain.

Alone.

We’ve The rain dampens my hair, the curled strands now falling limp over my shoulders. My black shirt and trousers chill me to the bone as water runs through them, pinning them against my skin.

come up Pulling my phone out, I find Sofia’s contact, but the line only beeps a few times before going dead. *Shit.* No signal. Well, isn’t that bloody brilliant?

from a A rumble of thunder sounds in the distance, followed by a quick flash of lightning. I spin on my heels, facing the rolling door of the building.

dropped me outside of. Whatever she was apologising for, I’m pretty sure she’s out of there—which tells me I need to run in the other direction and not look back.

pped in Unfortunately for me, I’ve never been good at running.

orry.” The sound of heels clicking on the concrete echoes down the hallway, swallowed up in the roar of thunder as I make my way towards the family. With a creak, the rollers pull up, welcoming me inside.

A vicious chill travels over me, the hair at the nape of my neck standing on attention in the darkness before me. The space is barren and silent. I can’t see anything for the eye to see as I traipse across the floor, moving towards where the lights flicker in the distance.

ng with Dread trickles over my spine, my hand moving to grip the gun tucked

the waistband of my trousers. One of the many things I learnt from my
ar door.never leave the house unarmed.

into her Coming up to a staircase, I pull the weapon free, clicking the sai
ugh thebefore moving up the first step. Before moving to New York, I lived
fearless. Confident and strong. But over the months, something c
ddle ofinside of me.

Life hit me like a tonne of bricks, smashing my perfectly built con
into a million pieces. And now, when I need to find myself again, I f
ver mythat same little girl that first walked into the shooting range with Papá.
r seeps Scared.

My hand trembles around my gun, my breaths falling out of me ir
s a fewpants while I try to pull myself together. My heart slows as I take tl
nt. steps. A steel door waits ahead of me, the flickering light spilling fr
flash ofslight opening.

Felicity Closing my eyes, I pull in a deep breath, holding the oxygen in m
sure it'sfor a long moment. Something tickles at the back of my mind, a n
and notfrom being eleven. The first day I ever shot a gun.

The words Papá whispered to me.

For me.

street, “*Sii coraggiosa, mia dolce ragazza. Solo tu puoi salvarti*
e door.*arrivano.*”

Be brave, my sweet girl. Only you can save yourself when they come
iding to The memory spreads over me, filling me with warmth as I remem
Nothingman who loved me my whole life. Tears spring to my eyes, though
he lightsadness as expected.

He taught me.

ted into He trained me.

My father, My whole life, he led me along this pathway, preparing me for the darkness comes.

I don't know why, and I'm not sure I ever will.

But with his memory in my heart, my hand presses against the stanchion of the door opening slowly.

"Hello, wife." Antonio's voice follows the sound of cocking a gun aimed at me the second I step into the room. "How about a story?"

"Sure, why not." I shrug, my voice laced with false bravado. Once in a while I could stand in a room and face down death, but now I'm not so sure. I've always believed death to be inevitable, something that we can't avoid. A heavy defeat.

But what if life is worth the fight?

What if when we're truly faced with death, we choose to live instead of die?

"Take a seat." He gestures to a rickety wooden chair to the left of the door, a vicious grin on his face.

"I think I'd rather stand, if you don't mind."

"I mind." Hands clamp around my shoulders, dragging me to the chair before forcefully pushing me down. The gun in my hand falls limp on the floor when my arms are pulled backwards, the grip on them unrelenting. *quando* the feel of metal closes over my wrists, keeping them pinned behind my back.

"And it wasn't a question."

An ache forms in my shoulder blades at the position of my arms, but I don't let my tongue stop from wincing. Never show them fear or pain. People don't get off on it, and I've given him far too much of it since moving to New York.

Another chair is dragged along the floor, stopping about a foot away from me for Antonio. He drops down, his teeth glistening in the dull light.

day the continues to smile at me. His legs are wide, and he lowers his arms, his hands limp over his thighs.

“I’m sure you have questions.” He cocks his head, leaning forward, and speaks. I clamp my mouth shut, biting my tongue. “I wanted to make union easier for us both, you know. Muddle through life together, parents, all kid or two, and live peacefully.”

He chuckles, though it’s a brittle sound with no amusement. His eyes leave my face, but he cocks his head, his tongue swiping over his lips. So sure. “Why?” I ask, keeping my tone emotionless as I stare at him.

“Because I’m a nice guy, Pippa.” Fighting the urge to scoff, I try to move my hands, trying and failing to break free from metal bindings. Funnily enough, this predicament reminds me of when Leonardo chained me to the wall, though I think the outcome will be very different this time. “But then I saw you, and I went and looked at Leonardo with stars in your eyes, and I knew I was going to lose if I didn’t take control of the situation.”

My eyes widen, my blood chilling as his words hit me. Seeing my reaction, he laughs loudly, slapping a hand on his thigh. “Neither of you were good at hiding your attraction, Pippa. But I knew I had to get in first.” “That’s why you came to my room that first night?” I whisper, and he looks at me, falling to the floor.

“Yes,” he answers, his voice cold. “There was something between you and me that I bite of you that day, it was palpable, and I can’t compete with that kind of chemistry. People liked don’t even want to. I don’t want your love, or even your loyalty, Pippa. I’m trying to win you.” “Then why? If you don’t want me, what’s the point?”

“We’ll get to that in just a moment. But first I want to talk about my father.” Bristling as he mentions Papá, my gaze snaps back to him. “I don’t want it as he no smile on his face anymore. He looks angry, and my heart slows as I

ns overthat at me. “Darius Marchesi. A former Capo who asked my father to
him from his role in exchange for you, when you turned twenty-one.
ls as heever tell you why?”

ike this I shake my head, unable to find the words as I bite my tongue. The
p out acopper hits my tongue, warm and bitter. He laughs, the sound brittle,
he continues, “There are very few ways a Capo can leave his post. I
s nevernone of them are good. But with you, Darius had an ace up his sle
power up, if you will. The bastard daughter of the Bratva.”

I tighten my hands into fists at my back, ignoring the way the me
vist myinto my skin. My breaths come out heavy as he confirms what I thoug
enough,night at the casino. Aleksandr isn’t a normal man who stumbled in
wall—world. But still, nothing adds up.

ien you “My father was more than happy to let your family leave, knowing c
s goingyou’d be back in our clutches and we’d have the ultimate power o
Russians with you. But that isn’t what happened, is it?” He looks
æaction,expectantly, his brow raised as he waits for my response. But I have no
re very “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Traditore.”

ny eyes *Traitor*. My heart thumps against my chest, my vision blurring while
rushes to my ears. My skin becomes clammy, my legs shak
the twounderstanding pours through me.

thing. I “For sixteen years, your father worked behind our backs, colludin
.” the Bratva—your *real* father. The moment you stepped into that chu
Russians came. Because of him. What happens to traitors, Pippa?”

ut your Shaking my head, I fight the tears that threaten to spill over my lash
There’s “Answer me,” he blares, rushing over to me and fisting my hair
he aimspulling my head back.

pardon “They die.” The words slip out in a whisper, my voice crackling. My cheeks dampen, tears spilling down my face as my heart shatters under the weight of them. Why would Papá do that? Why would he risk himself for the taste of “Do you know how easy it was to kill him?” he asks, shrugging as if before the life of my father was nothing more than a day at the office for usually which I suppose it wasn’t. But to hear the admission said so callously and without an ounce of remorse is truly devastating. “A simple shot to the abdomen.”

tal cuts “I was there,” I grit through clenched teeth, blinking ferociously through the flow of tears, as my blood heats again, anger blanketing me at the sight of the man before me.

“Oh, so you were.” He laughs again, letting go of my hair and sending me one day back. He rubs his hands together, sighing almost comically when he’s finished. “I would have killed you too, you know?”

He glares at me “Why didn’t you?”

Nothing. “Because we’re married, Pippa. And you owe me a child.” He runs his hands over the lapels of his black jacket before he turns away and starts towards the staircase.

My blood “You could find any woman to impregnate,” I shout after him, my voice hoarse under the slew of emotions. “Why me?”

“While your whore of a mother comes from an Italian family, I know that a drop of blood runs through those veins of yours, making you the heir to the empire, the Half Italian, half Russian. You’re the most powerful person in this world right now, Pippa, making me the most powerful person the moment you birth a child of mine.”

before Deafening silence follows the retreat of Antonio and his men. When the door closes behind them, trapping me in this room, my arms bound

ng. My chair, I finally let the tears fall. My mind whirls around, confusing me. Under the as Antonio's words take root inside of me.

? He was manic as he spoke, but his tone rang true anyway. I'd like to think I was lying, that the words from his mouth were pure fiction. But the more I think of him—on them, the more I believe them to be fact.

sly and But that doesn't stop the questions. Questions I can no longer get a handle on, because I refused to hear my papá when he begged me to listen. In the end, I ran away. I hid like a child, scared of the truth.

to stem Why would the Russians let me go, let me live with an Italian family? What if the real father knew of me? Why did we move to London and work with the Russians—risking his life—if it was always expected that I'd marry Leonardo and tie our two families together?

en he's What part does Leonardo play in all this, and where the hell is he?

Why do the Bratva keep trying to take me out if I'm one of them?

Question after question infiltrates my mind as I thrash against my binds. A trickle of warm liquid runs over my hands, a sting of pain follows, and metal cutting into my skin. My gun stares at me from the floor, a sliver of chance of freedom beyond my reach. But still, I have to try.

y voice I press my heels into the floor, pushing myself backwards until my back topples and the chair falls to the floor. My head bounces off the ceiling. Russian white spots spreading across my vision, while my arms remain trapped against the Bratva back.

world, The wood splinters on impact, the chair breaking into pieces. A dull ache starts at my temples when I move to stand on shaky legs.

Blinking a few times, I try to clear my vision before looking over the shoulder. There is nothing but the broken chair, the one Antonio sat on, and my hand to the

ie more the floor. None of which is helpful while my arms are locked behind
painfully.

o say he “*Be brave, my sweet girl. Only you can save yourself when they come*
ore I sit mutter the words, repeating the mantra over and over again. Papá didn’t
me to quit, and he certainly didn’t raise me to take what the world
answers without a fight first.

stead, I They’ll come back, and when they do, I’ll be ready for them.

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the floor. None of which is helpful while my arms are locked behind me painfully.

“Be brave, my sweet girl. Only you can save yourself when they come,” I mutter the words, repeating the mantra over and over again. Papá didn’t raise me to quit, and he certainly didn’t raise me to take what the world gives without a fight first.

They’ll come back, and when they do, I’ll be ready for them.

LEONARDO

The man before me weeps. Tears stream over his reddening cheeks, his breaths coming in near pants as he fights against the chain around his neck. They always fight. Always think they can break free.

I knife his stomach, the blade gliding through his skin as if it were butter. The bitter scent of copper fills the air as blood pools to the surface, the blade in my hand. More breathless whimpers spill from his gritted teeth, his eyes drooping as he struggles against the lack of oxygen.

I loosen the chain, watching in amusement as he sucks in a deep breath. The blood seeping from his wounds slides down his body, falling into a puddle of crimson on the floor.

There isn't a much prettier sight, truthfully.

The only thing that has ever come close is *her*.

The first time I saw her, she was only sixteen.

She was leaving her father's house, her chestnut brown hair falling in waves down her back. A simple black dress covered her body, stopping at her thigh, the material loose and flowy. Her face was bare of make-up, a natural flush spread over her cheeks as she laughed at something he

Elisa said to her. Even then, long before I knew what it meant, the protect her crawled into my skin.

I saw her again at seventeen, dressed in jeans and an oversized while shopping for Christmas presents with her oldest sister, Sofia. I fastened into a messy bun on her head. The urge grew stronger.

And then at eighteen. Her first night out.

Dressed to the nines in a short red dress, the bodycon material clin every inch of her lightly tanned skin. Her hair was pin-straight do back, the brown shining under the fluorescent lights. Men circled l vultures, her sister Rosa encouraging the attention—but she was too the alcohol working its way through her body to pay them any mind.

That was the first time I let her see me, though I'd been watching years.

The urge to go to her was too strong to resist, and I stalked thro crowd of moving bodies. She looked up at me, her deep brown eye with excitement as she travelled the lines of my face.

That was the moment I knew she was mine.

No words were spoken between the two of us in that moment.

But I made a promise that night.

Pippa Marchesi deserved the world, and I'd give it to her.

No matter the cost.

She doesn't remember the interaction, her brain too addled with a ng into But she remembers me, deep down. I saw it when I stepped into St church in London two months ago.

In her white dress, with fearful eyes as she took me in when I walke with a that aisle. The glimmer of mischief in her expression when I stood r sister Antonio. The ghost of a smile when I caught her gaze. The swipe

urge totongue when I let my eyes travel over her. The way her heart pounded held her in my arms on the dancefloor.

hoodie Tiny interactions on the most important day of her life . . . important for the reason she thinks.

The sound of a door slamming pulls me from the memories, a voice following after.

ging to “Leo,” Nico breathes, waiting for me to turn to him.

wn her I tap the man in front of me on the face, my knife nicking her cheek like beautifully before I pull the chains taut to his neck again. Turning slightly, I drop my knife onto the table beside me. My brow raises at Nico, who says, “She’s gone.”

her for “Well, Gio, it’s your lucky day,” I say to the man behind me with a chuckle before I grab my knife again. He looks at me with wide hopefulness. The poor bastard. For years I’ve been working against Antonio. Turning away from him silently. Their loyalty becoming mine.

The fact Antonio hasn’t figured it out yet tells me exactly why he doesn’t deserve the throne. The writing has been on the wall for years, but I didn’t see what he wanted to see. Idiot. Gio was one of the last few. If he thinks I’d let his stubborn ass free, he’s more of a fool than I first thought.

The moment my arm comes up, he senses my intentions and tries to pull away from me, but the bindings on his arms and legs make that impossible. Slicing open a man’s neck is harder than it looks on TV. They make it so easy. A simple swipe of your knife, and they die.

But that’s fictitious.

down Layers of thick muscle come first, and you have to break through all of it before you can reach the carotid artery. It’s a gruesome task. For her

when they'd rather take the easy route. A bullet to the head is preferable world.

I don't like easy.

His head lolls, blood pouring from the open wound. A satisfied smile hurried at my lips as the life seeps out of him.

So fucking beautiful.

I swipe the blade of my knife over my black pants, clearing the skin before facing Nico once more. He looks wary as he watches me stalk slowly, the room, though I don't know why. We knew this day was coming.

Antonio was never going to let Pippa slip from his clutches easily. I

he had her father killed. He needed the distraction of a funeral to with alone. Get her away from me.

Letting him take her goes against everything intrinsic inside of me.

Just like letting him think she was his wife. The moment

first held her in my arms, I knew she could never be his, no matter what contract stated.

I was already working against him long before then, working with

the truly Bratva after he took something from me. Something that was never his

he tried to do it again. To claim power never meant to be his.

It was always hers, and hers alone.

She's lost sight of that recently.

She's forgotten who she is.

But not for much longer.

A bigger war is brewing, and only she can win that battle—she has to choose.

There are few people I'll stand at the back of, guarding with my life

Only her.

in this *My wife.*

Switching out marriage contracts was easy. A simple slip of paper and a signature from myself, and the deed was done. However, I still had to let him pull the strings for a little while—even when the thought of them tears me apart.

I had to let the power go to his head until it was time.

Today, he showed his cards . . . now I get to show mine.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, the text tone a shrill sound in the silence of my house. I pull it out, glancing at the coordinates flashing against the screen. It's why for a moment before lifting my head.

"You ready, Boss?"

My smile widens at Nico's question as he steps beside me. I want it. But it's fucking ready.

New York City is mine.

And with Pippa at my side, we'll rule the city together, the entire fucking city. *my Italian Mafia and her Russian Bratva* behind us.

Till Death Do Us Part.

is. And **To be continued . . .**

has no

.

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AFTERWORD



Are you mad at me right now? I would say I'm sorry, but I'd be lying. This story has lived in my head for a very long time, just waiting for the right moment. I finally agreed to give this whole writing thing a go. Cliff-hangers are the worst—I know. But these characters deserve to have their story told and their needs to be met. I've no doubt you have questions, I have them too. The answers are coming, and there will be hell to pay when certain things come to light. I hope you stick around for the journey!

Pippa and Leo will be back for the final instalment in the Our Solent duet ... *coming soon!*

Follow the link to pre order now <https://mybook.to/FBFWOSV>

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Play By The Rules (Book 1)

Play In The Dark (Book 2 coming soon!)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To you, the reader, thank you! Thank you for taking the time to read *Death Do Us Part*. There are very few words that can explain how grateful I am that you took a chance on me and my story. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

To my girls ... I finally got here. I'm sure you had your doubt moment when I changed course and started writing *Play By The Rules* should have been writing this book. I definitely had my doubts, but these two were ready to talk and there's no way I could have got the book out if it wasn't for your unwavering support over the weeks. The melt the spirals, the tears and the laughter—you went on every part of this journey with me, and I can't thank you enough. You are the sunshine I didn't need! Love you all!

Gee Gee and Flockster. I have to thank you separately and for different reasons, but I'm going to try and keep this short and sweet because this is definitely the last book I'll do it in, because I'm pretty sure you'll read these anyway.

Gee, you are my smut approver, my arse kicker and my deprestie truly isn't a way this story would exist without you ... and if it did, it be the cleanest romance ever and nobody wants that. I tolerate you alw

Flockster—I just know you're dying over the use of this nicknar published book and this makes me very happy. We are *toxic* together wouldn't have it any other way. When I spiral, you spiral. We definite things interesting. Thank you for being smut approver number two and you for being my formatter and giving me the prettiest books ever deserve all the love, and that's because of you! I love you!

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Flockster—I just know you're dying over the use of this nickname in a published book and this makes me very happy. We are *toxic* together, and I wouldn't have it any other way. When I spiral, you spiral. We definitely keep things interesting. Thank you for being smut approver number two and thank you for being my formatter and giving me the prettiest books ever. They deserve all the love, and that's because of you! I love you!

My lovely husband, and my daughter. The fact you're somehow still willing to share me with these characters who live in my head is a testament to your love and support. Thank you. You're my favourite people and I couldn't do life without you.

Finally to my cat. Yes, I'm thanking a cat ... and yes I know how totally weird it is, but we're going with it anyway. Spartacus, you give the best cuddles when I'm needy after a long day of writing. Thank you for being my snuggle buddy when everyone else is asleep. You're the best fur baby ever!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Violet Paine lives in Derbyshire, England with her husband, their dog, and fur baby. When she isn't writing, you can find her tucked up on a couch, wrapped in a duvet with a glass of wine in one hand and a book in the other.

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