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wiolet paine

TILL DEATH DO US PART

VIOLET PAINE



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Till Death Do Us Part

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AUTHORS NOTE

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

CONTENT WARNING

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



Qr code Description automatically generated

People who have triggers should proceed with caution.

This may not be your cup of tea, and that's totally cool; just don't drink it.



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.

CHAPTER ONE

Thunder rumbles through the darkening sky, the boom deafening as it echoes across the city. They say rain on your wedding day is a sign of 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 quick succession. From where I stand on the balcony, facing the gardens of the 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 hangs. Laid at its feet are the most beautiful off-white lace and crepe satin Louboutin 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. A day 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 me by a handful of people whom don't know the first thing about my taste and style.

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 you could get from a fairy tale.

I drop down into the seat at the vanity, waiting for my sisters to arrive to help me into my dress. The only thing I have left to do now. They wanted to 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 staring back at me. My chestnut brown hair is twisted into a low bun with loose tendrils framing my face while my make-up has been brushed on to perfection.

Gold and brown shadows coat my eyelids, accentuating the usually dull brown, and the layers of foundation, concealer, and bronzer hide all 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 as their 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 on 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 father moved us from America to England when I was only six, it had never crossed my mind that mine could—or would—be arranged for me.

Sofia and Rosa have yet to marry, and Elisa got to marry for love, yet 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 it's my duty 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 figure out what any of it is.

“Do I have to do this?” I ask Sofia when she slips my dress out of the garment bag. It is truly exquisite with an a-line silhouette—the shape perfectly flattering for my small frame. White lace appliqués over an ivory 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 didn't, but 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 amongst 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 for me and a warm welcome back into the fold for him.

“Now, no moping,” Sofia tells me with a shake of her head. She lays my dress on the bed and grabs a bag from Rosa's outstretched hand before 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 to get married.”



Stumbling over my feet, I barely make it up the stairs to the church without falling on my face and breaking my nose. I'd like to say it's because the heels are too high—while that may be true, the giggles coming from behind me remind me much of my lack of graciousness comes from the many shots of tequila my sisters and I downed in my hotel room.

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

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

“I can’t believe you girls,” he hisses in my ear. The glare on his face would probably be scary if I were not so tipsy. I find it rather endearing, cute even, the way his nose wrinkles as his eyes narrow at me.

When he runs his hands through his greying dark hair, letting out a sigh, I step 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. He 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. In fact, whenever I have asked, you’ve refused to answer any of my questions. So, forgive me if I have not taken this seriously enough for you. That is on you, 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 biting my tongue isn’t something I’ve ever been good at.

“There are many things I have not told you, Pippa. Many things I cannot. But this union is important to our family, so when we get in there you are to be on your best behaviour. When you leave and fly to New York with your new husband,

you are going to do everything that he expects of you. There can be no outbursts or disrespect towards him. No insolence. You will be the perfect wife to him. Do you understand?"

I nod, stepping away from him the moment he loosens his grip on me. While I understand his words, there's something deeper in his tone I can't read.

I move again, ascending the steps one by one, until I pause at the entrance of the church. My hands tremble as Papá slips my arm through his, pulling 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 a chair while we wait. Light sounds of a piano fill the room while candles flicker on almost every surface, casting a dim orange glow over the space.

Truthfully, the church is nothing less than magnificent.

Lofty ceilings with stained-glass windows spread across them hide the rain falling outside, while statues of the saints pave the way from the grand entrance.

Opulence and glamour everywhere you look.

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

A bitter cold that seeps into my bones, chilling me from the inside out. Another omen, perhaps.

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

Urging me to turn around and run away.

The signs are glaring, and I want to listen.

To follow them out of that door and far away.

But when the opening notes of Bach's "Arioso" trickle into the room and my sisters take their places ahead of the door that will lead them down the aisle, I know I'm too late.

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 little I have eaten today, and I know it will not be pretty if I let that nausea take hold of me.

Though, it could put an end to the proceedings if I feign a sickness. I'm busy pondering whether that could actually work when the doors open ahead of us.

My sisters descend the aisle slowly, in an orderly line, and I almost laugh at how out of place they look in their sage green dresses amongst the sea of black filling the pews. I'm not sure if there was a dress code the guests had 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 more like a funeral.

The guests stand following the change in music to signal my arrival. 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, his grip tight where our arms are linked. I fear if I look up, I'll be tempted to tuck tail and run. I imagine the only thing I will wind up with if I were to do that is a bullet in my skull.

Not the ideal beginning to one's wedding day.

Or end, I suppose.

"You have to breathe, bambina," my father whispers. "This is a good thing, you'll see."

I don't believe him, and I'm not sure he believes himself either if 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 him a small smile anyway. The last thing I want to do right now is lay my emotions 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 I am ready, my father is slipping my arm out of his and placing my palm into 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 pinstripe suit. His dark hair is slicked back, perfectly styled to accentuate his high cheekbones and strong jaw.

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

He does not speak nor smile as he stares at me, his deep-blue eyes leave a burning in their wake as he takes in my features. A harsh frown mars his lips, 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 enough, there isn't a spark of lust in my body for him. His face is too sharp, his body too lean, and his personality too stiff for my liking.

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

"O' God who consecrated the bond of Marriage ..." the elderly priest starts.

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

If ever there was a time to step up and say I can't do this, it would be now.

I'm sure the Big Man would forgive me.

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

With every word spoken, my blood chills further and my heart races 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?

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

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 that a church would be filled with such opulence.

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.

The ceremony drags, and I swear the priest talks slower with each line just because he can. Can't he see that everyone's patience is wearing thin? Or maybe that's just me

and everyone else is loving his spiel on why marriage is sacred.

All I know is by the time we're finished here, I will need a large alcoholic beverage.

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

“Since it is your intention to enter into the covenant of Holy Matrimony, join your right hands and declare your consent before God and His church.”

Shit.

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

He says his vows, promising to love and cherish me in sickness and in health and blah blah blah.

It's all bloody bullshit.

The most a man like Antonio could offer me is a lifetime of pain and sorrow.

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

But I can't get the words out.

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, Pippa, take you, Antonio, to be my lawful husband, to have and to hold from this day forwards—”

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 us, 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 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 slither of entertainment to an otherwise long and boring ceremony, and for that, 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 lose myself in deep brown eyes. 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 neck. I can't deny that I'm intrigued to see what it all looks like under the fitted black shirt he's wearing.

Only when Antonio coughs do I realise I'm staring at the newcomer, my mouth gaping slightly. I quickly turn my head back to face the front, ignoring 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 hands twist 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 phone rings 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 slows, rolling to a stop at the kerb.

With his brown hair, hazel eyes and black suit, he fits right in with the rest of them—but there’s something softer about him, a kindness in his eyes that 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, soaking everything as it bounces off the pavement. “Thank you, Nico.”

Thunder crashes through the sky, a flash of lightning follows, and I almost 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 arm 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 into 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 in their tracks to stare at me. A flash of heat spreads up my neck to my face in embarrassment. I wonder what they're thinking as I walk through the hotel, in my wedding dress without a groom in sight.

Do they think I'm a runaway bride? Or a bride abandoned by her new 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 slow for a beat, trepidation stealing my breath. Each step I take is a step closer to my life no longer being my own ... and I'm not ready for that.

But I don't have a choice.

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

"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 for me, I kick my heels off, a happy moan slipping from my lips "Oh, that feels good. Those shoes may be beautiful, but my god do they hurt."

"Classy as always, my girl." Rosa laughs, clinking her full glass with my 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, taking a large swallow while Rosa only laughs and drinks alongside me.

“Don’t get sloppy,” Elisa says, her brow furrowing as she glances warily 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 tongue of yours.”

“Don’t be dramatic, maybe just a light spanking,” I tell her with a laugh. She rolls her eyes, but a smile forms on her lips anyway. “Besides, it’s my wedding day. Surely it’s a rite of passage to get super drunk and pass out on the dancefloor.”

“Sure, if this was a normal wedding. You just married into the Mafia, girl. I don’t think the usual traditions apply here.” She chuckles, twisting a finger through her blonde curls. We couldn’t look more different, my sisters and me.

There were many times when we were growing up that I wondered if we were even related.

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

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—nothing like either of my parents.

Not that I can say that with absolute certainty about my mother since the only memories I have of her come from photos hidden around our house.

She up and left one night when I was only a baby. There one moment, gone the next, as though she never existed.

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

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

Elisa shakes her head, scowling at me playfully while laughter falls from Rosa, the drink in her glass spilling over the rim as her shoulders shake in amusement.

“Oh, sweet girl, I hope you keep that spark alive when you get to 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 much about the inevitable. All of us struggling with the thought of saying goodbye.

The tent gradually fills over the next half hour, the volume in the space becoming almost deafening as introductions are made and the alcohol flows.

Very few people interact with my sisters and me, beyond the odd hello and congratulations. 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 life in New York will be quiet and lonely. From everything I know—which is little—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 mind, a familiarity when his eyes lock on mine. 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 so easily.

“Hello, ladies,” he says, dropping into the seat to my right. He rests his hand on the table, right beside mine, our pinkies grazing as he flings a smile my way. “Princess.”

Narrowing my eyes on him, I clench my thighs to temper the pulse that starts in my centre at the nickname. There's something about the way it falls from his mouth that sends a wave of heat coursing through me.

A single word from his lips, and I might as well be panting like a bitch in heat over a stranger.

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

“Good evening,” I reply, dropping my eyes to the table and taking a sip of my champagne. His eyes burn holes into my head, but I refuse to look up.

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

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

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

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

Bloody brilliant.

A husband who wants nothing to do with me.

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.

Elisa is right.

I'm going to get myself killed.



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

I'm not sure whose bright idea it was to make sure half of Antonio's extended family got a dance with me, and if I ever find out, I might actually kill them.

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

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

Though, comfort is the last thing I'm feeling when he whispers in my ear.

"Hello, Princess," he murmurs, sending shivers down my spine. My gaze flicks up, my eyes locking onto his deep brown orbs that are already ingrained into my brain after staring at them for a short time back in the church. Up close, his face is strong and chiselled as though made from stone.

There isn't a single wrinkle on his face, nor a line in sight when he smirks down at me. I know Antonio is thirty-four, and given they grew up together, I 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. That's the only way I will survive any interaction with him, by keeping calm and collected. He's dangerous, that much is obvious when his dark eyes move over my face and travel down my chest, lingering slightly on the cleavage threatening to spill over the neckline of my dress.

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

"Have you had a good day?" he asks me, twirling me around the dancefloor. His movements are gracious, confident as he leads us through a waltz across the floor. The fact the man can dance only makes him more attractive.

"It's been lovely, thank you."

He laughs a little, the sound tickling my earlobe as he leans into me. “Why do I get the feeling this little miss perfectly polite act is just that, an act?”

Because it is.

“I have no idea,” I answer, the lie falling easily off my tongue. That’s not to say I’m not a polite person, but I’m also not the kind of person that minces around things.

The role of the perfect wife is something my father has been trying to drill into me since he first told me about the marriage contract three years ago.

No man wants a sarcastic, witty wife.

At least that’s what I’ve been told on an almost daily basis.

I’m not sure I agree but then I have no previous marital experience to compare to. So maybe Papá is right. Though, why any woman would want to 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 now, I’ll play the role. I’ll act the part and hope that it sticks, or pray the Mafia are willing to take on an outspoken twenty-one-year-old who drinks like a sailor and has a mouth to match.

Leonardo tightens his grip, pulling me even closer. There’s barely an inch of space between our bodies. I’m not sure it’s appropriate to be this close to the man, though, I’m not complaining.

“You’re interesting,” he murmurs. His lips graze my earlobe, and I barely control the moan that tries to escape me. “I can’t wait to see how you come into yourself in New York. I doubt Antonio is going to be able to handle you at all.”

“Maybe I’m not meant to be handled,” I quip, tilting my head up to him. Our lips brush, a whisper of a touch before I lean back.

“Oh, that’s not true at all. You’re meant to be handled.” He pulls away from me, taking a few steps backwards towards the bar. Before he turns around, he sends me a wink, and my heart races. “But not by him. See you around, Princess.”



“Hey, Papá.” My father spins in his seat, a smile plastered on his face as he stares up at me. His tie is loosened, and the top button of his shirt undone.

Like this, he just looks like any old dad at his daughter’s wedding: carefree, jovial even.

There’s something else shimmering in the depths of his brown eyes though. A sadness of sorts, and the frustration I saw earlier lingers in the tense hold of his muscles.

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

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

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

I 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 out 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 for him to return home bloody and beaten.

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

Before I can say anything further, shouts fly across the room as guns are 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 no one there that I can see, but the dramatics won’t be for nothing—that I’m sure of.

“Pippa,” Papá warns, his voice little more than a growl as he watches me 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 the holster, 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. “You 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.”

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.

“Why does the new Mafia bride have a gun in her hand?” Leonardo ponders with a low chuckle, his eyes straying from my hand to my face. There's an amused smirk on his lips when he tilts his head, watching me curiously while chaos ensues around us.

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

“Can you handle it, Princess?”

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

“I think I’m in love,” he murmurs, his words meant for only me. His eyes darken when I push the barrel deeper into his skin. He cocks a brow as though to taunt me, which only eggs me on more.

I won’t pull the trigger, not on him.

Not today at least.

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

Rolling my eyes, I let the gun hang limp at my side, a mumbled curse falling from my lips.

“No killing, Pippa. Especially not your new family,” he demands, his eyes moving between Leonardo and me. When he turns to face the commotion with a blank look, he grumbles under his breath, “She’s going to be the death of me soon.”

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

Although, a teddy bear that taught his youngest daughter how to handle all manners of weapons. “Now, does anyone want to tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Russians.” Antonio’s voice comes from behind, his tone heavy with disdain while he watches the curtains on the tent. His hands are free of weapons, which is surprising, considering how heavily armed the rest of his men seem to be.

He looks carefree, bored even, but those cold eyes of his tell a different story. They narrow on the tent, watching as a tall lean man steps through the curtains into the space.

His sleek hair is dark, buzzed at the sides and longer on the top, and a scar travels over his forehead, slashing through his right eyebrow. He wears a suit, similar to the men around me, but where theirs are black, his is a royal blue. His stroll is lazy as he makes his way towards us, stopping just shy of a metre in front of my new husband.

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

“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 when I tighten my grip around the handle. While this man may not seem overly threatening with his easy stance, it would be foolish to lower my guard. “You seem to know who I am, but I haven’t the first clue who you might be.”

“Alexei.”

“A pleasure to meet you.”

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

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

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 unthreatening to me, the man behind me is not.

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 to stand beside him. My father and Antonio are too busy watching Alexei to have noticed the small interaction, and that’s something I can only be grateful for.

“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 chocolate brown eyes seem to devour every inch of me and his lips quirk up into a slow smile, this man is a walking temptation.

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

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

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

My feet move before I can think better of it, taking me to my father’s side. He eyes me cautiously, though his hand reaches out and taps at my palm 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 your congratulations on these nuptials, Alexei,” Antonio comments, his face never leaving Alexei’s as he steps forwards. The other man remains calm, the same smirk still on his face. Though he turns his gaze to watch me, sending me a wink before he answers.

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

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

“None taken, you’re not mine either.” Before today I would have said I didn’t have a type, but now I’m not sure that’s the truth. Though that’s not 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, of course. “Though, I’m intrigued as to what you would want me for if not to marry. What would be the point in stealing a new wife from the Mafia, if not to claim me for yourself?”

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

about the way he speaks them. My father seems to notice too as he grabs my hand, squeezing gently to offer my comfort.

Alexei chuckles, raising his weapon-free hands in a show of innocence, though it does little to ease the suffocating tension in the air.

“Leonardo,” Antonio says, turning to face his best man. The way he spins is slow—measured and tactical. Turning your back on your enemy shows them you don’t fear them, that you believe them to be weak. “Take Pippa back to the hotel.”

“Of course,” Leonardo mutters, his hand clasping my wrist and pulling me away from my father. The hairs on my arms stand, goosebumps raising on my skin as a shiver passes through me at his touch. His grip is firm, hauling me backwards. Papá glances at us both, his eyes lingering on my face for a long moment before he lets go of my hand with a final squeeze. “Let’s go, Princess.”

Alexei sends me a wave, a wide smile on his face as Leonardo leads me away from the room. I catch the gazes of my sisters huddled together in the corner. Winking, I blow them a kiss, noting the way their bodies relax at the sight of me: okay and unharmed.

I’ve never really considered the ramifications of being married to Antonio before now. I knew the life was dangerous, but I had assumed most of that would be kept away from me. However, when we reach the gardens and at least ten guns are aimed at my head, loaded and ready to be fired, I’m thinking my assumptions were wrong.

Silly of me, really.

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

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—anybody 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, but he rubs circles against my pulse point with his thumb. The gesture is small but 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 with the 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, a scowl on his face. “She is not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” I ask, the question slipping from my lips. Leonardo's grip on my wrist tightens, my skin aching under his punishing hold.

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

My eyes narrow, my mouth opening to say something more; though, what, I have no idea. Leonardo cuts me off, speaking in a bored tone. “Then it is 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 away from 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 before I shoot you.”

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

“Do you think you could take me out before my men kill you? You’d be dead long before your bullet ever hit me.” He keeps his voice flat, though there’s a hint of doubt lingering in the depths of his eyes. That’s the thing with men, they always presume to have the upper hand. While he’s right I’d be dead the moment I pull the trigger, he’s wrong in thinking I wouldn’t take 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 when he wraps an arm around my waist. “Gentlemen, we must be leaving now.”

Konstantin watches for a moment before nodding at Leonardo. “Perhaps Alexei is right about this one. I imagine we will be seeing you again soon, Pippa, but for now, I will say goodbye.”

I don’t get the chance to respond as Leonardo quickly hauls me towards the pathway that leads back to the hotel. He loosens his hold on my waist, his hand finding mine. He threads our fingers together, his thumb caressing the back of my hand. I fight the urge to shiver at the electricity thrumming through our joint skin.

“Do you have a death wish?” he asks when we reach the lobby. Bright lights assault my eyes, a stark difference from the darkness that envelopes the gardens. We do not stop; he just continues to drag me towards the lift that 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 others. I will not bow down to men who want to bring me harm in the hopes 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 several 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 grabs 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, and I drop my chin into my palms, watching him as he works. He moves around the kitchen easily, as though he knows the space well.

“Have you been staying here long?”

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

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

“It would be very uncharitable for me to turn you away, would it not?”

“I suppose but thank you anyway.”

“Don’t thank me,” he retorts with a dry chuckle. “At least not until there is something worth thanking me for. Letting you

stay in my home is the least I can do for the boss and the new wife.”

His words are a harsh reminder of what today is. Not that I have forgotten, but in the midst of the commotion, I haven't let myself think of what comes next.

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

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

When I'm rinsing the mug, he offers to show me to my bedroom for the 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 has been delivered from the suite I stayed in last night.

Grabbing a pair of plain black sweatpants and a white t-shirt, I move into the en suite and flip the shower on. Once the pins in my hair have been removed, I twist my arms behind my back, trying and failing to unhook the 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 as if 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 cheeks. I turn quickly, pulling in a deep breath. Though his answering chuckle tells me he noticed the reaction.

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

“Death is not scary.”

“Do you fear me, then?”

Goosebumps spread across my skin as he swipes my long hair over one shoulder, his fingers grazing my neck before moving to release the top 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 dress 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 me. He leans in, his full lips pressed against my earlobe. My body tenses as he speaks, though not in fear as it probably should. “Good night, Princess.”



I sleep poorly, though thankfully, alone. Antonio never comes to the bedroom, and when sunlight filters through the blinds, a grateful smile passes my lips. I shower quickly, pulling my hair back in a claw clip so it can air dry while I dress in leggings and a plain black sweater before moving into the main area of the suite.

“Good morning,” Antonio says, calling out to me from where he sits at the island. He is dressed in another black suit, without a tie today, and his hair is slicked back. He wears a smile on his face while he pours over the newspaper in front of him. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you,” I answer, moving to the kettle warily. This is the most 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. I did. Thank you.”

Nodding awkwardly, I make a cup of tea, avoiding his steely gaze. “Did you want a drink?”

“No, thanks.” He waves a mug of coffee in front of me with an amused look on his face. My face flushes in

embarrassment, my eyes settling on the cup in my hand. “We should probably have a chat.”

“Surre,” I say slowly, grabbing a stool from under the island and hopping up on it before facing him.

He straightens, dropping his paper to the counter before lifting his gaze to mine. His expression is blank—unreadable as he watches me for a beat. “I am 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 head to eye me curiously when I lift the mug to my mouth and blow on the scalding tea. Steam curls from the mug, the warmth hitting my face. “Though I will try.”

“Why am I here?”

“That one I cannot answer unfortunately,” he retorts with a dark chuckle. “This union is something that was planned many years ago, long before either you or I learnt of it.”

My brow furrows, his words running through my mind. I was only made aware of the contract three years ago, the day I turned eighteen. Papá had told me that day he had received the offer maybe a few weeks before. “But my father said—”

“Your father lied, Pippa. The union between our families was planned over sixteen years ago,” he says with a crooked smile perched on his face.

That makes no sense. We relocated to England fifteen years ago. Why would my father move us away from our home,

from his life, if a marriage between our two families was imminent? Why bother?

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

“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 want you, that is another thing I can’t answer.”

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

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

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

“So I keep on hearing,” I mumble.

“Any more questions?”

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

“I won’t offer you love, Pippa,” he tells me, his mouth turning down a little over the thought. “It is expected that

we'll have children one day. I'm willing to give you a little time to get used to me before I take you to bed but know that I will take you to bed. I need an heir, and you're the woman who gets the pleasure of giving one to me."

My blood chills, my hands clenching so tightly around the mug my 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?"

"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 stay 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 way or another about you as a person, but I do care about my reputation. Fuck it up and you're dead."

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

Before I can respond, a door opens on the other side of the room and 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 thick ink-covered arms.

"Pippa," Antonio snaps, pulling my attention back to him. "Do you understand?"

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



Later in the morning, I stand on the runway, watching as my family exit their 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 the 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 until they’re holding mine. There’s a smile on her face, but it doesn’t hide her sorrow as tears spill over her cheeks.

“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 hands and nod anyway. “I will.”

The private plane comes to life behind me as Antonio’s men make their way up the stairs. Wind whips at my hair, the strands that have fallen out of my clip slapping against my cold cheeks. I squeeze my eldest sister’s hands once more before moving to hug Elisa and then Rosa. They cling to me

for longer than necessary, but I make no move to push them away.

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

“La mia dolce, bambina,” Papá whispers, pulling me into his body and wrapping his arms around me. The scent of whisky and cigars hits me, and 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.”

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

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

“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.

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

Taking a deep breath, I spin on my heel and walk the few steps towards the 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 tonne 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 over 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 propped against the open door. Forcing my feet to move quicker, I stumble over the last step, but a long arm

wraps around my waist, halting my fall. “No wonder 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 at me with an amused grin on his face. He keeps his arm around me, helping me down the last step. As we reach the ground, I let out a slow breath before thanking him.

“What did I tell you about thanking me?”

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

“I guess we’ll find out at some point, won’t we?” he ponders aloud, letting 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 against 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 pull me from my slumber. Rubbing a hand across my face, I peel my eyes open to see 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. It is the first time I have heard it in reference to myself and it sounds so odd. “That will take some getting used to, I’m

sure. But the same thing as the whole 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 again, 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 SUV drives out of sight, deep longing within me that I can't drive away with it. Instead, I'm stuck here.

A large black mansion stands before me, beckoning me to enter. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I lift my bag and follow the pathway towards my new home. Anxious energy spreads through me, my body a trembling mess of nerves when I take the concrete steps and stop in front of the black door. There's a knocker in the centre, shaped like a snake, and a bell to the left.

I hesitate for a long moment, unsure as to whether I'm supposed to knock or not, but the decision is taken out of my hands when the door swings open.

"Hello, dear." I almost fall backwards as a woman steps out of the mansion and moves towards me. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

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

"Understandable, you've had some big changes as of late, I imagine," she comments with a small smile. Her voice is kind,

her smile even kinder. She has greying hair, cut into a sleek bob, and wrinkles that spread across her face. Her outfit is simple, a pair of dark grey trousers paired with a plain white shirt and a cream cardigan.

“I’m Margo, and you must be Mrs. Bianchi.”

“Call me Pippa, please,” I groan, lifting my hand and offering it to her. When she takes it, she places her other hand on top, patting me with her fingers a couple of times before stepping away. The gesture is so like something my father would do; I’m instantly taken to her. She turns, walking back through the open door, gesturing for me to follow.

The foyer is dark and cold as I enter. A wooden table to my left houses a bowl of keys, and a shoe rack to my right lays empty alongside a coat peg. There is a sprawling wooden staircase dead centre, taking you to the second floor.

“Shall we get a cup of tea and then I can take you on a tour?” Margo leads 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. Papá is 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 reminder of home hits me, and I have to take a steadying breath. While it may have only been several hours since I left the familiarity of London behind, it feels like a lifetime has passed.



Margo guides me around the mansion, starting with the east wing. She leads us into a large living room first, the space filled with an expanse of seating I doubt ever gets used, based on how fresh it all looks. Two large black corner 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, and 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 scoff at the use of the word house. There is nothing homely about this place. “Though, as you can probably tell, most of the men stick to their own areas.”

“The men?”

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

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

“He’s a man of few words, that one,” she says with a short chuckle before guiding me out of the lounge and through another set of double doors a little farther down. My mouth opens in a silent gasp, thoughts of whoever else may live in

this mansion long gone when I take in the expanse of bookshelves lining the walls.

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

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

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

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

“Then why don’t I show you to your bedroom,” she says, motioning to the door. “You can have a shower, change out of your travel clothes, and then I will get you a pot of tea together and some sandwiches, so you can curl up with a book down here.”

“Margo, I think I might love you.”

She says nothing more, just chuckles lightly to herself as we walk down a long hallway and into another wing of the mansion. Here, there are only a handful of doors, and she takes

me to the one at the end. The bedroom is large, light, and very basic. Not at all what I was expecting after the couple of rooms I've seen.

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

Margo must see the confusion on my face, as she tells me, "I wasn't sure how you would want your room decorated. Since this is your home now, it only makes sense for you to have a say in it. So you have the basics for now, until you decide to do some shopping and make it your own."

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 claw bath in the centre and a walk-in shower on the far wall. More than enough space for me. The counter is porcelain, and a sparkling silver sink sits in the middle. The cabinet is stocked with the basics, though I make a note to ask about a car and trips to the local supermarket when I speak to Antonio so I can buy my own preferred products.

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, all 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.

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 wings. Papá doesn't like to flash his wealth, though it seems Antonio and his men have no such qualms.

The only thing similar is the staff, though I am sure our housekeeper, nanny, and home tutor pale in comparison to the sheer amount that must work in the shadows of the mansion. My father is very particular with whom he allows into our family home. So he keeps his staff to a minimum.

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 hour."

"Thank you, Margo," I tell her sincerely with a smile, following her out of the closet and back into the bedroom. "That would be wonderful."

"Any time, Pippa," she replies, patting my shoulder before leaving me in peace.

A little while later, showered and dressed in leggings and an oversized grey hoody, I find my way back to the library. My finger trails over the spines of the books lining the walls until I come to a stop at a shelf of books that do not seem to fit the mould in here. Most books I have passed by so far are classics: the likes of Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, and Jane Eyre. This shelf, however, looks as though it could have been handpicked from my personal collection at home.

Dark romances fill the shelf, some I've read, others I have not yet. My brow furrows slightly at that. Did someone speak to my sisters? My father? Were these books brought here for me, or does somebody else in this mansion have a penchant for psychotic book boyfriends and toxic relationships in their novels?

I grab a favourite, a story about a girl falling in love with her stalker. With the book tucked into my chest, I slide down onto the love seat and pull a pale pink blanket over my curled-up legs. Margo kept her word, and there's a pot of perfectly brewed tea sitting on a small foldaway table. There's a knitted cosy on the top in the shape of a pumpkin, a seasonal décor choice, I would assume since September creeps to a close and October looms.

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

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

"I see you've made yourself at home already," a deep voice rumbles, coming out of nowhere. Startled, I jolt upwards. Tea

spills over the sides of my mug and onto the page I'm reading.

“Shit,” I hiss, placing the mug down and shaking the book off—though it is of no use. The liquid has seeped through the pages, causing ink to run and several words to become a jumbled mess as the pages start to stain. “Fuck. No.”

“It’s just a book, Princess.”

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

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

I take a deep breath, willing myself to not throttle him with this book when 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 don't respond.

Maybe I have.

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

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I reply far too quickly to be truthful—and if his answering chuckle is 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 did little to ease the tiredness in me. Folding the blanket, I drape it over the back of the loveseat and pick up the teapot and mug.

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

“I figured, a place of this magnitude,” I retort as Leonardo guides me down the hallway towards the dining room. “However, I have always cleaned up 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 a lot of people in the house. So he kept it to a bare minimum.”

“That’s surprising,” he tells me, his eyes locking on mine. There’s 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 mug onto the counter before turning and leaning my back against it. “Only with his children.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” he ponders, resting his elbows on the counter next to me and keeping his eyes on my

face. “It can’t have been easy raising four girls alone. Your mom disappeared, right?”

“How do you know that?”

“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, yeah, she disappeared. Just up and left one night, apparently. I was about six months old. But Papá did all right, with the help of Bea, our nanny, and Mrs. White, our tutor.”

“You never went to school?”

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 as he leads me through the hallways until we come to a set of double doors. My 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 single touch and my body acts as though it has been starved of intimacy for years.

He pushes the door open, motioning for me to pass him. There’s a large mahogany table set up for at least eight people.

Antonio sits at the head, his head down while he stares at his phone.

“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 take the 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, and a handful of dishes are spread across the table.

The men talk over one another, each more eager than the other to regale 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 I am 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 discuss the events of the wedding. Before I can stop myself, a question running 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, or just 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—though it isn’t enough to stop me from continuing.

“They wanted me, right?” I ponder aloud, my eyes moving over each of them. They each hold my gaze, nodding lightly at my question. “Surely it doesn’t make sense that they would have just let me walk out of there.”

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

“It was a warning,” the latter responds, his voice bored as he wears a blank expression on his face. “They wanted to show they could get in. That 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 at 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 long moments to remember where I am, and why I am here. The plain white-gold ring on my finger feels like a dead weight, dragging me into the depths of despair. It has barely been twenty-four hours since I left my home, 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. Perhaps today will be a good day to make this place feel like home. A few tweaks, some 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 energy when I find the room, and I

cannot help but smile at the woman bounding 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 fright before spinning on her heels and turning to face me with wide eyes. “Or can anyone join?”

“Fuck. Shit. Sorry, you scared me.” While she takes a second to compose 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 about 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 shirt; 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 every corner. Though I must admit, you're far friendlier than my usual visitor down 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 to the kettle in the corner of the room. “My mom worked here before me, and when she got another job offer, I jumped at the chance. I grew up in this place, running around these halls, and I love cooking and baking, so I figured why not. Plus, the pay is pretty good too, so it was an easy decision. Though, I don’t think I should really be talking about my pay with my new employer, should I? Tea?”

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

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

“Well, Felicity, it is nice to meet you and I am not really your employer, so I don’t think you need to worry too much about talking about money with me. I’d be a terrible boss, truth be told, and my accountancy skills would be even worse.”

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

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



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

Twisting around, I start towards the main foyer of the mansion in search of anybody that can tell me where to find my husband, or at least give me a clue as to whether I can leave for the day.

With Papá being so paranoid about my safety, it's become second nature to ask permission to go out for the day. When I turned eighteen, I probably 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 nowhere to be found either. The whole mansion is quiet. Far quieter than I am used to, and I hate it. There are no sounds of my sisters chattering from the lounge when they popped in to visit—which was almost daily—or my father talking on his phone in his office, or even the patter of our housekeeper, Meredith, running around the floors, talking to herself while she got her daily tasks done.

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

Wrapping my arms around myself, I wander the halls aimlessly, hoping to find anyone on my exploration. The décor is lavish and dark. If it is not made of wood, like the tables that sit in every hall with candle holders on them, it is black and ominous.

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

“Pippa.” My hand halts on the portrait I was examining, an older gentleman who looks familiar, but I can’t place why. I turn to face Margo, 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 of just wandered around exploring,” I tell her with a shrug, but then at a thought my mouth turns down. “That is allowed, right?”

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

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

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

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I smile at her, though the sadness doesn’t disappear. Stepping away from the portrait, I

start down the hall. Margo falls into step beside me, our shoes slapping against the hardwood as we make our way towards the foyer. “You wouldn’t happen to know where Antonio was actually, would you?”

“He’s probably out. But I know Leo is home. If you need something, he’s 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 do not respond. “He’s on the second floor of your wing, so at least he isn’t far if you ever need him whenever Ant isn’t around.”

“You call them Ant and Leo,” I comment, a little curious about that. Our housekeeper at home, no matter how friendly we were with her, would never have dreamed of calling my father by his name, let alone a shortened version of it.

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

“No. Informal is the last thing a person would ever call my father when it comes to his employees. His daughters, though, well that is quite a different story,” I answer, smiling fondly at thoughts of my father and my sisters.

“I can imagine.” She nods, tilting her head at me. “You miss them.”

“Greatly.”

“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 door to my left. She pats my shoulder lightly before walking away with a wave. I hesitate a moment, thinking about following her and escaping to the quiet of the library, but the door flings open before I can get my feet to move.

“Princess,” Leonardo murmurs, that deep voice of his sending tingles 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 wouldn’t 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. “Outside. Shopping. I want to go shopping. Please.”

My cheeks burn under his scrutiny, my eyes dropping closed for a second 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 brow raising as he watches me. “And you’re here, because?”

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

“I didn’t realise you needed permission to leave.” He laughs, stepping out of the door and guiding me down the hallway with his hand on my lower back. 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 shakes his head, his eyes landing on my lips when my tongue slips out to moisten the 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 as much as you please.”

“I was hardly a prisoner at home either.”

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

“Yes,” I snap, my spine straightening as frustration burns through me at 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 remains still a moment longer, his eyes burning holes into the side of my face before he moves again continuing down the hallway.

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

Headlights flicker when Leonardo presses on a fob in his hand. While I 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 cool 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 at his intentions.

“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.”

“But this is—” He opens the door and pushes me down into the leather seat. I take a moment to gather my bearings, then another to realise I am in the passenger seat. “Shit, I forgot you guys did things backwards over here.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the Brits that do things backwards, but you keep telling yourself that.”

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.

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

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

He reaches over me, his hand pulling the seat belt across my body and clipping it into place without ever taking his eyes off the road. I didn't even 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 weirdly hot that move was.

“Where are we going?” I ask him, my eyes straying to where his long fingers clench around the steering wheel. His hands are calloused, the skin rough, and there's a collection of thick rings on several of his fingers. Including his ring finger. Before I can think better of it, I blurt out, “You're married?”

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

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

“Well, you have nothing to worry about,” he reassures me, amusement in his tone.

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

“You wanted to go shopping, Princess.”

“Yes, but I just—”

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

“Is this one of the times where thanking you is appropriate?” I ask him with a laugh, watching as his brow furrows when he turns his head and holds my gaze. My breath hitches when his lips turn up into a crooked smile, my heart thumping against my chest.

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



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

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

Yes, please.

I'm not sure he'll agree when he sees my credit card statement, but I needed all the trinkets and candles that called out to me from store windows. As I keep moving, I am drawn to a jewellery store window, the golds and 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 inside the store to view the ring close-up, the hairs on the nape of my neck rise and a wave of awareness travels over me.

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

It is not an unusual feeling; there have been many times, back in London, when I have felt eyes on me, felt the pressure of someone behind me. I've 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 dropping my bags behind a large black bin. With my back against the wall, I slide my hand behind me, breathing a sigh of relief when my fingers fold around the leather hilt tucked beneath my sweater.

While my SIG Sauer is my preferred weapon of choice, I doubt pulling that out in New York City would be a bright idea. At least with my knife, there are no loud noises to alert pedestrians on the main street if things get out of hand.

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

He has cropped blond hair, the shade almost white, and his face is sharp, with high cheekbones and a strong jaw. Thin lips twitch at the side when 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 cautiously. His smile widens when he moves towards me, his eyes falling onto where my jumper has slipped over one shoulder. “I'm going to have fun 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 of musk 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 boss, but he never said you needed to arrive in one piece. An error, I'm sure, but one I'm going to make the most of. Just one bite, Pippa. It won't hurt much.”

My head falls back as a rumble of laughter slips from my mouth. The move is calculated, a perfect slip of my blank exterior. A single moment that allows the man to bring his free hand up to cup my throat. It's a risk, of course; you never know when your opponent is simply crazy enough to snap your neck then and there.

But some risks are worth taking.

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

What is actually amusing though, is that he is yet to see the knife hanging limp at my side. I would have thought that men such as him had better awareness of their surroundings. The accent, paired with his words, tell me he is a part of the Bratva. The very group of men who have decided they want me. It seems foolish to not catalogue everything.

While I am not disappointed that they have sent an idiot to retrieve me, I have to laugh at the sheer ignorance of him.

“What is it with sending boys to do a man’s job?” I ask him, cocking my head to the side. His brow furrows, and he takes a slight step backwards, searching my gaze. Without giving him a moment, my hand surges forwards, plunging the knife into his stomach. There’s a slight resistance before it breaks through his skin, but I don’t let myself hesitate for a moment and throw my whole weight into it until the blade is embedded in his body.

Just like my father taught me.

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

He winces in pain, yanking his hand away from me and stumbling backwards. A deep scowl spreads across his face, wide eyes focused 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 over 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 face the dead man on the ground and then nudges the body with the toe of his black 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 before 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 woman of yours,” he ponders, muttering mostly to himself as he eyes the body. His head tilts, his thumb swiping over his full bottom lip.

“He underestimated me. Most men do,” I tell him, snatching my knife back. The moment my hand wraps around the handle, my shoulders sag in relief. It’s a little thing, but somebody else handling my weapons makes me itchy.

“I’ll try to remember not to make that mistake,” he murmurs, watching as I 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 have him catching 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 speak to Antonio, then we can take your shopping home.”

That makes sense, I suppose; though, all I want to do right now is go back 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 his 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 swallowing 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 pulls away, before speaking again. “Your body language changed when I 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 fiddles 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, and before I can unclip my belt, my door swings open as Leonardo leans over the metal frame.

He reaches into the car, just as I move for my belt. Our hands brush, sending a spark of electricity searing through me as I press the clip. His fingers thread through mine, pulling me from my seat the moment I’m unbuckled. Stumbling over my feet, I grip his arm with my free hand, ignoring the way my fingers itch to travel over his skin at the contact.

“Careful, Princess,” he murmurs, releasing my hand and moving his to my lower back when I straighten. His thumb traces over my skin, pushing my sweater up as he runs it along the waistband of my jeans. Goosebumps follow his caress and I have to pull in a steady breath—there is something about the way he’s always touching me, without a care in the world, that sends butterflies soaring in my stomach.

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

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

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

A hint of tobacco permeates the air, laced with something bitter that tickles my nose, though I can't place the lingering scent. Incessant chatter and excitable cheers echo through the space as the patrons win.

Leonardo pays them no mind, keeping his head high and his steps steady. Following his lead, I roll my shoulders back, and keep my gaze forwards, ignoring the stares as we pass.

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

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 is loosened, hanging lax down his chest.

"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 take a seat, twiddling my thumbs while I wait. “What can I do for you both?”

“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 nails into the skin to stop myself from speaking.

“Is that so? Pippa, can I ask why?”

I lift my head, a wry smile on my face when I focus on Antonio. I am not ashamed of the fact I defended myself—nor should I be. However, the way he watches me, his mouth downturned, has me wondering if I was supposed to let myself be taken by a strange man.

A strange man who had no intentions to take me without *taking* me first.

“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.”

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.

“You are correct, Pippa. We wouldn’t want that, would we?” Antonio deadpans, though I doubt he wants an answer as he turns to Leonardo and continues speaking. Truthfully, he sounds displeased that I wasn’t kidnapped. “Did she kill him?”

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

My mind whirls as I take in the room. Antonio seems to be a man of few possessions when it comes to work. There is a laptop on his desk and a few 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 to be 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 married, which is par for the course. I doubt I will ever learn much about him, besides the fact he wants nothing to do with me.

“Pippa,” Antonio says loudly, pulling my attention back to him. His eyes narrow as he stares me down, and my shoulders tense under his scrutiny.

“What?” I ask, dropping my knees to the ground and straightening.

“Since it seems you aren't safe alone, I'm going to have to put a man on you full time.” He sighs, running his hand through his hair. “It isn't ideal, and I really don't have anyone

free to run around following you, but I can't have you being kidnapped, I suppose."

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

"Since I don't have anyone on hand right now, Leonardo has kindly offered to be your babysitter until I can free someone up."

My nose wrinkles, my hands twisting awkwardly in my lap. Not that I don't think he'd be a good bodyguard but spending alone time with this man can't be good for my sanity...or my health, considering my heart races whenever I'm in his presence.

"I could just—" Antonio cuts me off with a wave of his hand.

"I have shit to do today," he tells us, gesturing to the door. "Leo, we'll catch up later."



"You're telling me that the fine-as-fuck best man from your wedding is now your bodyguard?" Rolling my eyes at the laughter that follows my sister's questions, I pop my phone on speaker and drop back on my bed, my eyes landing on the ceiling. The moment we got back from the casino, I rushed up

to my room and called her. Needing someone to vent to about the day.

Hearing Rosa's voice is bittersweet. There's nothing like talking to your sister when your life is a mess, but the fact she's over 3000 miles away takes away some of the joy.

"Yep," I tell her, popping the p, before sighing. "But why I need a babysitter? I don't know. It's not as if I can't handle myself, is it?"

"P, I love you. But the dude was about to pull a gun on you. Even you can't survive a bullet to the head. Unless you harness some magical powers we know nothing about?"

"No magical powers," I say with a huff. She's right; I couldn't have survived a bullet. "But that's beside the point, Rosa."

"Well, what is the point? You'd rather be offered on a platter to these men who want 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 hate 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—“and while I have never understood why Papá only decided to train you; I know that was something between the two of you, Papá and Pippa time.” She goes 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. Jealous of the fact that he never thought to train them. He never told us why, even to this day he says there is no reason, it is just the way it happened. I don’t believe him, nor do my sisters, but arguing the point after ten years of the same answer seems futile now.

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

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

“Isn’t it? You’ve only ever gone against targets and boxing bags. You don’t even know self-defence, Pippa, not beyond throwing a single punch. Yes you know how to handle a bunch of weapons, but what good does that do if you’re overpowered? How do you plan to fight off a 200-plus-pound man if he has you cornered? You got lucky today, Pippa. Lucky that he didn’t know you were armed, but you won’t

always be so lucky. What happens when the next guy comes and you can't arm yourself in time? What then, Pippa?"

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

"There are no but's, Pippa. I hate Papá for making you believe you do not need anybody. You continue going around on your own, half-cocked with your weapons and you will get yourself killed."

"Rosa, I won't get myself killed," I tell her, making a promise I can't keep. There's no guarantee in this life, and death comes when it comes, no matter how much you may wish to fight against it.

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

"I love you too," I reply, though the line goes dead before she can hear the words. Locking my phone, I burrow my head into the pillow, closing my eyes. My room smells of vanilla and citrus, thanks to the new candles I bought today. It's a familiar smell, the same as my bedroom back home, but the usual comfort doesn't come when I inhale deeply.

Rosa's words swim through my head, berating me as I try to settle. I'm not stupid enough to believe the Bratva are not

dangerous, but Papá has always taught me to handle myself. I know how to fight. I know how to kill, if necessary, but has he set me up for failure?

He always told me I do not need others to fight my battles, that I cannot trust others to have my back when push comes to shove ... but is he wrong?

Can I trust the men around me to have my best interests at heart?

The answer is laughable, really.

Of course I cannot.

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

I slide out of bed, moving into the closet to grab a pair of purple satin pyjamas. I strip quickly, slipping the nightwear on and sliding into a pair of fluffy slippers. It is only seven p.m. but the library is calling my name.

For the rest of the evening, I lose myself in fictional words. At least in somebody else's head I can pretend my life isn't a mess. Whatever comes next, I will deal with tomorrow.

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



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

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

He stares at me blankly, devoid of emotion when I step aside and motion 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 from earlier tossed on the chair. I have had no visitors in my room, not since Margo first showed me around, so I have had no reason to keep on top of making it tidy and put together.

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

More like home.

“Is everything okay?” I ask quickly, grimacing when he snaps his gaze to mine. There is something different about him this evening—I cannot say what, but there’s something in his eyes and the hard set of his jaw that sends 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, dropping 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 rumpled pale pink bed sheets, another addition from today. “I know I said we could wait a while before the topic came up. However, after today, I’m not sure waiting is in our best interests.”

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

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

“I have no plans to pass any time soon, Antonio.” I chuckle dryly, trying to brush away the knot forming in the pit of my stomach. We have only been married for just over forty-eight hours and already the topic of children is weighing heavily on my new husband—all because he seems to think I will die.

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

“Now?”

“What better time than the present?” He stands, his fingers moving to the button of his jacket. Antonio is an attractive man, and I can imagine most women would be happy to lie beside him, but all I am feeling in this moment is fear. “You’re not a virgin are you, wife?”

My only answer is a small shake of my head, my mouth too dry to form any words in response. He slips his jacket off, laying it neatly over the armchair, before he moves onto unbuttoning his shirt.

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

There is not a single tingle of excitement, or flicker of heat. The only thing I feel is dread. It spreads over me like cement, every muscle in my body locking when he fiddles with the buckle of his leather belt.

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

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

He tuts in response, pushing his trousers to the floor before he steps out of them. Once again, he folds them neatly, placing them on the arm with the rest of his clothes, until he stands in front of my bed in a pair of white boxer briefs.

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

It feels like I’m frozen in time, watching through somebody else’s eyes, when he reaches for my pyjama top. My body trembles, though he doesn’t unbutton it like I expected, instead he traces his fingers over the material at my stomach. My throat bobs when I swallow over the lump that has formed there, my mouth dryer than the Sahara.

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

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

“Antonio, please.” My voice cracks when he pulls at my waistband, his hands disappearing inside the material. He runs his calloused fingers over my thighs, his eyes locking on mine. The blue is frostier than anything I have ever seen, the depths blank as he stares at me. There is no heat between us, no fire.

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

“Enough talking.” His voice is hard as steel, cutting off further conversation when he forces his lips down on mine, his tongue spearing into my gaping mouth. I fight the urge to bite down, knowing it will not help me. He pushes me against the door, my back screaming as I slam against the wood. 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 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 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 mouth one at a time, pulling at them with his teeth.

Time means nothing when he moves his hand over my waist and cups my 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 on me when he forces a finger inside. He thrusts inside, adding a second before grinding 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 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 my 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 keeps spinning as the weeks drag on. Antonio visits me almost nightly, 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 idea, 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 heart 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. Is that what they would 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 head. I can't tell her that her boss, a man she has known since he was only a child—a man she adores as if he were her own son—sexually assaults me on a nightly 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 use 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 stopped him?

A lone tear spills over my lashes, but I swipe it away before Margo can notice. I pull in a shuddering breath, keeping my attention locked on the page before 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 the words in, but I can't look at her. She stands there for another long minute and 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 roars in the background, lighting the room in burnt orange

and red flames, heating everything, but I'm still cold. I wrap the blanket around myself tighter, 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 freely now 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 constantly, threatening to drag me under, and I have no way of stopping it. There is little I can do but let it wash over me—consume me until I'm lost in a black hole. There is no escaping this life. No escaping the night and Antonio, or the nightmares that always follow. I am trapped here. A lost little girl with 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 centre of the large garden, thriving despite the cooling temperatures. A handful of Antonio's men wander the property, weapons attached at their sides, guarding us.

There have been no more instances of Russian men finding me, though I haven'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 limp at his side. He's so at ease, so comfortable in his surroundings. I haven't 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 I don'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 day, 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 sleep shorts. She takes one look at me before shaking her head in exasperation and letting out a great sigh.

"I've got my work cut out with you, it seems," she mumbles, ambling over to the walk-in closet. My eyes remain glued on the spot she was standing, my mouth twisting downwards. This is the first time Felicity has entered my bedroom, beyond standing in the doorway to hand me a tray of food since I have hidden out in here for every mealtime.

She wanders back into my room, her hands full of hangers with a selection of gowns hanging from them. A mixture of reds and blacks stare back at me, all floor-length and far too formal for an evening at home. "What's going on?"

"I'm here to be your fairy godmother and help you get ready for the ball," she tells me, laying the dresses on my bed before moving over the vanity. "Do you have any make-up in here?"

"Not really." I offer her a wry smile, pulling open the drawer that houses my mascara, lip gloss, and concealer. It's not that I don't like make-up, I do, mostly; I'm just not very

good at doing it myself. “My sisters always did my make-up if we were going anywhere, so I never needed much.”

Felicity blows out a frustrated breath, her head cocked to the side as she watches me. She purses her lips, clicking her teeth. “Be right back. Take a seat, and don’t move.”

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

“You were supposed to sit down,” she grumbles at me in a whiny tone when she makes her way back over to me. This time, her hands are full of vanity 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, guiding me onto the stool opposite the mirror. I move to face her, but she shakes her head and nudges me back to stare at my reflection. “Er, Felicity. What’s going on?”

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

My eyes widen slightly at not only her words but how she speaks them. Very few people would speak so openly with

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

“No, it’s not that.” She lets out a sigh, the sound wary and sad, before she shakes her head and smiles widely at me. “The men are good men, mostly. I just don’t necessarily agree with everything they do and how they get their power.”

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

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

An hour and a half later, and with lots of primping and priming, Felicity has worked her magic. I twist my body side to side, watching the way the crimson red gown she picked clings like a second skin. The mermaid shape skims my curves, accentuating an hourglass figure I didn’t even realise I had. With the high-halter neckline, it looks demure and classic. From the back, though, the lack of material is daring and sensual.

A perfect mixture of sophistication and fearlessness.

Something I desperately need right now.

My hair is twisted into a half up-do, that runs to the middle of my back in loose waves with a few strands spilling over to frame my face. The make-up is simple, with minimal face product, and only a light dusting of black kohl around my eyes and a muted red lip.

“Thank you, Felicity,” I tell her earnestly, offering a small smile. I feel good.

Strong.

Brave.

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



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

Men stand at the bottom, chattering amongst themselves. They’re all dressed in black suits, black ties, and white shirts. The only stand-outs are Antonio in a black shirt and Leonardo who skipped the jacket, settling for black pants and a black shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, leaving his tattooed arms on display.

My hands tremble when I reach the bottom where Antonio waits for me. 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 and plastering a small smile on my face when he turns me to face his men. A few I recognise from that first dinner here, though if I was asked any of their 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 my gaze 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, his tone hard and unwavering. "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, and I understand shooting first, but something just doesn't sit right with me with his order—though I don't know why.

Antonio continues to talk to his men, discussing security for the event, but 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 on her heel and rushing out of sight.

“Let’s go.” I snap my head up at the request, my gaze locking on Antonio’s frosty eyes. He stares down at me, annoyance etched in his features. It’s only then I realise the others have left and we’re alone in the foyer. Straightening my spine, I push the fear slowly creeping up to the back of my mind. There is little I can do about these interactions with my husband, but I won’t show him my fear.

Not now.

He’s already taken too much from me, he can’t have that too.

I nod at him, tucking my black clutch under my arm and turning to face the door. He doesn’t let go of my hand, just drags me along with him out into the bitter night. Several black SUVs are lined up outside, doors open so Antonio’s men can step into them. He tugs me towards the second to last one, shoving me through the open door. I lose my footing, my head smacking into the leather with a grunt.

A deep chuckle comes from the front passenger seat. “Graceful as ever, Princess.”

Of course.

Why wouldn’t the man that Antonio has assigned as a glorified babysitter not be in the car with us? Breathing in slowly, I take my time to sit up, ignoring the watchful eyes I can feel burning holes into the side of my face.

Antonio slides in after me, slamming the door behind him. The car pulls away from the kerb as we navigate around the

other cars before rolling through the open gate and slipping into the late evening traffic.

The drive is suffocating. Silence fills the car; the only noise to be heard is the rumble of the engine beneath us as we fly down the road. Anxious energy coils within me, my head aching and my hands becoming clammy as I shrink into the seat, keeping my distance from Antonio.

After thirty painful minutes, we pull up to the same casino Leonardo had brought me to that day after the alley. The day I stabbed a man. With everything else going on, I've barely spared a thought for the Russians that seem to be after me—a silver lining, I suppose. If only it were enough to make everything else brighter.

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

“Much better,” Leonardo murmurs, offering me his arm. I shake him off, taking measured steps until I'm standing beside Antonio. He looks down at me for a moment, assessing me, though, for what, I don't know. He nods, mostly to himself, before gesturing for me to join him on the red carpet laid out before us.

Cameras flash from the sides, journalists and reporters calling out Antonio's name. I try to keep a smile on my face while avoiding looking at them head on. I'm not sure what I expected of tonight, but this wasn't it. Though that's not

saying much since I had no idea this was happening until two hours ago.

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

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

“You and Ant get seen together for a second,” he answers, looking at the man in question with an expression I cannot read. “Then he deals with business, and you busy yourself with spending all his money on the 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 I have one of those anymore, and the mansion certainly isn’t that. Nodding, I flick my gaze over the room, watching as waiters dip in and out from between the guests, their hands full of trays with champagne and hors d’oeuvres. I snatch a glass, downing half the contents in one gulp.

The bubbly liquid does little to settle the knot in my stomach, and I think I will need something less sparkly if I plan to make it through this evening in one piece.

Antonio moves to the centre of the room, all eyes turning to him as he speaks over the hushed voices of the waiting patrons.

“Thank you all for coming.” His voice carries over every inch, the guests soaking it up while he speaks to them. He reaches a hand behind him, grabbing my wrist and pulling me into his chest and letting his arm wrap around my back. My muscles tense under his hold, my heart thundering as he holds me close. “For those of you that aren’t aware, this is my wife, Pippa.”

A flush coats my cheeks, my face burning in embarrassment when everyone moves their gaze to me. Men look on curiously, while several women spear me with looks of envy and anger. One woman, a blonde standing off to the side, glares at me with nothing short of pure viciousness in her expression.

From a distance, she reminds me of Marilyn Monroe with her shoulder-length hair styled into big curls and a bright crimson red painted on her lips. She’s beautiful, or would be, if her face wasn’t scrunched up like a pug.

I lift my champagne glass, taking a sip before sending her a small finger wave. Growing up with my sisters, if there is one thing I have learnt how to 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 when I grab my fifth glass of champagne, or perhaps it’s the sixth ... I’m 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 very 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, bar 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 when people win, or the grumbles in frustration when they lose, is oddly thrilling. There’s something about watching their expressions change or their body 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 thrilling experience you are used to in your line of work.”

He smiles then, wrapping a strand of my hair around his finger. “Perhaps. 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 and 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 speak, but his finger creeps from my hair to my jaw, stroking the sensitive skin there.

A shrill voice comes from behind him, breaking the spell between us. I pull 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 arse, wraps long manicured fingers around Leonardo’s bicep. She leans in, pressing her obviously fake chest into his arm before speaking.

“Leo, darling,” she preens, her voice like nails on a chalkboard. “How 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 kiss to her cheek. An ache forms in my chest when she stares up at him with stars in 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 down my champagne. The numbness has worn off, and I need it back before I let my emotions take hold of me.

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

Not surprising, really.

Men only ever want one thing from a woman.

But even knowing that, that same uneasy feeling continues to eat away at me.

“Vodka, neat, please.” The bartender offers me a small smile before rushing off to make good on my order. A gentleman beside me coughs lightly, hiding a small laugh behind the sound. I turn to him, cocking a brow in question.

He stares back at me, a finger pressed to his crooked lips. His dark grey 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 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. 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 Alek.”

“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 I revel 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.

“Should I be drinking fruity cocktails and wine?”

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

My gaze snaps back to Alek, my nose wrinkling under his scrutiny. What an odd question to ask a stranger. The answer is an easy one, but not something I'm particularly willing to get

into with a man who looks old enough to be my father. Instead, I just nod and offer him a fake smile. "I am."

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

"I'm not sure that's any of your business."

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

"My husband hates me," I blurt, lifting my shoulder in a shrug when he cocks his head. "And I can't say I have any love for him either. I doubt I should be telling you any of this, or I might just find myself with a bullet in 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 of that to this man. I don't even know him. He watches me, his smile turning down as he takes in my words. I glare at the vodka in my hand, the glass already mostly finished without me even realising, the sole reason for my loose lips.

"I can't imagine anyone could hate you," he murmurs, quirking his lips and focusing on a point over my shoulder. "But if not your husband, then who is the man currently staring over here with eyes like thunder?"

I follow his stare, my shoulders tensing when I spot Leonardo. He leans against the walls, his arms folded over his chest while he watches us. Charlotte stands at his side, her hands moving a mile a minute while she tries to engage him in conversation, but his attention isn't swayed from me.

Alek is right.

There's a look in his eyes that sends a shiver tingling down my spine, though, not in fear, as it probably should be. My breath comes out as a shudder, and I quickly avert my eyes, shaking my head to regain composure.

"He's my stand-in bodyguard at the moment," I tell Alek after finishing my drink. The bartender replaces it within an instant with a full glass. "I'm a 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. It turns out 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. He tells me about his wife and his son, how they grew from poverty to riches, 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 midst of them tonight.

He's nice. Genuine and kind.

Something I've missed greatly in my time here.

Whether it's the need for friendship, or the lack of common sense due to alcohol I've consumed, I don't know. But the smile on my face when 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 bicep before standing on shaky legs. He offers me a crooked smile, his eyes alight with happiness. There's something more behind them, though, I can't read his expression well. "Maybe we'll meet again one day."

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

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



Light filters through the open curtains, the sun bathing my room in a golden hue. If it wasn't for the mariachi band playing in my head, the morning 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, and I'm sure something crawled into my mouth and died if the bitter taste on my tongue is anything to go by. I shouldn't have drank half as much as I did; but I don't regret it.

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

Just a headache and hangover from hell.

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

Wishful thinking.

A hand tugs at the pillow, yanking it from my grip and tossing it onto the floor. With a huff, I brush my tangled hair from my face and open my mouth, prepared to tell the intruder to piss off, when a hand clamps down on my lips.

Leonardo towers over me, his face blank as he gazes at his hand over my mouth. My eyes widen when he leans down, peeling his fingers away from me one at a time. His thumb lingers an extra second, the pad brushing over my 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 when he swipes that same thumb over his lips, tracing them like he had mine. When his tongue slides out, swiping

along the ridge, I close my eyes and pull in a shuddering breath.

Dangerous.

That's what he is.

Pure danger.

“What do you want?” I groan, gathering the duvet and pulling it up to my chin. With him standing here, dressed in black pants and a black fitted t-shirt that strains against his muscles, I feel exposed wearing only an oversized Guns N' Roses t-shirt as nightwear. He looks clean, crisp, and perfect, while I'm rumpled and gross.

“You have thirty minutes to get ready,” he tells me, glancing at the clock on my wall. He cocks his head slightly, eyes narrowing on the hands as they slowly tick down. “Actually, make that twenty-five. Chop, chop.”

He moves towards the door, not bothering with explanations. The door closes with a loud click behind him, leaving me alone with only my headache and the urge to hit him. It's barely seven a.m. There is something so very wrong with having to be up and ready at this time on a Sunday morning.

I stay in bed for ten more minutes, watching the time run down on the clock. When it hits 7:15, I pull in a deep breath and drag myself out of bed. The claw bath calls to me when I walk into the bathroom, begging me to soak my tired muscles

in a hot, steamy bubble bath. Instead, I flick the shower on and let out a wistful sigh.

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

I dress quickly in a pair of plain black leggings, a white vest top, and an oversized grey hoodie I stole from an ex-boyfriend. The only good thing I got out of that relationship.

Shoving my feet into chequered Vans, I run a quick swipe of mascara and lip balm before shoving my damp hair into a messy bun. The look isn't my 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 the stairs towards him. His eyes run lazily over the length of me, taking me in with a ghost of a smile at his lips before his gaze locks on mine and his expression falls blank once more.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" I ask when I reach his side. He looks down at me for a moment before dropping his hand on my lower back and guiding me towards the garage. I fight the delicious shiver that runs over me, keeping my head forwards as we walk to the garage. It's only when we're rolling out of the grounds and onto the road, I repeat my question.

"Antonio has left the city for a little while," he tells me without taking his eyes off the long road before us. With the early hour, the streets are eerily quiet while the sun beams

down on the concrete. “I have to do some work in his absence, and that means, as your babysitter, you get to come with me.”

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

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

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

“Do you really think if I wanted to kill you, I’d do it secretly?”

“I think I don’t know you well enough to answer that question,” I quip when I step out of the car, pushing past where he holds the door open.

His hand wraps around my wrist as I move around him, pulling me flush to his chest before he spins quickly, pressing my back against the cold metal of the car and stepping into me until his chest is pressed to mine.

My breath comes out as a whisper, my eyes locking on his when he leans forwards, pushing his hips into me. I press my palms against the door frame, my muscles locking when he leans down, his breath fanning my face. “Maybe we should change that.”

“Change what?” I ask breathlessly, sliding my tongue over dry lips. His eyes follow the movement, his pupils dilating as he watches me. My mind has gone blank as the feel of him overwhelms every one of my senses.

“You knowing me well enough to answer the question.”

“Right.” I nod, though it’s unconvincing. I’ve lost all sense of myself.

His mouth lifts into a slow smile, his eyes darkening for a beat before he steps back. The loss of him is instant, the cold kiss of the wind bitter against my burning cheeks. Though it seems I’m the only one affected by what just happened, as he rolls his shoulders and moves towards the store door without a single backwards glance. “Come on.”

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

“Whoa.” My eyes bug when I step into the store. Bookshelves line every wall, filled to the brim with thousands of titles. A collection of sofas of mismatched patterns and colours are dotted around the floor with throw pillows and blankets adorning them. It’s bare of customers, as though the day 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. Since 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 hands 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, but 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 for a moment before he pushes me away and spins me so I’m facing the centre of the store.

“Not something to thank me for,” he mumbles, his eyes searching my 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 the last 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 office; me with my books and him on the phone or laptop answering copious amounts of emails and calls.

It's surprisingly domestic and not at all what I would have expected with 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'd have 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 whispers 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 his messy cooking or his rumpled hair after he takes a stressful phone call. To just experience him.

There's also the heat between us, so magnetic I can't look away. His 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 is for someone to be intimate with me, but with him, I know it wouldn't be at all 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 moments, all those bad touches, and replace them with his own.

I try not to think too much about what happens when Antonio comes back. We have crossed no lines, or broached any barriers, but I'm thinking it's not a case of if ... but *when*.

For the first time since I moved to New York, I feel at ease—with him. 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 it off and hanging it over the back of the door.

“I don’t know how you did it,” she comments, passing me a mug of steaming tea before grabbing her own. “But I think I’m addicted to this stuff now.”

“I told you.” I laugh, raising a brow as I blow gently on the scorching 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 taken it upon herself to convince me I need to get out of the mansion and go make friends. Apparently, me moping around here with only Leonardo as company isn’t a good thing. “A few friends of mine are heading to Amnesia tonight, and I have it under good authority that you are allowed out as long as you take a couple of bodyguards with you.”

“You already spoke to Leonardo?” I ask, shaking my head in amusement, though it’s hardly surprising, the more time I spend with Felicity, the more I’m seeing she’ll always find a way to get what she wants.

“Yes, and he said you’re free as a bird. Sooo ...” She stares at me eagerly.

I sigh dramatically, blowing into my mug before taking a large sip of tea. It isn’t that I don’t want to go out and have a good time, but the only friends I’ve ever had have been my sisters, and I’m not sure how well my brand of *me* translates to other people.

“Okay,” I tell her, shrinking back in my seat when she squeals loudly and throws her arms around me. I give her a

tentative squeeze in return before pulling away. A night on the town with a group of people I know little about...what could possibly go wrong?

Later that day, my bed is a mess of strewn clothes and shoes I can't choose between. My hair is half done, with loose curls on one side of my head and the other a tangle of my natural waves. I blow out a breath, shoving the strands out of my face as I stare at the mess.

The only information Felicity has given me about where we're going is that it's an upscale nightclub and jeans and t-shirts are not an option—which 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 bought me the dress as a wedding gift, telling me that every Mafia wife needs at least one leather outfit in their wardrobe. It's so far from anything I would ever wear or have ever worn. For once, I want to be daring, step out of my comfort zone and let myself be someone else, just for one night.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I grab the hanger and place it on the back of the door before cleaning away the clothes and leaving only a handful of shoes to pick from. I get to work finishing my hair, and when I'm halfway through my make-up—courtesy of Felicity dropping me bags of it off earlier—the door opens with a creak and a loud hello.

Dressed in only a dressing gown and her hair tied up in pin curls, I can't help but look at Felicity questioningly as she

moves into my closet.

“You have better clothes than me,” she tells me when she comes out with a red mini dress. “And since I doubt you’ll ever even wear half of them, I’m just helping you out.”

“By borrowing my clothes?” I laugh when she shrugs, sending a cheeky grin my way. Truthfully, I have no issues with her helping herself to my wardrobe. She’s not wrong with her assumption that I’ll probably never wear them all. There are only a few pieces I’ve brought from home, and the rest were already here and bought for me before I arrived in New York.

“Now, what is your drink of choice?”

“What kind of night are we having here?” I ask her, turning back to finish swiping dark powder over my eyelids. “A casual girls’ night?”

“Absolutely fucking not. If we aren’t white-girl wasted by the end of the night and dancing on a table, then I don’t want it.”

“Felicity, I think you just became my new best friend,” I tell her, smiling widely at her through the mirror. “Vodka.”

“A girl after my own heart. Pippa, I think we’re going to have a beautiful friendship. I’m going to browse the kitchen and see what fancy shit we’ve got. Be right back.”



“Welcome to Amnesia,” Felicity says, pushing past a velvet rope barrier and pulling me onto a balcony that overlooks the nightclub. My two guards for the evening—Gio and Luca—remain stoic behind us. They haven’t uttered a single word since we met them at the mansion, nothing to tell me who they are or why I should feel safe in their presence.

That hardly matters, I suppose, since I have no doubts that Leonardo will be snooping around a corner watching anyway. With that thought, I do feel safe.

Felicity hands me a glass filled to the brim with bubbling clear liquid, I tip it down my throat, swallowing a generous amount while I get a good glance around the VIP section. Two large leather sofas fill the space, adorned with plush velvet pillows with glass-top tables before them lined with bottles of champagne and spirits ready to be consumed.

A few bar stools with round wooden tables fill in the empty spaces, and wall sconces cast the space in a dim golden glow, making it welcoming and quiet—away from the busyness of the main floor below.

The club is nice, though a different experience from anything I’ve had before. Back home, I only ever went out with my sisters, and it would be a pub crawl before ending up in the kitchen, dancing on the island in our pyjamas with a bottle of whatever spirit we entertained that night—much to Papá’s dismay.

“Come on, girly,” Felicity shouts, grabbing my hand and tugging me down the stairs with her. “We’re dancing.”

Gio follows us, keeping a short distance but never letting me out of his sight while we writhe around on the dancefloor, moving our bodies in beat with the music flowing through the speakers.

The club is packed to the brim, with bodies swaying around the floor with drinks in their hands. Sweat drips down my neck as the crowd closes in, clinging to the lines of the leather dress as the skirt slides up my thighs until 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 cleavage and curvy hourglass figure, she makes it look much better than I ever could. Paired with her light blonde hair and blue eyes, she could easily be mistaken as Margot Robbie's sister—and I'm only slightly jealous of that fact.

For the next hour, we alternate between drinking and dancing, and before long 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 outside 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 pulls a cigarette out, my curious nature gets the best of me, and I take it off her with a small smile.

My gaze locks on her, noting the way she lights the tip before pulling a generous breath in with the smoke. Mirroring her actions, I place the stick 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 taste is bitter, though not horrible but oddly familiar. Not something I've tasted before, but I've definitely smelt it—coming from Rosa's bedroom.

“This isn't just a cigarette, is it?” I turn to Georgina, raising a brow. At least I think I do, with the alcohol running through my veins, I'm not sure what I'm actually doing. Felicity answers, dropping down onto the bench beside me and pulling the cigarette from my hand.

“Nope. You're getting your first taste of weed.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Noo.” She laughs, Georgina chuckling beside me. “It just loosens you up a bit. Mixed with alcohol, it won't do much. You might just feel a little more mellow.”

Nodding, I pull it out of her hand, taking another drag. Mellow sounds like perfection. It goes down easier this time, the taste lingering on my tongue. Rosa has been smoking weed for years, but I've never dared to try it before now. Though I'm thinking I should have when it tickles my throat again, warming me nicely.

“This is nice,” I tell them happily, taking a sip of my drink to cool my throat. “It tastes pretty yummy, actually.”

“Hey, I can hook you up if you’re wanting some for at home,” Georgina says, resting her elbow on the table and dropping her head into her palm. “I can’t imagine it’s the easiest life being married to Antonio, a bit of grass might make it a more fun experience.”

“You know him?”

“Not well, but with Felicity living in that great big mansion, we’ve crossed paths a few times, and he always seems so grouchy. I can’t even think about what he’s like as a husband.”

“Not a good one,” I mumble, tipping more alcohol down my throat. “But thankfully, 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 fans her face dramatically. Felicity shakes her head in amusement, laughing lightly at her friends’ antics. “The things I would let that man do to me.”

My hand tightens around the glass, the grip strangling as my knuckles turn 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-brown skin, those chocolate eyes, and dark corkscrew curls that fall effortlessly to the middle of her back. Paired with the high-waisted tight black skirt she’s rocking and the red corset, she’s a solid ten out of ten.

Really, I should encourage her to go after him.

I am married to his friend *and boss*, after all.

And there is no doubt that they would make a stunning couple.

Yet the thought of her placing her hands anywhere on his body makes the pit in my stomach sink. Maybe it's because he's become my closest friend here. It has to be. Any other explanation is not something I can let myself think about.

“We need more alcohol,” Felicity shouts, swaying on her feet when she stands. “Let's go girls.”

A chuckle flies out of my mouth at her choice of words, and all I can think of is Shania Twain singing “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” I push off the table, humming the song to myself as I stub out the rolled-up paper in my hand before following her inside.

Hours pass as we lose ourselves to the music filling the room. The mood is light and playful as we dance until hands grab at my waist, pulling me into the body behind me. I jerk away, reaching for the holster beneath my dress as my eyes close.

I'm not sure whether it's the alcohol, or the weed—or maybe it's just me—but something snaps inside of me as he places his hands on my body. The build-up of emotions comes flooding to the surface. I'm losing sight of everything around me as my fingers coil around the handle and I pull my SIG Sauer out into the open.

Gasps ring out as partiers realise what's happening, but I don't have the clear mind to give a shit about that right now. I press the barrel against his head, the metal kissing the centre of his forehead.

“You know.” I sigh, peeling my eyes open and locking on his face. “I've 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 fall out in a trembling breath.

“You did,” I tell him, cocking my head. I'd convinced myself I was doing okay and that being touched was okay. There is no anger when Leonardo puts 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 reaction is more than over-the-top—I know that, and yet I can't pull my hand 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 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 the sentiments, but in this moment I'm too fuelled by rage. He's actually lucky my brain is still coherent enough to ask the questions.

It's a shame I can't find it in myself to do this to my husband too. Maybe then my life wouldn't be such a shitshow of pent-up emotions and rage that can only come out after a ridiculous amount of alcohol, weed, and one unlucky man who is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, his brown hair falling over his face when he drops his head. "Please don't kill me."

My mouth opens, ready to ask him why the hell I shouldn't, when long fingers wrap around my wrist and pull my hand away from him. My anger cools slightly at the touch, my tense muscles relaxing.

"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 into his waiting hand, never once moving my gaze from his. His jaw is clenched, the muscles straining against the harsh set of his mouth. If I thought I was angry, 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. "But that doesn't mean I can't."

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 his long body falls backwards, landing harshly against the tiled floor. Leonardo tucks two fingers

under my jaw, pulling my gaze to his. He leans in, his forehead almost touching mine. “Have a good night, Princess.”

With a smug smirk on his face, Leonardo walks away from me. Felicity and Georgina stare at the mess on the floor, their mouths agape in shock—maybe a little in horror too. Though I can’t really blame them. It’s one thing to know that the men you’ve been around kill without remorse, it’s a complete other to see it with your own eyes.

Not for me though.

This is the second time Leonardo has taken the kill shot for me when I didn’t pull the trigger. That shouldn’t affect me the way it does, yet warmth spreads within me.

This time, however, the dead is an innocent—mostly. If I hadn’t let my anger and sorrow take me over in a split second, he would still be alive. But he’s not. Because of me.

I know I should feel bad.

I don’t.

There’s a price to pay when you enter this world—blood. It’s a shame the guy wound up in front of the wrong girl tonight and paid the price for it.

My eyes stay locked on Leonardo as he saunters off, his face still set with that infuriating smirk. He leaves through a back door, but a couple of men I recognise from around the mansion come and clean up the mess left behind.

The music blares louder once more, dancing resumes on the floor, and in only minutes it’s as if a man didn’t just have his

life ended for simply putting his hands on the wrong person at the wrong time.

Turning to face Felicity, I offer her a small smile, but it does little to settle her tense muscles. Georgina is faring only slightly better as she lifts her drink to her mouth with a trembling hand and wide fearful eyes.

“I mean, they say only the good die young, right?” Shrugging, a wry smile crosses my lips. “Maybe he was one of the good ones?”

Their eyes bug at my words for a second before a giggle falls from Felicity’s mouth,

“Okay. We need more drinks, more dancing, and to end this night on a high,” Georgina shouts out over the raucous crowd. “Plus, I need to cool down. That may have been scary as fuck, but watching Leonardo kill that man may have gotten me way hotter than it should have.”

She fans herself as she speaks, and I fight the urge to pull my gun on her next. My fingers twitch over the holster on my thigh while I try and fail to talk myself out of it, but I come up empty.

That motherfucker stole my gun.

My gaze falls on the door to the far left of the club. It’s not near the exit, and it’s where Leonardo came from so ...

“Felicity,” I say to my friend without taking my eyes off the door. “If I went through that door, where would it take me?”

She wrinkles her nose, following my line of sight. “That’s the office and stuff behind there, why?”

“Who owns this nightclub?”

“It’s Leonardo’s actually, why?” she asks slowly, cautiously.

I shrug before walking in that direction. She calls out behind me, her voice hurried as she tries to stop me, but the sound is lost in the sea of noise—not that her pleas would stop me anyway.

He stole my gun.

Nobody gets to steal my gun.

That was a gift from Papá for my sixteenth birthday.

When most girls are getting make-up and fancy clothes, nice jewellery, I was given my SIG Sauer, and it became one of my most treasured possessions. Without it strapped to my body, I feel naked. Bare.

Unsafe.

Pressing my hands against the door, I push at the heavy wood until it gives, opening just enough for me to get through. A long corridor is before me, lined with closed doors. My hands shake in frustration as I test a few doors, coming up empty each time. I reach a dead end and hear voices coming from a room to my left.

Bingo.

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, and I drop my hands to my hips, narrowing my eyes on the man at the head of an oval table.

“Where the hell is my gun?” Around ten men, all dressed in the same 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 rethink and back out of the room quietly, but my sense of self-preservation is not that 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 as I prop my hands on my hips and glare at him. “Now, please.”

“Well, because you said please.” He pauses, leaning forwards and dropping his elbow onto the table. His lips twitch in amusement, his eyes locking on mine. “No.”

“Leo,” the man seated to his right calls out, but his attention never strays 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 stand 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 is my lifeline back.

Mafia men and their dramatics can wait.

The door closes behind me with a click, the air in the room tense as we stare at each other. One second and another. We just wait; neither willing to be the first to break.

Leonardo rolls the sleeves of his black sweater before pushing his chair back and standing slowly. He stalks towards me, his eyes on mine the whole way.

Overwhelming heat travels over my body when he steps into me, crowding me backwards until my back hits the door. His hands land against the wood, 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 mint on his breath tickling my nose.

“You stole my gun,” I tell him breathlessly. My heart races, the feeling heavy against my chest when he lowers a hand and cups my cheek. His thumb caressing, teasing the edge of my mouth before pulling it back.

“I borrowed your gun. And you can have it back.” He shrugs, stepping away from me. My shoulders sag in relief despite the chill that hits me from losing 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 if 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 slow grin. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

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 it's on fire when he slaps the stop button on the treadmill.

My body sags over the screen, a deep exhaustion settling in my bones. For over an hour he's had me running on this bloody thing, but still, I don't have my gun back. He hasn't said a word since he dragged me out of bed at six 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 while the 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 hair 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 him. “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, swiping sweaty 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 grabs my hand and helps me off the machine. My knees buckle the moment I hit solid ground, but he wraps his arm around my waist, hauling me into his chest. “We’re going to do some self-defence training, but the first line of defence is always to run.”

“I highly doubt you’ve ever run from an opponent.” His lips quirk up, his thumb stroking the bare skin at my back. It should be gross, considering all the sweat pouring from me, but gross is the last thing I’m feeling at this moment.

“*Your* first line of defence is to run,” he tells me, staring down at me until our eyes lock. “But if you’re cornered, it would help if you could fight your 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. He lets me go, the hand stroking my back coming up to his mouth as he swipes his thumb over his bottom lip.

Is he tasting my sweat?

That thought alone should have me running for the hills ... but it causes 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. “Death isn’t much of an option for you these days. You’re too important. So you’re going to learn real self-defence, without weapons.”

Scoffing, I ignore his “important” comment and grab the shirt I tossed on the floor earlier. The white crew neck slips off one shoulder when I put it on, but I don’t reposition it. “I am five foot two and weigh approximately 130 pounds, if I’m weaponless, then I’m dead. No amount of training is going to save me.”

“That sounds very defeatist,” he comments, his eyes narrowing as he watches me.

“Nope, it’s just a fact. Papá tried to teach me to fight. Even brought some friends in, but every single time they got the upper hand. I’m not strong enough to win.”

He watches me curiously, cocking his head for a moment before he tugs at the hem of his black shirt, pulling it over his head—so fucking slowly—and dropping it to the floor. My mouth dries at the sight of his bare chest. Tattoos cover every

inch of his visible skin, the black and grey inked perfectly over his rippling muscles.

A lion on one side of his chest, a lioness on the other with swirls and designs I don't understand—but I appreciate the artwork anyway. My eyes trace over every single line, moving downwards until I notice the eight pack he's rocking.

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 has me 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 ring in the corner of the large gym. He hops up, his back muscles straining as he jumps over the corded ring. “I can guarantee you I'm better. So, get your ass up here.”

“I'd rather not,” I mumble, my nose wrinkling when he widens his stance and stares at me with a challenging expression. Not only do I know that he can easily take me down with little more than a handshake, I'm also sure being up close and personal to him when he's half naked is not a good idea.

The urge to climb him like a tree is far too overwhelming.

I take a slow step backwards, then another, my eyes never leaving his. There's a flicker in his jaw as he rolls his shoulders, taking a single step over the leather mat before I spin on my heels and run. Footsteps follow me, slow and measured, while my already aching legs push me down the hall and towards the foyer.

Margo fiddles with the post at the main door, shock filling her expression when I run by. She shouts hello, but I ignore her. The need to get away from Leonardo is too high to stop and reassure her.

I'm halfway up the stairs when his heavy arm bands around my waist and tugs me into his chest. He tuts in my ear, his mouth pressing against the lobe when he speaks. "Running away isn't very nice, Princess."

My mouth opens, but only a squeak comes out when he spins me, his hands cupping the curves of my arsecheeks before tossing me over his shoulder. Melodic laughter follows us as he carries me back towards the gym, his hand moulded to my arse the whole way.

At least Margo is getting some joy out of this.

Traitor.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" He drops me on the mat, laughter spilling from his mouth when I land with a harsh grunt. My head bounces off the leather, my vision blurring for a second before I regain my composure.

Pushing myself up onto my elbows, I scowl at him, though he only laughs 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.

He tilts his head, his eyes travelling lazily over me. The intensity in 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.

With no warning, he wraps my ponytail around his hand as he pulls me towards him, my hands fly out, landing on his chest with a slap to steel myself.

He loosens his grip on my hair, his fingers tugging at the ends for a beat 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 stands to attention, goosebumps travelling over my body.

“What are you doing?” My voice comes out in a breathy wheeze. The grip 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 when he opens his mouth.

“We’re training, Princess. You need to get out of this hold before you die.”

“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? Within seconds he could end my life, and I can do little to change the outcome of that.

“Clock’s ticking, Princess.”

His grip tightens, his forearm now cutting my airway off. My breath sputters, the burn in my lungs too much to bear. Stars flash across my vision, the room becoming a blurry haze

before my eyes flutter closed. I will myself to move, to fight, but I'm slowly losing control of my body as darkness closes in.

He mutters behind me, his sound echoing that of a ticking clock. Seconds pass, but I don't move. I can't. The darkness takes over, pulling me into the abyss. Though, I swear I hear him whisper in my ear before I lose consciousness. "Time's up."



My eyes flutter open, and I blink a few times, trying to adjust to the dark room—the only light coming from a small window to the right of me, with a slither passing through the gap in the steel door to my left. There's a dull ache at my temples, and my throat is dry and scratchy.

It's only when I try to lift my fingers to massage my throbbing temples that I realise my hands are bound behind my back, locked with a metal chain coming from the cold brick wall behind me.

What the hell?

I take a few steps forwards but stop when the metal digs into my wrists, preventing me from going any further. My eyes move over the room, scanning the minimal contents. There's a small single bed in the corner with only a grey blanket and

small white pillow as décor, and a stainless-steel toilet sits opposite, cold and unwelcoming.

That's it.

There is nothing more to offer in this room but bitter cold and emptiness.

“Leonardo,” I call out, my voice quivering as my panic grows. “This isn't funny.”

Long, tense, silent minutes pass without answer. My heart races as time passes, the throbbing in my head worsening the longer I stand there staring into the darkness. This has to be some sick prank that Leonardo is playing. He's the only person it could be.

But why?

I call out again, my voice cracking more with each word. Without a clock, I don't know how much time passes, it could be minutes, or hours. Time means nothing down here in the darkness.

When the echo of footsteps across hardwood sounds, my body sags in relief as I let out a deep breath. Black Italian leather shoes are the first thing I see before black dress trousers and a black shirt that clings tight to his muscled frame fill my vision as he steps closer. A far cry from the casual 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.

Right now, though?

He is a made man through and through.

“Princess,” he murmurs, his expression blank as he reaches out to me. He fingers the cuffs at my wrist, lightly touching my skin as he does. 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 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 it has my back arching and my chin tilting towards him. “Perhaps I’m teaching you a lesson.”

“What lesson is that?” I ask breathlessly, swallowing hard over the lump in my throat. His eyes follow the movement as my throat bobs, darkening when they land back on my face.

“What happens when you get taken by the enemy,” he deadpans, moving his hand from the metal to fist my hair. He tugs my head back farther as he stares down at me. “What do you think they’ll do to you? If they get their hands on you, because you refuse to learn self-defence?”

“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.”

He chuckles into my ear before his tongue laps at the skin sensually. If it wasn’t for his hold on me, the sensations would

have me buckling to the floor. “No, you said that, I just didn’t disagree. They won’t kill you, Princess. Not straight away, anyway.”

“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 granted you that wish.”

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 chest, but he tightens his fingers in my hair, dropping his forehead to mine.

“What are you doing?”

“I always thought black was my favourite colour,” he murmurs, pondering aloud as he looks down at the skin he’s marked. He pockets the knife he used before sliding his thumb over my chest and lifting the crimson-coated pad to his mouth, lapping it clean with his tongue. “But now I’m thinking it might just be red.”

“Leonardo,” I breathe, the flush of my cheeks spreading down my chest, warming my body until I’m squirming under the scrutiny of his stare.

He fingers the neckline of my sports bra, pulling the material down until my breasts pop out, the cold air peaking my nipples instantly. His eyes drop, landing on the hardening

pebbles. He presses his thumb against one, ignoring the stutter in my breath when sparks of pleasure pass through me.

I should fight him, but with him touching me, the only thing I want is more.

“Why do you call me Leonardo?”

“Why do you call me Princess?” I retort.

He chuckles, lifting his eyes to mine while he continues to play with my nipple. This is wholly inappropriate, yet I can't find it in me to care when he pinches the skin, pulling it taut for a second before letting go and moving his attention to the other breast.

Holding my gaze for a moment more, he smirks before sucking one of my nipples into his mouth while rolling the other between his finger and thumb.

The sensations, paired with my inability to touch him, to guide him, to grip him, sends waves of pleasure through me, heating my throbbing clit. He reaches for the knife again and skims the sharp point over the skin of my 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 wrong. Choosing the latter, he dips below, slicing my underwear and nicking my skin simultaneously.

Dragging his teeth over my nipple, he pulls away before kneeling between my legs and staring as blood beads at the

surface. Leaning forwards, his tongue swipes at it, cleaning me up before it can run to my bare pussy.

When he moves to tug my pants down, I finally catch myself. “You can’t.”

He only chuckles before sliding them down my legs until they’re pooled at my feet. His eyes settle on the black lace underwear I’m wearing. The mix of hot and cold has my pussy pulsing under his gaze, his eyes darkening as he leans in and runs his nose over the material.

“Look at how wet you are for me, Princess. Do you get like that for Antonio?” he asks, his words a stark reminder I have a husband. Hearing 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, thoughts of Antonio are far from my mind. “I wonder what he’d say if he knew you were tied up in his basement, close to begging his consigliere to fuck you with his mouth.”

“I, uh, I’m no-t.” 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 down my thighs. He stares at my pussy for a moment, his pupils dilating as he takes in the view. Lifting his gaze, it locks on mine for a second, a smug smirk lifting at his lips before he dives forwards.

His tongue swipes along my folds, my body tensing at the contact when he grabs my arsecheeks, his fingers digging into

the soft skin. A breath hits my 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 at my entrance, fucking me with his tongue. My hips rock involuntarily, seeking more, but he keeps his movements slow and measured.

When he brings his lips over my clit, pulling it into his mouth before sucking on the sensitive bud, I lose all sense of coherence and my eyes close when he bites down.

He continues to lap, bite, and tug at me for what feels like an eternity, dragging me towards the edge. When he slides a finger into me, thrusting harshly, stars spread over my vision, my thighs clenching his head as the pleasure coiling at my centre explodes. My mouth opens on a scream, my nails digging into the palm of my hand when my body pulses with my orgasm.

He chuckles against my skin, keeping his mouth wrapped around me while I come down to earth. When he pulls away, his chin is coated in my juices, his eyes are heated as he stares at me. He reaches around, pressing at the 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 and pulling 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 harsh pants, my

eyes staying on the floor as I ignore his gaze. “I have a husband.”

“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 before disappearing over the ledge and out of sight. The weather has turned miserable in New York, a reminder that winter is drawing closer.

Felicity chatters happily with Georgina beside me, their voices carrying over the crowd of the café as they discuss costumes for the Halloween party that Antonio is hosting at the mansion over the weekend.

It's tradition apparently. All his men and their families, alongside his staff, are given the night off to celebrate the spooky season. If you ask me, it's silly. The thought of a bunch of Mafia men dressed in daft costumes and 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. "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 legs.

It’s been three days since he devoured me with his mouth; three days in which I’ve hidden out in my bedroom, telling Margo I wasn’t well when she tried to get me up and out—yet those images play on a loop in my head. Even now, my cheeks flush as I think of how he brought me to orgasm on his tongue.

The worst of it is, I keep imagining the knife he used. Wondering what it would feel like if Leonardo used that to pleasure me while blood pours from 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 in 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, leather-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. Shaking my head, I finish my drink before inhaling the vanilla cheesecake in front of 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 shoving 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 over my head, dropping it onto the floor before popping the button of my jeans and sliding them over my thighs and stepping out of them.

Felicity gasps, her eyes wide as she stares at me through the mirror. Standing only in black lace underwear, my eyes fall to the scabbed line at my chest, a reminder of that morning with Leonardo.

“What happened?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I mumble while pulling on the leather trousers and corset. “I caught myself on the door, and the latch cut me, that’s all.”

I’m not sure she believes me when her eyes narrow, and honestly, I wouldn’t believe me either. I’m not even sure a door latch could cut me like that, but I will roll with the lie anyway. Say something enough, and eventually it will stick.

Right?

“What do you think?” I ask her, spinning on my heels and showing her the outfit. She lets out a whistle, thankfully taking

the conversation change in stride. Her eyes run over me, a smug smile on her lips when she winks at me.

“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 giving myself a once over. I have to admit, I look good. The leather clings to my body in all the right places, accentuating my petite frame in a way that draws the eyes to my cleavage and hips.

“You’re buying it, yes?”

“I guess so.” I sigh dramatically, clicking my tongue. “You may have been onto something with this idea.”

“Yes,” she cheers, clapping. “Get dressed and then it’s my turn to find something. I’m thinking super spicy devil.”

She skips out of the room, closing the curtain behind her while she shouts out to Georgina. Her enthusiasm is something I could stand to pick up on. I dress quickly, folding the leather outfit neatly over my shoulder as I step out of the changing room. If nothing else, I’ll look good while hiding in the library of the mansion when the party happens.



The rest of the week passes quickly and before long the day of the Halloween party is here. Servers pass through the hallway, rushing around to set everything up in the ballroom. Because

what mansion doesn't come with a ballroom? I doubt I've even scratched the surface of what else is lurking in the hallways of this place.

I press my back against the wall as one of Antonio's men stalks past with a phone pressed to his ear. Half of the men probably live in this mansion, yet I only know a few. I really should make more of an effort to get to know them, to integrate myself into this world.

However, that hasn't worked out well for me with Leonardo, has it?

Where I should be happy to have a friend in this world, instead I'm riddled with fear that what happened in that dark room will somehow reach the ears of my husband. The Capo.

Technically, I did nothing wrong—I was chained to a wall; it's not as if I could have told Leonardo no ... but the issue is, I didn't even try. I wanted everything he did, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to experience more with him.

Plus, Antonio came back this morning and my period came a couple days before. My mood soured when I felt the first cramps and saw the spots of blood in my underwear.

Not because I want to have a child. I don't, especially with him.

I'm twenty-one. I haven't lived nearly enough life to be ready to become a mother. I want to see the world, to live a life full of love and laughter before I start that chapter.

Instead, my mood soured because I know not falling pregnant will make Antonio want to try even harder. Men like him can't understand that these things take time and I'm sure he will only become more aggressive with his attempts the longer it takes.

"Pippa, there you are, dear," Margo calls out to me when she spots me coming down the hallway. Her eyes are alight with excitement and she's wearing a huge smile as she watches the decorations being put up in the hallway. "Should you not be getting showered? The hair and make-up artists will be here in an hour."

"Are you telling me I smell, Margo?" I wrinkle my nose playfully. She shakes her head, patting me on the shoulder. "I'm heading up there now. 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. Anyway, it's always fun to get pampered, isn't it? And let's be honest, this isn't a house, and the Halloween party certainly isn't just a house party. You'll see."

"Yeah, I suppose so," I agree with a shrug, not caring much for it either way. "I best get my smelly self in the shower, then."

With a wink, I turn towards the stairs and rush off, chuckling as she shouts after me in indignation. Missing the last step, I go flying towards the floor before an arm bands around my waist, pulling me back into a muscled chest.

“Leonardo is right,” Antonio murmurs behind me. “You are a clumsy little 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.

“May I go? I need to get ready?” I breathe out, keeping my voice calm 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 up the remaining step with a muttered, “Go.”

I rush to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me, and pressing 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 I can’t. And I don’t know how to deal with that truth.

He’s my husband, it’s my job to give him children.

To let him use me however he sees fit.

However, after experiencing what I did with Leonardo, I know it’s not so simple anymore. I can’t close my eyes and pretend what he’s doing is okay just because he’s my husband. I can’t lie to myself anymore.



“Damn, girl.” Felicity whistles when she walks into my bedroom several hours later with two glasses in her hand.

“You’re one to talk,” I tell her, running my eyes over the little red mini dress she’s wearing. The satin material falls into a deep V on her chest and stops mid-thigh, showing off an expanse of her pale legs. The white devil 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.”

“I do look good, huh?” She laughs, dropping the items onto my vanity before fluffing her curled hair. My hair falls into loose curls down my back, the top half tied up around the metal cat ears to make it look like the ears are a part of my head.

The dark smoky eyes and winged-out liner do wonders for my brown eyes, making the dullness pop into something shiny. Paired with the leather outfit, I look pretty hot, if I say so myself.

Felicity hands me a glass filled halfway with vodka and nothing else. I shake my head at her, but she only rolls her eyes before pinching her nose and tipping her own glass to the back of her throat. Following her lead, I lift the glass to my mouth, pouring the liquid straight down.

The burn is welcome, heating my chest with a warm flush. Felicity gags, swallowing harshly to keep the liquid down while I set my glass on the vanity.

“Right, we have about an hour and a half before the others come, so let’s hide out in the kitchen until then. We’ll turn the

speakers up and warm up our feet before the real fun starts,” Felicity says, wagging her eyebrows at me.

“Okay, but when I’m sick later, will you hold my hair back?”

“Please, you’ll be holding mine,” she tells me, grabbing my arm and pulling me towards the door. “Though, maybe no dead bodies this time.”

“Felicity, this is a party in a mansion full of Mafia men. I’m pretty sure dead bodies are to be expected.” She freezes, her eyes widening for a moment before she shakes her head and grabs my hand. It looks like my friend might finally be coming to terms with the life she grew up around.



My hips move to the beat of the music filling the ballroom. Though I’m not sure that’s an appropriate name for the room. This party is definitely not a ball; unless a ball consists of drunken men in funny costumes waving guns around, bags of cocaine split open on tables, and a dancefloor full of women and men getting their grind on.

Margo was wrong with her earlier assessment that this party isn’t a house party. It’s everything I would ever expect of a house party, just on a much grander scale.

Booze, drugs, and debauchery.

A standard weekend for most kids back home growing up—and here—if the shows I watched on television were right.

Felicity bounces on her heels beside me, her eyes glazed over as she lifts a key to her nose and sniffs generously at the white powder sitting on the brass. She offers it to me, holding a bag in her other. I shake my head, sticking to my cocktail instead. I only just tried weed for the first time when we went 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 arms 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 again in 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 somewhere, I guess. Not that I've seen Antonio since earlier on the staircase. He's back to 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 make my way out of 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, pouring a generous amount into the cup, before turning and

leaning against the wall to watch the crowd for a moment and cool down.

Fanning my face with my palm, I sip my drink taking in the room. Bodies writhe 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, his back leant against the wall and his hands in his pockets, a flush spreads over my cheeks.

He watches me, his eyes travelling over my body lazily with a smirk on his face. I move my gaze away quickly, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. I push off the wall, moving towards the doors that will take me out to the gardens. The bitter air hits my skin, chilling me, and I let out a slow 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 my legs until I'm swinging slowly. Wind slaps at my cheeks, my hair flowing messily behind me while the momentum lulls me into blissful peace—until footsteps 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, keeping my gaze locked on the gardens in front of me. His heat surrounds me when he wraps a palm around the rope, stopping the swing before sliding onto the bench next to me.

“You tell me,” he murmurs, cupping my jaw and pulling my face to his. Our thighs touch as he leans closer, and there’s not nearly enough air between us. “Why are you avoiding me?”

“Maybe your company isn’t as exciting as you think it is,” I deadpan, though I don’t pull away.

“Now I know that’s not the truth.” His thumb swipes over my skin, the calloused pad stopping when he reaches the corner of my lips. My eyes lock on his, a brow raised when he runs that thumb over my bottom lip, tugging my mouth open for a second before resuming his caress. “I thought we were friends, Princess.”

“Friends don’t make friends cheat on their husbands.”

“Is it really cheating when you don’t love your husband?” he retorts, asking the question that has been on my mind since that day. I’d like to say no, but I doubt it’s the truth. We said vows. We promised a lifetime under the watchful eyes of God.

There’s a lot of doubt in my mind when it comes to the great divine, but a small part of me still believes. Maybe it’s the little girl who still lives inside of me, the girl who spent her Sundays at church with her papá at her side.

“I could, you know,” I answer, dipping my gaze. “Love him.”

“Do you?” he asks, his voice cold as ice. My head snaps to his, my eyes 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. That’s the only thing that matters, right?”

He opens his mouth, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he stares at me. He doesn’t get to say anything before loud shouts and screams come from inside 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 mine, but it seems redundant. The mansion does little more than rattle on its foundation.

Leonardo remains a solid wall above me, his hands on the grass at the sides of my head. While the others around us let out sighs of relief, he stays tense. His face is etched in agitation, maybe even disbelief.

Pressing my palms to his shoulders, I try to push him off, but he only leans 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 threads his fingers through mine. The touch is intimate, warm and welcoming. Even when it shouldn't be. “This isn't over yet.”

“What do you mean? The explosion was minor, I think we're fine to move, Leonardo. Anyway, you're squishing me.” Technically not a lie, he is. However, that isn't the reason I

need him to move. The way his body moulds to 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 at me. “You really think someone planning to bomb the home the Capo lives, when 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 scare 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 fanning across my cheeks. “It was just a warmup.”

“So, what, we just wait?” I ask incredulously, a slight shiver on my lips as the cold grass seeps into the skin at my back.

“We just wait,” he comments, his lips moving across mine as we speak. 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 might 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 when 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. “And 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, putting 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 kiss. I forget about where we are. Forget who’s surrounding us. Forget that I have a husband. Forget everything but the feel of him on top of me. The slightest touch of our lips, and my heart races. Blood rushes to my ears, blocking the 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 back. Our eyes lock, the brown in his looking almost black when he pushes into me again. My mouth opens on a gasp, which he uses to his advantage when he slides his thumb in, pushing it against my tongue. I wrap my lips around it, sucking it into my mouth with a moan.

At this moment, anyone could turn and see what we’re doing, but I don’t care.

With him moving against me, pushing me closer and closer to the edge, despite the layers between us, my eyes flutter closed, an orgasm coiling inside of me. I can’t stop the

sensations from building, and my vision becomes hazy when a scream falls from my gaping mouth.

Leonardo lowers his mouth to mine, swallowing the sound as another explosion comes from the mansion behind us. The foundations tremble as brick explodes around us, falling into large debris on the grass. Glass flies as bodies fall to the ground.

But through it all, Leonardo stays on top of me, his movements unrelenting as he rides out my orgasm with only the rock of his hips. I moan into his 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 something else entirely. He devours me whole, his tongue duelling with mine as we fight for dominance. My heart thumps against my chest while his hands tighten their grip on mine. He consumes me, taking everything I have to give him, while he kisses me as though our lives depend on it—maybe they do.

The world is falling apart around us, but there's only him and me here now. When I peel my eyes open again, my body spent as I relax into the grass, I don't miss the smirk on his face, or the way he eyes me with pride.

“Like I said, Princess,” he murmurs, lifting off me and pulling us both to 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 my back as he

fists my hair and tugs my head backward. “That was just the warmup.”

Why do I get the feeling he isn't just talking about the explosion?



“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 his office at the casino while the rest of the guests who survived the Halloween 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 at the home I've been living? Getting dry humped to orgasm on the wet grass. Mud coats the back of my arms, my hair is a tangled mess, and the leather trousers stick to my underwear where my juices have seeped through and dried.

Antonio doesn't seem to have noticed anything amiss in my appearance. Though it helps that Leonardo being tasked as my babysitter means him throwing me on the ground and protecting me with his body is to be expected.

“I think it’s time to consider the fact you have a rat, Ant,” Gio, one of his soldiers, tells him, stepping forwards and folding his arms over his chest. “How else would someone get into the mansion when we’re all there?”

Nothing to do with the fact that the majority were off their tits on cocaine and getting lost in women.

I keep my thoughts to myself, knowing better than to voice them aloud right now.

“Leo,” Antonio shouts to the man standing stoic behind me with a bored expression on his face. “What are your thoughts?”

Leonardo shrugs casually, clearly unbothered by any of this. “Gio is probably right, it makes sense. If this is the Russians, they’re getting braver. There are few men who would dare stage an attack on someone’s home and Alexei isn’t stupid. He wouldn’t attempt it if he knew it wouldn’t pay off.”

“So I have a fucking rat?” Antonio scoffs, slamming a palm down on the oak. The crack is deafening, but he shows no reaction. His eyes narrow on Leonardo, his anger palpable as the men talk over one another.

I shrink into my seat, lifting my knees to my chest and folding my arms around them. For the next hour or so, the men go back and forth, figuring out the best way to flush out a rat all the while my eyes grow heavier. When I glance at the clock, I blow out a breath at the early morning hour.

The only topic that hasn't come up is where the hell we're supposed to live, considering the mansion is in pieces on the ground. The thought consumes me as my eyes flutter closed and I succumb to sleep.

Hours later, or it could be only moments, large hands grab me and lift me into a warm, comfortable chest. I keep my eyes closed, letting my head loll into the body, the familiar sandalwood scent permeating my nose and blanketing me in pure comfort.

"I'll take her to my penthouse. We can figure the rest out tomorrow," a deep voice mumbles, their hand curling under me to pull me closer. The echo of voices fills my ears, but I'm too lost in the haze of sleep to register their words as I settle into the body I'm curled into, my head nestled in their neck.

When I awake again, sunlight streams through unfamiliar grey curtains. The mattress I'm lying on is like a soft cloud, and when I roll over, my eyes are drawn to a photo frame on the bedside table.

A younger Leonardo stares back at me, his arm thrown over the shoulder of a petite, dark-haired woman who could be his twin. Their eyes are a matching shade of chocolate brown, and the easy smiles on their faces are like a mirror image of one another.

My heart clenches at the sight—though I don't know why.

The smell of bacon pulls me from the bed, and I throw my legs over the edge, noticing I'm no longer in the Catwoman costume but an oversized hoodie that is far too big for me.

It's that moment I remember the explosions, the mansion falling to pieces, and my heart plummets. Not for the home that was never mine, or the belongings I learnt to love, but for the lives lost. For the people who had made a home in that place.

For their families, their friends.

I'm not naïve enough to believe that it's all about me. It's clear the Italians and Russians have bad blood between them, but there's something about the fact that this all ramped up since I've been around. Or is there more to the story I'm not understanding?

Who the fuck am I kidding?

There's always more to the story.

I drag myself from the comfort of the bed, and pad barefoot out of the bedroom. The unfamiliar hallway is painted with magnolia and bare of any décor. It leads to an open-plan kitchen and living room, which are almost as bare as the hallway.

There's a basic grey couch in the lounge, pointing towards a large flat screen TV on the wall, and in the kitchen, there's a large island, a kettle on one counter and a coffee maker on the other, but not much of anything else.

Leonardo stands over the stove, the muscles on his back taut as he leans forwards to stir something. Without a shirt, his tan tattooed skin glistens under the golden glow of the sun shining through the large window. The black and grey ink begs me to

trace the lines etched into his skin. Lowering my eyes, I notice the grey sweatpants covering his legs and almost whimper when he turns around.

I'm sure all men know that the universal weakness for women is a pair of grey sweats, and when I see the outline pressing against the material, my knees almost buckle. His answering chuckle sends a spark of heat straight through me.

"Where are we?" I blurt, dropping my gaze to the floor when he stalks towards me. His long legs eat up the space between us and he wraps his arm around my back and pulls me into his chest.

My palms land on his chest, the muscles tensing under my touch. He leans down, his breath fanning over my ear when he talks. "This is my penthouse."

"Where is everyone else?" I push him away, putting some much-needed distance between us. Being in his presence after our last two interactions is 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 casino 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 longer, think you can handle it?"

I won't lie and say the thought of being away from Antonio doesn't fill me with instant relief. I know I can't stay here forever, but a little longer to come to terms with our life

together is welcome. However, I don't know how possible that is if I'm stuck with the man in front of me.

Leonardo makes me question everything.

"I have nothing here," I tell him, gesturing at the jumper covering my 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 good for my sanity.

"Don't worry, Princess. I have clothes you can wear for now, and we'll pick up whatever else you need another day. First you need to eat. Then we 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 spin on my heels to rush out of the room.

I end up in the bedroom again, falling face-first onto the mattress and dialling the number of my family home back in England. After only a handful of rings, my father's voice comes down the phone and a wide smile lifts my lips.

"Hey, Papá."

"Bambina, is that you?" he asks happily, his voice a welcome sound. "How are you, my sweet girl?"

"I'm good, Papá. Though I miss you."

“I miss you too. Now, why are you ringing off Leonardo’s phone?”

My nose wrinkles at his question, confused as to why he would have Leonardo’s number. As far as I’m aware, he’s only ever met the man that one time at my wedding, and there’s no reason I can think of as to why they’d need to be in contact.

“How do you know whose phone this is?”

A suspicious sounding cough comes down the line, and an awkward silence takes its place for a long moment before he answers, “I have all the men’s numbers. You know I worry about your safety, Pippa.”

“You worry too much,” I tell him, taking a deep breath before answering his earlier question. It’s only going to make him even more cautious. “I don’t actually have my phone at the moment.”

“Why?” he asks slowly, and without even seeing him, I know his brow is furrowed in concern. My mouth turns into a frown, not wanting to worry him further, but knowing if I don’t tell him and he discovers through someone else, it will only make things worse.

“The mansion got bombed. But it’s okay, Papá. I wasn’t inside at the time, and I’m not injured or hurt in any way.”

A harsh breath comes down the line, followed by a handful of Italian curse words. Rolling onto my back, I stare at the ceiling with a sigh, waiting until he’s finished. It’s another minute or two before he addresses me again.

“You’re safe? Right now?” he asks me.

“Yes, Papá.”

“That’s good.” He breathes out in relief. “I’m going to speak to Antonio about coming for a visit soon.”

“Papá—”

“No arguments, bambina. Anyway, it’s been far too long since I’ve hugged my little girl, and I’m in need of my Pippa cuddles. Plus, your sisters are dying to see you, so I’ll bring them with me, and we can spend a week together, okay?”

“Okay,” I agree. I may not want my family to worry for me, especially from thousands of miles away, but I can’t deny how happy the idea of seeing them makes me. I’ve never been away from them for longer than a single night before I married Antonio and moved to New York, and my heart aches from missing them.

We spend another hour on the phone, not talking about much, just basking in the company before he must leave. With a final “I love you,” the line goes dead, and I’m left with only my thoughts in this bedroom.

When Leonardo comes in a little while later, a plate with bacon and eggs in his hand, he takes one look at my forlorn expression and drops onto the bed beside me. “You okay?”

“I don’t know,” I answer earnestly. The fact is, from the moment I walked into that church over a month ago, everything changed. In more ways than I can even comprehend. “It’s a lot, you know? Between Antonio, the

Russians wanting me, and you? I'm a little lost and a lot confused."

He nods but says nothing as he rolls onto his side and flicks his gaze to mine. My breath comes out shakily, my eyes staying locked on the ceiling.

"Why am I here?"

"Here in my penthouse?" he asks, reaching out and tugging on a lock of my hair.

"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 catches at the closeness, my heart racing when his other hand cups my face. "You're just going to have to trust that maybe it's all for a good reason."

"And if it's not?"

"Do you trust me?" He leans in, his mouth hovering over mine when he 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 centre and 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 kiss, telling myself that this once it's okay to give in to the connection I feel with him.

We stay there, losing ourselves in each other, though we don't take it further. His kiss is devouring; sweet and sensual too. No matter how much I want to touch him, to trace his skin with my hands, to feel him while he drives himself inside me, I don't.

This may not be appropriate with a man who isn't my husband, but I can at least convince myself I'm not doing too much wrong if it stays like this.

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 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 curious 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 walk 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 too. I'm 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. With a wince, I step away from him, gesturing to

the bartender for a wine. Angering the man isn't in my best interest, nor is engaging in an argument I doubt I'd 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 you've done since you've come here is cause commotion and have my men killed.”

“Ant,” Leonardo warns, moving in front of the man and gesturing for 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 office, 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, tipping 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 you 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 rat 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.

But Antonio.

The one man who makes me feel the least safe when I'm in his company.

My eyes travel to Leonardo, my heart speeding up when he sends me a wink while Antonio closes his eyes, squeezing the bridge of his nose. He's the person who makes me feel the safest, and yet, could he be the rat?

No.

That's impossible.

He's the one who has had direct access to me for weeks, and if he was working for the men who wanted me, I've no doubts he'd have made sure they had me long before now.

"We only take a handful of men. Luca, Gio, Nico," Antonio says, listing 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. “Take me with you.”

“Not a bad idea, actually,” Leonardo ponders despite Antonio’s insistence otherwise. His friend turns to him, an exasperated look on his face. He only shrugs, dropping into the seat beside me and resting his elbows on his thighs. “She can shoot pretty well, and she’s handy with a knife if things go south, but she can just sit in the car and be lookout otherwise.”

“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 isn’t anyone else you trust to sit me,” I tell them, moving over to the bar cart 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 and wait 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 over his full bottom lip. Antonio looks less happy, shaking his head in defeat as he sighs.

“You win, wife,” he says, grabbing his glass and tipping the remaining 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 tell you 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 gaze to mine, his eyes moving over me in a heated way. “Come on, Princess. Let’s 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 back. I need a word with my wife.”

Leonardo looks as if he wants to argue, his mouth setting in a harsh line for 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 to attention when Antonio pulls me against him, his hand settling on my lower 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 my folds. The feeling is like ice on my skin, his calloused fingers thrust inside me while he whispers in my ear. “You mean next to nothing to me, Pippa. A means to an end, and yet you can’t even deliver on that front.”

A whimper slips from my mouth when a dull ache starts at my entrance the more he prods his fingers. This is nothing like being with Leonardo. With him, it's like a flame has been lit inside of me and my body needs more—needs him. This is cold, violent, and painful.

“Take off your trousers.” He pulls his fingers out of me, pushing me away from him until I fall over his desk, my hands stinging as they slam against the wood. Tears fill my eyes, but I do as he tells me.

My fingers tremble as I fumble with the button, my vision becoming hazy with the unshed tears pooling in my eyes. Crying gets me nowhere. Begging gets me nowhere. I'm trapped here with him, and when I push the denim to the floor and he grabs my hips, instead of closing my eyes and focusing on the dark as I normally do, I picture dark hair and brown eyes.

I picture calloused tattooed hands that only ever feel gentle when they handle me.

I picture warmth and comfort and home.

I picture Leonardo, even though I know I shouldn't.

And for once, it doesn't feel quite so bad while it lasts.



Burning water scalds my skin as the shower streams over me. I scrub myself raw with the loofah, as if that can somehow take

away the remnants of what Antonio has done. Tears stream down my face, lost in the running water as it runs down the drain.

The waves of sadness come and go, but the anger stays. Every time I think I'm doing okay, he claims me again and reminds me I can never escape his clutches. He is my husband, and I am his wife, and together we're locked into a union neither of us can escape.

When I finally emerge from the bathroom, a robe wrapped tightly at 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.

When he stands, I step backwards instinctively. My skin heats when he reaches for me, his hand fisting in my hair. He pulls me forwards, leaning 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 bite my tongue 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 better 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. But whenever he comes for me, I freeze and can't break free.

“Tell me, Princess.” He leans down, pressing his forehead against mine. “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 you lie there, limp like a rag doll because you know that he can't give you what you need.”

“What is it you think I need?”

“Euphoria,” he answers, pressing his lips to mine and branding me with his heat. Every bit of anger inside him pushes into me into that moment, and I don't stop myself from claiming it. It fuels me when I kiss him back. I grip his shirt, pulling him closer until he backs me up and slams me against the door.

A groan slips from my mouth when he pulls away, dragging his lips over my cheek, down my jaw, and stopping at my neck.

“Leonardo.” His name comes out in a breathy moan as he closes his lips over my pulse point, taking the skin between his teeth and sucking hard. He stays there for a long moment, marking me with his mouth.

A satisfied smirk covers his lips when he pulls back, his arms crossing over his chest. My chest rises, my breaths harsh as I watch him. The thought of wearing him on my skin long after he leaves fills me with warmth.

“Sleep with him again, Princess, and I’ll slit his throat,” he tells me, his voice unwavering and hard. His eyes are hard as steel, the smirk on his face vicious when he next speaks. “And while he bleeds out on the floor, I’ll fuck you using his blood as lube.”

My eyes widen, though I can’t deny the ache that starts in my clit at his words. 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 leaving me there alone. I slump against the wall, my heart drumming against my chest.

Walking on shaky legs across the floor, I grab for the high-waisted black jeans and black sweater left behind for me. Black boots sit at the foot of the bed, stealth clearly the aim of the game for tonight.

Make-up sits on the nightstand, a hair dryer and hairbrush next to it. I don’t let my thoughts linger on who they might belong to, knowing I don’t have the right. It takes longer to cover the mark than it should, and when it’s disappeared from my skin, hiding under the layers of make-up, I miss the sight of it.

I toss my hair into a sleek ponytail and dress quickly. When I’m ready, I sit on the bed and drop my head into my hands. Blowing out a shaky breath, I force my mind to focus on what’s coming next instead of wallowing in pity and confusion.

Leonardo comes to get me an hour later, saying nothing as he leads us down the apartment building and into the

underground garage. A large black SUV waits for us there, Antonio already sitting in the back while Leonardo moves around to the passenger seat, leaving me no choice but to climb in next to my husband.

The car is quiet, filled with tense energy, as Nico rolls out of the building and drives away from the city lights and towards darkness. I know little of the plan for this evening, just that my job is to sit in the car and wait.

Wait for them to prove themselves, or some shit like that.

Seems redundant.

Instead of attacking the enemy, they should strengthen their walls first.

Starting a war when you have a rat in your midst doesn't seem the best strategy in the world. And I can't imagine tonight will end with anything less than bloodshed and destruction.

We finally pull up to a nightclub at least an hour away from the city. Nico lets the car idle on the kerb, his fingers clenched around the steering wheel.

The street is littered with people, men and women stumbling around as they chase whatever high they're seeking for the night. Lights flicker from the windows, enticing you to lose your inhibitions and fall prey to delicious debauchery.

But that's not why *we're* here.

Antonio steps out first, spearing me with a glare as he orders me to stay put. Nico hands me a burner phone before

following him, the numbers I need pre-programmed for if things go south. Though how I'm supposed to know that with the street as busy as it is with unrecognisable faces, I haven't a clue.

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 turning to face me with hard eyes.

"I feel like I at least need coffee and donuts," I tease, watching in satisfaction as a slight twitch lifts the corner of his mouth before he schools his expression once more.

"You don't even drink coffee," he mutters, cocking his head slightly before reaching into the glove compartment and pulling out something that has my face lifting into a wide smile. "Anyone comes within an inch of this car, you roll the window down and shoot, got it?"

I clap excitedly, reaching over and snatching my SIG Sauer from him like a kid at Christmas. Tension I didn't know I was carrying releases from me in waves as I grip the metal handle. My eyes lock on his, my smile widening at his scowl when I try to thank him.

"I need you to agree, Princess," he warns, leaning over the centre console and resting his hand on my thigh. Even with the denim barrier, my skin burns where he holds me.

"What am I agreeing to?" I ask, almost groaning when his thumb runs over the seam of my thigh.

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 as dread forms in my stomach. “You’ll be safe, right?”

“You worried about me?” he asks, a brow raised as he watches me. I shrug, 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—things are already far too complicated with everything else going on.

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. With a final lingering look, his eyes telling me something I can’t read, he steps out of the car and leaves me in silence.

The three men walk down the street, their strides confident as they make their way to the doors of the nightclub. I wish I was feeling some of that confidence, but the only thing I feel is sick.

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, soaking the streets as people rush past to escape the elements.

I tighten my grip on my gun, holding it flush to my thigh. The waiting is the worst, and my mood plummets the longer I sit here staring out of the car window. There is no sign of the men, no sign that the others Antonio brought in 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, stepping 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 know I don't have the patience to wait for them to come back. Sliding my gun into the waistband of my jeans, I tug my sweater down, concealing the handle as I start towards the club.

When I reach the door, I offer a confident smile to the doormen, sending a silent prayer they don't ask to see my ID. Sure, at twenty-one I can legally drink in America, but since I don't have any of my personal belongings given 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 dark 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. Music echoes off the walls, the sounds of drums and bass pulling the patrons to the dancefloor. Arms wave in the air, hips writhe and grind, and all the while, I see 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 towards a 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 towards it.

The staircase is devoid of any life when I make my way up. The pit in my stomach grows heavier, and I press my hand to my back, grabbing my gun and flicking the safety off. When I reach the top, I pause for a beat, pulling in a deep breath before pushing at the door and leaving the safety of the padded 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 up here 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 a 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 eyes narrowing as he gestures to a set of seats next to him. “Take a seat. We can have a chat.”

“I’d rather stand, I think.”

“Stubborn too.” He chuckles, dropping down into one of the chairs. With his arm thrown over the back, and one ankle propped on his thigh, he looks comfortable and relaxed—it’s unnerving. Frightening, I suppose, given he must know Antonio and his men are here tonight.

And yet I don’t fear him, even though I probably should.

“How did you know I’d be here?” I ask, stepping into the room farther and flicking my eyes over the space. Aside from the two chairs, the room is bare 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 club downstairs.

“Like I said,” he murmurs, a smirk on his lips as he watches me. “Italians are nothing if not predictable. You’ve been around them for too long, you’ve become just like them.”

My eyes narrow on him, a scowl at my lips while he continues, “Natura contro educazione”

“You speak Italian.” I gape at him in shock, my heart thundering when he flicks a vicious smile at me.

“I know my enemy, Pippa.” He shrugs, dropping his arm and leaning forwards. With a tilt to his head, he raises a brow, gesturing. “The question is, do you?”

“I doubt I have enemies, I’m just a lone woman in a man’s world.”

“You’re the most important woman in that world,” he tells me, gesturing to the seat beside him again. This time, I don’t argue, just drop down and cross my legs at the ankles in faux comfort—placing my gun on my thigh. He eyes it for a moment before lifting his gaze to mine again.

“It’s amusing, really, that you think that. You claim to know your enemy, you learn their language, and yet you don’t understand their hierarchy.”

“I never said you were high up on the food chain, Pippa. In fact, you’re probably the lowest. Those men you’re surrounded by? They don’t like important women. They chain

them, drag them into the pits, and bury them under children and housework.”

“That’s awfully judgemental of you,” I comment, though I don’t disagree. He’s correct. After all, that’s everything my father warned me of before I came here—that being the perfect wife was imperative. “Can you honestly say your Bratva is any better?”

He doesn’t answer, only chuckles to himself for a moment. The scar on his face wrinkles as he does, a harsh reminder that his world is as bad as mine—perhaps worse, even.

“You utter the word with such disdain, as though you’ve already decided we’re worse than you precious Italians, which is awfully judgemental of you too, don’t you think?”

“I guess that’s a character flaw we share, then.”

“I guess so,” he agrees, lifting from his chair and moving to the glass barrier that overlooks the floor below. “What do you think your men are planning to do here tonight?”

“Like you said, women aren’t high up on the food chain here. I’m not clued into their movements, and even if I was, I’d hardly be telling you all about it.”

“Why did you leave the safety of the car and come in here?” My blood chills with his words, an icy blister burning me alive inside. How does he know I was sitting in the car? How did he even know I’d be here tonight?

He turns away, walking towards the door and pulling it open. His back straightens, his shoulders tensing as he speaks

once more. “Remember, Pippa. I know my enemy. Perhaps it’s time you learn yours. I’ll be seeing you.”

With that, he leaves me there, sitting in the dark. Footsteps bound up the stairs a little while later, hurried and impatient as Antonio storms into the room and finds me sitting there. His eyes narrow on me, and a scowl takes over his face as he walks towards me.

My eyes water in fear when he reaches out, his fingers threading in my hair as he pulls me up. When he steps back, I let out a sigh of relief, but it’s short lived when the back of his hand comes flying at my cheek. The weight of his slap, paired with his anger, has my head snapping backwards and pain reverberating through my skull.

Blood rushes to my ears, the pounding of my heart the only thing I can focus on as he stares down at me. His blue eyes are icy and cold, his face set in stone.

“Do you know what you are, wife?” His voice is deadly as he speaks, unwavering and brittle. “Pathetic. You can’t just sit in a car and wait. You have to inject yourself, and what happens when you do? You have a cosy chat with the man who wants you dead.”

While there is some truth to his words, I think he’s wrong about the latter. There isn’t a single part of me that believes Alexei intends to harm me despite evidence that perhaps says otherwise.

He sent a man to grab me off the street, then he bombed the home I was living—and yet tonight, he had prime opportunity

to end my life or snatch 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 move across the dancefloor, letting my hips sway in time with the music. After Antonio left me, there didn't seem a reason to go back to the car. Instead, I grabbed a bottle of vodka from the bar and found my way to the dancefloor.

The alcohol burns its way down my throat as I sway side to side, losing 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 also, his consigliere, who might be an even bigger problem, is also around here, watching my every move.

We stand there for long moments, moving against each other, though I never turn. His face doesn't matter. Nothing matters in this moment. For right 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—a war 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 relax into the body behind me. I press the hand not holding the vodka against his fingers, helping guide them as they caress me over my clothing. Over my waist, to the underside of my breasts, back down until they reach my inner thighs ... so close to where I should want no one after what Antonio did this afternoon, but the one place I need friction—though it's the wrong person behind me.

But the need to replace the imprint of Antonio's hands on my skin and the feeling of him inside me is overwhelming, and when the hand roaming my skin cups my pussy, I can't find the words to say no. For one moment, I want to be free of those shackles. I want to feel something other than hurt and dread. Anything but confusion and helplessness.

But like perfect moments, it ends abruptly when gunshots echo through the room, reverberating off the walls before being replaced with screams of terror as patrons rush to escape the floor.

The man behind me lets go in an instant, pulling away and darting off to safety while I stand there, a statue. Not in fear though, I just don't have the energy to move.

"Time to go, Princess." Leonardo grabs my hand, finally coming out of his hiding space, and pulls me away from the commotion and towards the balcony again. He drags me up the stairs, slamming the door shut behind us.

“You’ve been a naughty girl, haven’t you?” he asks, watching me with a raised brow. Straightening my back, my gaze locks on him, my eyes narrowing when he grabs the bottle from my hand and places it onto a table in the corner before grabbing my hips and spinning me so I’m pressed against the glass pane that overlooks the club. He pulls my hands up, pressing them against the glass with a mumbled, “Stay there.”

Maybe it’s the alcohol, or maybe it’s the way he says the command, so deep and alluring, but I do as he says. A war wages below us. Weapons are drawn, men are shot, and shouts of horror continue while the club falls into disarray between two warring Mafias.

“Shouldn’t you be down there?” I ask when Leonardo steps behind me. His hand finds my ponytail, wrapping it around his fist once, then twice until he tugs my head backwards. The bottle of vodka is back in his hand, and he presses it against my closed lips.

“Swallow for me, Princess,” he commands, pressing his hardening erection into my back. My mouth opens on a gasp, and he uses the moment to tip the bottle. With the angle of my head, swallowing is more difficult, and I choke on the liquid as it sits in my throat, though this doesn’t discourage him. He tips the bottle more, forcing more liquid into my mouth.

“God, you sound so fucking good when you choke. I can’t wait to hear it when those lips are wrapped around my dick.” He pulls the bottle away, pushing my head forwards so the

remaining liquid spills to the floor, my breaths coming out ragged as I try to bite back the gags. “You let somebody touch you. I’m sure I told you earlier what happens if someone touches you.”

“No. You told me what you’d do to my *husband* if I slept with him. Nothing about any other man,” I quip when I finally catch my breath. He doesn’t move from my back, only drops the bottle to the floor with a light thud before closing his hands over mine against the glass.

“Do I need to spell it out for you?”

“Sure, go ahead,” I quip dryly, ignoring the tingles that travel through me.

“Nobody touches you, Princess,” he tells me, running his hands down my arms slowly. Goosebumps form on my skin, the material of my top thankfully hiding the reaction. When he reaches my shoulders, he slides his hands over them and down towards my breasts. “I’ve been more than patient with you up until now. Waited for you to come to me, and yet you’re still pushing me away. Why?”

“Because you’re dangerous.” My breath hitches when he cups my tits over the material, his fingers pressing into the sensitive skin. I bite my lip to stop the moan that threatens to escape. My heart pounds against my chest when he tugs at the hem of my shirt and pulls it upwards. His fingers dance across the bare skin at my waist, the calloused tips sending sparks of heat through me as he continues his trail.

“Have you ever thought that you’re the dangerous one?”

I shake my head, letting it drop back onto his chest when his hands slip under the lace of my bra and cup my breasts. He kneads the skin, my nipples hardening under his touch, before he takes the pebbled nubs between his fingers and pinches hard.

“You didn’t answer me,” he tells me before pressing a hot open-mouthed kiss on my neck. My eyes roll back when he suckles the skin into his mouth, his teeth grazing my pulse point. He pinches my nipples again, and the combination of his mouth and fingers has my panties flooding with juices.

“How could I be dangerous to you?” I ask breathlessly, my head rolling when he moves his mouth, peppering kisses across my neck and jawline. While he continues to caress my left tit, his other hand travels over my waist, stopping at the waistband of my jeans.

“You’re the only thing I can think about. This tight little body of yours, those breathy moans you make when I kiss you just right, the way you’ll feel when I finally slide into your tight cunt and take what’s mine. Don’t you get it yet?”

“Get what?” I breathe.

“From the moment I walked into that church, you’ve owned me. You’re 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 grabs my hips again, spinning me so my back is pressed to the glass and my chest is flush with his. “I want to own you. I want every single piece of you. Your heart, your soul, your mind.”

“I have a husband,” I argue weakly, swallowing hard as his jaw clenches. 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.”

I shake my head, refusing to say the words aloud.

I can't. I can't give him that kind of power over me.

“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 bother pushing the denim down my legs, just slips his hand under my lace underwear and runs a finger through my folds. “You're so fucking wet. And it's all for me, isn't it?”

“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 lightly presses against my entrance. He takes his time, circling my heat before pushing inside me. I open my mouth, my words coming out jumbled as I beg 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'm going to fuck you tonight,” he tells me, finally sliding a second finger inside me and pressing his thumb against my clit. He works his fingers in and out, his thrusts more frenzied with each one. “And when you take my dick, it'll be the last one you ever take. Do you understand?”

Oh my fucking God.

I spiral towards my climax, my eyes rolling to the back of my head when he presses against my clit while sliding a third finger inside me. He fucks me 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 me and steps away. My answering whimper comes out in a cry, though he pays me 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. Standing 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 extra inch of my skin before locking on my face again. Pure hunger reflects in his gaze, and my chest rises heavily as I take him in.

“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 as he grips it in his hand, pumping twice before walking back towards me. “Tell me.”

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 those 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, Leonardo. I want you to take everything I am. All the broken pieces and put them back together. Tonight, I want to be yours.”

He groans at my admission, his eyes hooded with lust as he steps towards 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 there. “Just for tonight?”

“Just tonight,” I repeat, sliding my hands into his dark hair and threading my fingers through the strands. “I can’t give you anything more than that.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” he mumbles dangerously, but I don’t have the chance 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 claiming me.

A throb starts in my centre when his cock pulses against my clit, offering me friction through the lace of my panties. He slides his hand down, moving my underwear to the side before

pushing inside me. My back arches in surprise at the feel of him. Never in my life have I been so deliciously full.

My hips buck against him in desperation, seeking more. The sound of our slapping skin fills the room, my moans being swallowed into his mouth as he continues 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 the nub. I tug his hair, pulling him from my mouth so I can breathe. Instead of taking me again in another kiss, he leans down, closing his lips over a pebbled nipple 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 explode 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 wooden door. For the last hour, I’ve tried to lose myself in the words on the pages 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 breaking 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 bitterness 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 bottom half and pad out of the room on soft feet. The sounds are coming from the 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 gently 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 there isn't 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 before 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 my 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 to the island.

“Good to know, I guess.” Wrinkling my nose, I hop up onto one of the bar stools propped by the island. My feet swaying in the air as he flicks the kettle to life. Aside from the odd occasion I’ve been in the car with Antonio, Nico hasn’t said more than five words to me in all the time I’ve been in New York. “Are you allowed to talk to me?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asks, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Dunno.” I shrug, tapping my fingers against the marble counter. “You’re just very quiet usually. I guess I figured you didn’t like me much, or you weren’t allowed to fraternise with the boss’s belongings.”

“Neither. But if you haven’t noticed, Ant is a man of few words. So it’s easier just to stay quiet.”

“Do you like him?” I blurt without thinking, mentally slapping myself when he chuckles deeply and slides a mug of tea over to me. Asking questions like that, to men like Nico, can only lead to terrible things.

“He’s my boss.” He smiles, though there’s something hidden in the depths 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 like 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 slip around. Words such as those might just get you killed.”

“Maybe death is preferable.”

“You’re twenty-one, Shortie,” he tells me, a sad smile on his face. My skin becomes twitchy under his scrutiny, the sympathy radiating off him uncomfortable. “You have your whole life ahead of you. Don’t wish for the ending just yet.”

“What about you?” I ask, ignoring him. Not that I want to die, not really. But it seems like it would be much easier than living these days. Leaning forwards, I prop my head into my hand. “You can’t be much older than me. What do you want to do with your life? Surely this isn’t the big grand plan, driving around the boss?”

“My place in this world is strategic. I love my family and my friends. This life is all I know, why would I want to do anything else?”

“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 holds my gaze unwaveringly.

“This life is about power. Everyone wants it. And you apparently don’t. Which tells me you have secrets you’re keeping.”

“Everyone has secrets, Pippa. I believe you know that better than most.” Bristling, at his words, I stutter, trying to explain myself, but he cuts me off with a shake of his head.

“I’m not judging you,” he says softly, a small smile on his face and it calms my growing anxiety slightly. I’m not sure there’s a reason to believe him—but I do anyway. “I know Antonio can be a cruel man.”

He pauses a moment, his eyes lingering on the mark left behind from Antonio’s hand earlier. “And this isn’t something you ever would have wanted for yourself. Plus, Leo is—” He hesitates, wrinkling his nose in thought before continuing. “Leo is charming and alluring to most.”

Pulling my bottom lip between my teeth, I tug at the skin while I watch 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.

“Being gay in the Mafia isn’t welcomed. It’s a death sentence, Shortie.”

“It shouldn’t be,” I whisper, my heart aching for him. To not be able to live as your true self is more heart wrenching than anything else I can think of.

“You’re right. Maybe you can change that when you become the boss.”

I laugh incredulously, shaking my head. “Please, that would be the day. A 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 is, the door at the back of the hall opens and Antonio steps out. A smattering of blood coats his face, and a vicious grin lifts at his lips as a scream follows him down.

“What are they doing in there?” I whisper to Nico, my heart thundering against my chest when the door closes once more. He shakes his head, pursing his lips for a moment.

“Trust me. You don’t want to know.”

“I heard my name through the door when I was eavesdropping. What do I have to do with the Russians, Nico?”

“I like you, Shortie,” he tells me, lifting his mug to his mouth and blowing on the hot liquid for a beat. “However, the secrets of our world aren’t something you want to unveil right now. Stay innocent to them, for as long as you possibly can.”

We sit in silence after that, both lost in thought; or at least I am. The sad truth is, no matter how much I wish I could stay out of the violent truths of the world I’ve been dragged into ... I don’t think I can. I fear they will pull me in with them anyway, and all I can do is brace myself for the fall out.



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 excited energy whirling in my stomach. Almost two months ago, I stepped onto a plane and landed in New York City, not knowing when I'd see my family again. If I'd see them again.

All the missing them, the pain and sickness of being without them is all ending—for one week, at least. When Papá called the burner phone I'd be given yesterday to inform me of their travel plans, my heart just about burst out of my chest in happiness.

The moment the door opens, I'm flying across the asphalt, not caring for the shouting voices behind me telling me to stop. Papá catches me when my feet lift from the ground, his arms wrapping tightly around me as he hauls me into his chest and my legs fold around his waist.

“Oh, quanto mi sei mancata dolce ragazza,” he whispers in my ears, squeezing me close to him. *Oh, how I've missed you, sweet girl.*

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 and starting their own lives is a welcome wish. For me though, I never put much 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.

Within seconds, more arms are thrown around us, the hug becoming warmer as my sisters' bodies press against me. Happy laughter rings from the 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 us over to where Antonio and Leonardo wait. I keep my gaze aimed at the ground while the men speak, refusing to give the satisfaction of staring at the face I can feel burning holes into me.

For the last four days, I've avoided Leonardo at every turn. Along with 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 gay man who's afraid his secret will get him killed, and the man you cheated on the husband with—suffice to say I haven't left the bedroom much.

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 Papá and towards one of the waiting SUVs.

“There isn't all that much to tell you.” I shrug, shaking my head at her eager expression.

“Pish,” she scoffs, tugging me into the car with her. “Bombs, gun fights, and alleyway stalkers. Pippa, that's hardly nothing.”

Smiling sheepishly, I lift my shoulders before pulling the belt across me. “Honestly, maybe my perceptions have

changed since I've been here, because all of that just feels normal now. That's probably concerning, actually."

She laughs lightly, grabbing my hand and squeezing my fingers. "Maybe a little."



Huffing, I tug the hem of my black dress down when the material rides up my thighs and sits under the curve of my arsecheeks again—for the fifth time. I should have known better than to let Rosa pick my outfit for the evening when we were shopping earlier, but I didn't have the heart to tell her no when she squealed excitedly in my ear.

Spending that time with my sisters today, shopping and going for lunch, has felt so normal that I'd give them anything they asked of me to keep the happiness buzzing around me.

Wind slaps against the bare skin of my legs as I wobble on my heels while waiting for everyone to exit the cars. Lights flicker above the Italian restaurant Papá demanded we go to tonight—because eating anything other than Italian in New York is sacrilegious, according to him.

Antonio slides a hand around my back, pulling me against him as he starts towards the restaurant. My skin bristles, my stomach dropping as dread suffocates me. Whenever I've been in his company today, he's played the role of doting husband, for my father's benefit, though I don't know why.

Nor does Papá, if the wary suspicion etched on his face says anything.

Which is honestly not surprising since he knows that Antonio and I don't have a marriage born of anything but duty. While I haven't told him everything that has happened between the two of us; I have told him that Antonio isn't a man I could ever fall in love with and that our relationship is purely transactional.

If he knew the truth, I don't doubt my father would kill my husband before his own life would be taken by Antonio's men, and that's not something I'm willing to let happen. It's easier—and safer—for everyone if I keep my lips closed on the matter.

The restaurant is bustling when we step inside, and I'm grateful for the heat that passes over us as the maître d' leads us to our table. My father claps his hands excitedly, pulling his chair out with a wide smile on his face.

“You know, this has been my favourite restaurant since I was a little boy,” he tells us as we join him at the table. “Every Sunday, without fail, my nonna would bring me here after mass and we'd have a mini feast.”

“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.

Clearly my lucky stars aren't so bloody lucky.

“No.” Papá chuckles, rubbing his hands together. “I’m a New Yorker, born and bred. I only moved to Chicago when I became Capo. And then stayed there for twenty years before moving to London.”

I smile as he continues telling his life story. This isn’t the first time he’s told my sisters and me this story, and every time, it fills my heart to hear of his time as a young boy, growing up in New York City.

“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 we 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 wears now, today won’t be the day he gives us the answers either.

The conversation goes back and forth around the table, everyone piping up periodically to say their own bits. To be around family again is a momentary fix to all the other drama in my life.

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 rushing off and returning with drinks for us. When I’m taking a sip of my champagne, a warm hand clamps down on my thigh, searing my skin instantly.

“Please remove your hand,” I say to Leonardo, keeping my voice a low whisper so the others don’t hear me. Ignoring my

request, he squeezes lightly 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 sliding further up my thigh until he cups me over my underwear. The lace material presses against my clit as he runs his fingers over me, teasing me until I’m 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 through my folds, smearing my juices over my now throbbing clit. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Nodding, I pull in a deep breath as heat courses through me when 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 to my ears when two fingers thrust inside me without warning. Nodding 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 family surround us.

The conversation picks up again, but my mind is lost to the sensations swirling around me while Leonardo uses his fingers expertly inside me, 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 worry my already cautious father. “Are you not feeling good, bambina? You seem 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 g-spot. “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 own 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 short lived when he rips the lace down the centre, removing the barrier of my underwear before something cold presses against my clit, circling it for a moment. He moves down my folds, pressing against my entrance.

“What are you doing?” I whisper through clenched teeth while the rest of our table talks about the heat in the restaurant. Dropping my eyes, they widen when I see the handle of his dinner knife. Butterflies soar in my stomach, my legs trembling in anticipation as the metal slips inside of me. “Leonardo.”

“Shhh, we wouldn't want your family to pick up on what's happening, would we?” My muffled protests fall on deaf ears as he continues to push the handle inside me. It slides in easily, coating with my juices before he pulls it all the way out, causing me to whimper.

My body burns under the pressure, his thumb finding my clit once more while he fucks me with a dinner knife. My pussy clenches around the object when he twists it, pressing against my g-spot once more. His tongue slips out, dampening his lips and all I can think about is having them wrapped around my clit while he continues to use the knife on me.

My orgasm builds slowly—too fucking slowly—as he slides the knife in and out of me with measured strokes. Just enough to have me whimpering, 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, but not so much that everyone turns to face us. “What do you need, baby? Do you need to come around my knife? Do you want to be a dirty girl who gets off while dinner is being served around us? Do you want them all to hear your moans and know I’m the one who brings you ecstasy? Tell me. Because I can feel you trembling around the metal, and all I can think about is bending you over this table and pounding you into oblivion while everyone watches. Is that something you’d want, Princess?”

I clamp my hand around the edge of the table, needing an anchor as his words cause me to fall apart. Clenching my teeth, I swallow my moans as my climax takes over and stars fill my vision while he continues to fuck me through it with his knife.

There’s a sharp pain when he thrusts deeper, but I’m too lost to the pleasure to note what’s happening inside of me.

“You’re a little slut, aren’t you, Princess?” he whispers, pulling the knife out and settling it on the table while my cheeks flush with fire. “My little slut.”

I grab my champagne, tipping a generous amount down my throat while my body settles. When I can finally breathe normally again, after long moments, my eyes linger on the knife noticing a spot of blood against the serrated edge.

Unfortunately, I’m not the only person to notice.

“Is that blood on your knife, Leonardo?” Antonio asks as he drops back down beside me, placing his phone on the table.

My face burns, and my heart skips a beat as my husband directs his curiosity to the man at my side. For a moment, I'd forgotten he was here at this restaurant with us—I'd forgotten everything but Leonardo.

“Hmm, I must have nicked something when I was playing with it.” He shrugs, picking it up and using it to slice his chicken. I drop my gaze to my thigh, my eyes widening as a trickle of blood passes over my skin. The fucker cut me while fucking me. Shit. “But a bit of blood never hurt anyone, did it?”

My cheeks flush further when he slides the chicken into his mouth, pulling the knife in a second later and cleaning it with his tongue. The same knife he used to fuck me.

Well, fuck.

The rest of the evening goes off without a hitch, and by the end, everyone is merry on alcohol and laughing jovially over dessert. However, the whole time, I can only focus on the man to my right.

Avoiding him seems redundant. And when he touches me, I forget every reason that I should.

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 to hang out 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 like I’m stupid. “It’s his credit card, obviously.”

“Ahh there we go, that makes more sense.” Shaking my head with a laugh, 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 tell us anything, so he dragged us here and tossed us out, telling us that we could be 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. For the last forty-eight hours, all she's done in our group chat is comment about 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 nothing—but my mind whirls anyway, my hands itching to whack the image of him 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 pursed lips, 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. Sliding it open, she waves a hand at the rails of clothes there, the ones I refuse to think 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 my 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 shirt and 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 that, even if the alternative makes me feel slightly murderous.

"This dress is perfect for you." She lifts one of the many hangers, pulling out a beautiful black dress that drapes over one shoulder and opens into a slit on the thigh, falling all the way to the ground.

"Absolutely not," I tell her, shaking my head ferociously. "My vagina will be 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 rails again before pulling out a short red bodycon dress. "And this one is for me. Elisa and Sofia can fend for themselves. No doubt they'll dress like boring old biddies anyway. You know something, P?"

"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. "Elisa married and became a bore, and well, Sofia has always been a grandma in a 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'd be saying it with such amusement.

Hours later, we're getting ready in the suite my family is staying in. Make-up lays haphazardly on the bathroom counter while hot hair tools are taking up the vanity in Rosa's room.

My hair has been curled and pinned to within an inch of its life, and if it wasn't for the tequila steadily working through my system, I'm sure I'd be 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 don't look up from my phone—a direct replica of the phone I lost in the bomb that was left on my bed a couple of days ago. She's been at it all afternoon with Elisa and Sofia. Funnily enough, that's one thing I don't miss about home. Even though it was only me that still lived with Papá, my sisters and I spent almost every day together, and the arguments were plentiful.

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 men who are dangerous, does not make me boring, Rosa," Sofia snaps, slapping her hand against the vanity. "It makes me a responsible adult, which is more than I can say about you."

"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 the number of times I've heard a curse word

from her mouth, and even then, it's never been aimed at one of us.

Rosa is too lost in her own frustration to register that Sofia is seconds from breaking, so instead of stopping, she continues pushing. "What's your damage, Sofia? Seriously, you bang on and on about how dangerous these men are, and yet never once have you told us why? Poor little Sofia, so scared of the big bad Mafia men, that even now in your thirties you fear them. I don't think I'm the one that needs to grow up, Sof."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Sofia whispers, her voice cracking on the words.

"Sofia—" I'm cut off when Rosa storms out of the room, slamming the door behind her. We fall into silence, the tense air suffocating as Sofia drops onto the bed and cups her face with her hands. Elisa sticks her head out of the bathroom, a sad expression etched into her features as she looks at me with a raised brow.

I shake my head, lifting my shoulders. I haven't a clue what just happened either.

"Sofia," I repeat, moving over to sit next to her. Laying my arm over her 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, noticeable in 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, and 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, let’s get these pins out of your hair, and I’ll finish your make-up.”



Dimmed lights, with neon flickers. The murmur of the crowds. The jiggle of coins as people place their bets. And two of three sisters that refuse to speak 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. He orders us both a neat vodka while my sisters split off behind us, finding tables and escaping the mindless bickering.

“Don’t you have friends to meet?” I tease when he lifts to sit on one of the bar stools and spins to face me.

“Can’t a father spend one minute with his daughter without being rushed 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 arm. “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. I watch eagerly, my brow raised. “You’re my favourite.”

“Not much of a secret. But I’ll take it.” Silence befalls us after that, and for the next ten minutes, we enjoy the quiet of each other’s company in a room full of life and laughter. It’s not a lie to say being my father’s favourite isn’t a secret. It’s not that he loves me more or treats me better than my sisters—he’s just always been more protective of me.

Beneath the silence though, there’s something etched into Papá’s face I can’t read. Something that has me opening my mouth before I can think better of it.

“Why did you marry me off?” I’ve asked the question before, but it’s always gone unanswered. He sighs heavily, dropping his gaze to the glass in his hand. “Please, Papá. I need to know.”

“Growing up, I always wanted you to fall in love with a nice little English boy. Move to the countryside. Have a bucket load of children and live happily ever after.”

“Really?” I deadpan, my brows raising. That sounds like my worst nightmare, and with the smirk playing on his lips, I know he agrees.

“That was my dream, bambina. Not yours.” Another sigh, before he tips the clear liquid to his lips. He swallows the drink in one, placing the empty glass on the bar and gesturing for a refill. He looks lost as his eyes find mine, his lips turning down before he speaks again. “I never got a say. Your life was

planned for you, Pippa. From the moment you were born, it was set in motion. I kept you away from it, for as long as I could. But I was never going 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, his jaw tensing.

“That doesn’t explain why I’m here. Why you sent me here? Why you signed me away to a man like Antonio,”

“Because you are the most important piece in this battle. I never wanted this for you, Pippa. If I could have kept you with me, hidden, for the rest of your life I would have. But it was never my decision to make.”

“Then whose was it?” I snap, watching as my father straightens his back and looks over my shoulder.

“Mine.” My head snaps to the side, my eyes locking on the direction the voice comes from. A familiar figure stands before me, my mind buzzing as confusion grabs hold of me.

“I know you,” I say to him, my lips pursing in confusion as the man steps towards us. “You sat with me. Here at this bar, weeks ago.”

“I did,” he agrees with a smile, moving closer before he stops about a foot away. His suit fits perfectly today, his frame broader than I originally thought when I first met him.

“Who are you, Alek?”

“Aleksandr Kovalev,” he offers, a smile playing on his lips as he holds my gaze. “Not to sound all *Star Wars* or anything, but I am your father, Pippa.”

Glass shattering breeches my ears followed by the rush of blood. Warm liquid runs over my hand, and when I look down, I see the stain of crimson coming from a deep gash where I was holding my glass.

The glass now lays on the floor, the liquid seeping into the carpet. Papá rushes me, grabbing my hand and pressing a napkin to it to stem the flow of blood. His hand trembles as he holds my arm. Glassy eyes watch me, his face a sheet of white as I remain frozen.

“He’s lying, Papá,” I whisper, tears springing to my eyes. There’s no other option. “Please tell me he’s lying.”

He shakes his head, his mouth quivering a little—but that can’t be. Papá doesn’t get upset. He doesn’t cry. And he definitely doesn’t lie. Not to me.

“I’m so sorry, bambina.” His voice cracks as he utters the words almost silently, just for me. “I wanted to tell you, for so long I wanted to tell you. You have no idea how much it tore me up to not tell you the truth.”

“Then why didn’t you?” I demand, pulling away from him and standing. The stool crashes behind me and heads turn in our direction, but I can’t focus on anything but the man before me.

“Because I couldn’t.”

“Yes, you could,” I snap, pushing him away. I take a step backwards, then another, never taking my eyes off the two men as they watch me warily. “You know how easy it would have been? *Hey Pippa, guess what, kiddo? I’m not your dad. I’ve lied to you, your whole fucking life. I pretended to love you, pretended you belonged with our family. When really, I was just babysitting for the time being.*”

A hollow laugh slips from my mouth, my hands trembling as I press them against my aching stomach. “God, it really does sound so fucked up when you say it aloud, doesn’t it?”

“It’s not like that,” he demands softly, grabbing me again. I shake him away, taking another step backwards.

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t that thought out honestly. Let me guess, Papá, you were just being a good old soldier. But for who? Who are you even with? Because this man that’s next to you right now? He certainly isn’t Italian!” I gesture to the man who only watches me with a blank expression. There isn’t an ounce of emotion in his gaze as his eyes follow me.

“Pippa,” Papá calls for me, but I spin on my heels and run. Pulling my phone out, I dial one of the few people I *think* I can trust. But truthfully, I doubt there is anyone in the world I can.

“Nico,” I say, tears spilling over my lashes when he answers the call on the second ring. “Can you come pick me up, please?”



With trembling hands, I pull the trigger, watching as the bullet flies through the air and clips the edge of the glass bottle. The wind whips around me, leaving a bitter kiss on my skin. Anger fuels me when I reload and aim again.

My fingers are turning blue from the cold, but I don't care. To go inside would be to sit with my thoughts and face the lies and the devastation ... and I can't. So I'll stay right here, for as long as my body can withstand. For longer, if possible, and perhaps the night will take me away with it.

Another bullet and another misfire. A frustrated curse spills from my mouth. I used to be so fucking good with a gun, but now that's ruined too—like everything else in my life. Or maybe that was another lie. Maybe I wasn't as good as I believed but everyone told me so to keep me happy.

Fuck them and fuck fake happiness.

That's all my life has been.

Fake.

Footsteps echo behind me, heavy boots crumpling the leaves. I don't turn around. Let them come. No doubt it's yet another person who wants to sell me lies and heartache.

I aim again, letting out a slow breath before I pull the trigger. One second, then two before the bullet hits the neck of

the bottle. Glass splinters 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 over 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 while 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 we 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 before grabbing 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 the 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 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 sound rattles me, my hand trembling again as heat crawls across my chest and up my neck.

“Then you clearly don’t know me well at all,” I tell him, tensing my arm 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 open. You want to shoot me? Shoot me. I dare you.”

His eyes lock on mine. A wide crooked smile sits on his lips, so fucking 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, mumbling an *I told you so*. And like a bull to a red rag, I'm done for. Before I can process or have a conscious thought, my hand raises.

The bullet tears through his shoulder, leaving a wetness seeping through his shirt. My hair lashes over my face, the wind swinging it around wildly, but all I can focus on is him.

Dark eyes follow the lines of my body, his smile remaining. There isn't a flicker of pain in his features—only amusement. He hums, pulling his full bottom lip into his mouth. “You did it. You fucking shot me.”

“Just be grateful I didn't aim for your head,” I tell him, shrugging as I lower my arm, letting the gun hang limp at my side.

“That wasn't very nice, Princess.”

“Don't act all high and mighty, you goaded me into it, and you know it. Besides, a little blood never hurt anyone, did it?” I ask, using the same words he did in the restaurant days ago.

“Repeating my words, are we? When did we become that couple?”

“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 between us. 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 calling me to safety. Leonardo watches me, his eyes never leaving mine as I take another step, then another. The smile on his face widens, becoming vicious as my movements become more hurried.

So close, and yet so far.

The minute I run, unsteady on my heels, he catches me by the waist and pulls me against him. Cold metal touches my bare thigh where the split on my dress has fallen open, and a sharp sting follows the trail as he drags his knife up my skin, marking me lightly.

“I’m going to have a scar, Princess,” he tells me, his breath fanning my face as he whispers in my ear, “It’s only fair that I get to scar you in return. Don’t you agree?”

His words should terrify me, and they do—but not because of what’s he’s threatening, and not even because his knife presses in harder, slicing deeper into my skin—no, what’s terrifying is the way my stomach dips with lust and 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 until he spins around and slams me into the trunk of a tree. Bark digs into my back, 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 before moving lower. “Or here,” he mutters, slicing my dress down the middle and pressing the point into my chest.

“Or even here.” He drops to his knees, not caring for the cold grass as he grabs the two parts of my dress, ripping it open until it drapes off me like a coat. The tip of his knife presses against my underwear, right where I ache the most for him. “Would you like that, Princess? For me to mark you here?”

Shaking my head, I close my eyes and my head rolls over the trunk 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 when he slices my underwear and presses his blade to my bare skin. The cold metal paired with the heat pouring off me is overwhelming.

“Well, because you asked so nicely.” The knife disappears, and disappointment floods me, though he quickly replaces the metal with his 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 wood behind me, my nails digging in.

In this moment, he knows exactly what I need and gives it without hesitation. I don’t need to think, or talk, or do

anything but exist for his touch right 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 white spots flicker in my vision. There's a sharp pain on my thigh, and warm liquid trails down my leg, but all I can focus on is the sensations at my clit.

I tremble when he groans, the vibrations going straight to my clit until I'm writhing under the pressure. My orgasm builds, coiling inside me. My mouth opens on a gasp when he grazes my clit with his teeth before sucking the bud into his mouth.

The feeling at my thigh remains. The pain and pleasure merging until something snaps. My climax claims me, but he never stops. He continues to fuck me with his tongue, lapping at every inch of my pussy.

It's almost too much, but just before a second orgasm can overtake me, he pulls back. His lips glisten with my arousal, which only causes my pussy to pulse. His tongue swipes over his lips, a groan slipping out of him as he tastes the 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. When he pulls them back, crimson liquid coats them, and while the sight should make me nervous and uncomfortable—I only moan when he sucks them into his mouth, tasting my blood.

Biting my lips, I look down at my thigh. There's too much blood for me to see what he's etched into my skin, but it's deep enough that there is no doubt he got his wish of scarring me.

"Leonardo," I start, my voice laced with lust as he stands. Before I can say anything more, his hand clamps around my neck harshly, his grip unrelenting as he cuts off my airway.

"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, aren't you? 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 cum on my dick and strangle me with your pussy while I claim every single piece of you, aren't you?"

He loosens his hand for a moment, and I greedily suck air into my burning lungs.

"Answer me," he demands, his free hand trailing up my thigh until he 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."

"Yesss," I hiss through clenched teeth, already on the edge of orgasm while he sinks his fingers inside me, again and again. His thumb finds my clit, 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. The mixture of blood and my own juices is euphoric,

and I lick at him, greedily cleaning his fingers so I can taste myself.

“Such a good little slut for me, aren’t you?” He steps back, only 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 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.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I groan when he lines himself to my entrance, teasing me.

“Leo, please,” I beg, and he needs no further encouragement as he drives his hips forwards and thrusts inside of me. He leans forwards, his lips claiming mine in a vicious kiss. I moan into his mouth when he drives himself deeper, his hips slapping against mine.

“Touch yourself, Princess,” he tells me, moving his lips over my jaw and down my neck. He sucks on my pulse point before his teeth close around the skin. I snake my hand between us, my movements unsure when I press against my clit. “Do you feel that? Feel the way you pulse around me? You’re going to come all over me, aren’t you. Soak me in your juices and claim my dick as yours.”

Fuckkk.

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 him, pulling him deeper, if even possible, as my orgasm racks my body.

My heart pounds against my chest and blood rushes to my ear as my climax continues. He moves quicker, his eyes darkening when he locks them on mine. My hands move to his head, my nails digging into his scalp as he 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 of me before he spills his cum. A groan slips from his mouth, his teeth clamping on my neck hard as his orgasm takes over. He stays there for a long moment, his breaths coming in harsh pants. “You’re mine, Princess. There’s no going back now.”



I wake in an unfamiliar bed, again—though instead of feeling unsettled, all I feel is comfort. Nico kindly let Leonardo and I stay at his house last night, with muttered promises he would tell no one where we are.

He suggested it might be wise to sleep in separate rooms; Leonardo kindly reminded him he was a grown adult at thirty-four and could make his own decisions. I’ve given up on denying or trying to rationalise my feelings when it comes to him.

There is little point. I'm realising that whatever Leonardo wants, he gets. And he just so happens to want me. I only hope I can handle the fallout when 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 at the sight of him beside me. He lies on his back, one arm thrown across his bare chest and the other resting over his face. His dark hair is mussed from me running my fingers through it, and his chest rises slowly as he snores softly.

There is still little I know about him, and yet my heart twists when he mumbles in his sleep and reaches out for me. A satisfied smirk quirks at his lips when he finds my waist. Laughter spills out of me as he drags me over him until I'm plastered against his chest, and he hums happily.

"Good morning," he whispers into my hair before pressing a kiss at the crown of my head. If I wasn't already convinced this man will crush me into a thousand pieces when he's finished with me, the crooked smile on his face and the way he leans over and claims my mouth in the gentlest of kisses does 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. The pads of my fingers linger on his shoulder, a flush spreading on my cheeks when I take in the bruising and the mark left on his skin from my bullet. I didn't think much of it last night—far too preoccupied with other

things—but I’m glad to see that despite the blood that poured from the wound, it’s little 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 us 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. One hand grips my hip harshly while his other 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 moves inside me slowly. He works himself in and out, my orgasm building slower than ever before. But when it claims me, taking over my body with trembles, it’s the most intense thing I’ve ever felt. I’m overwhelmed in sensations as I throb

around him, my fingernails dragging over his back as he continues to thrust inside of me slowly.

After long minutes, he moves faster, a groan sliding from his lips when his dick pulses inside of me, his own climax taking over his body.

When he rests his forehead against mine, our laboured breaths blend, heating my face.

“You never answered my question,” I tell him, reaching up to cup his cheek. My thumb strokes the stubble there, and I bite my lip when he lets out 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 on his back, tucking me into the crook of his arm, I can’t help but wonder how 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 he has 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 crimson staining, I can see an L and a C etched into my skin, and it causes my pussy to throb. I twist my hands in the hem of

the shirt he gave me to throw over my naked body, the material pooling at my waist.

“Leonardo Cataldi,” he tells me with a satisfied smirk on his face when I ask what it means. *Well, Christ on a cracker, the motherfucker scarred his initials into my thigh.* “And to answer your earlier question, no. I don’t believe in soulmates.”

My 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 too overwhelming to deny that there has to be something driving it.

“Don’t look so forlorn,” he murmurs, swiping the last of the antiseptic cream on my thigh before pushing down on them with his hands until he’s standing between my spread legs. “I said I don’t believe in soulmates, and I don’t. What I do believe in, though, is people.”

He cups my neck, his fingers threading into my hair as he pulls my head backwards so I’m staring up at him. “And make no mistake, Princess. You are my person.”

I close the distance between us, my arms falling over his shoulders as I press my lips against his. Those words out of his mouth are more than I could have hoped for, just knowing that maybe he feels even a little for me of what I feel for him. I grip his hair, tugging him into me to deepen the kiss, while 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. I lick my lips, hopping down and pushing against his

stomach until he backs into the closed door. “I want to do something for you now.”

“Is that so?” he mumbles, his breath shaking as I trail my fingers over his bare chest, lowering myself until I’m on my knees before him and hooking my thumbs in the waistband of his grey joggers.

“Always with the grey joggers.”

“I heard a thing or two about women liking them.” He shrugs, his pupils dilating when I pull the material past his firm thighs, letting them fall into a puddle at his ankles. “What are you doing, Princess?”

“I recall you telling me that you taste real fucking good. I’m just testing that theory.”

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 as I open my mouth to guide him inside. My tongue traces his head for a beat, my pussy aching at the groaned curses falling from his mouth, before I suck in my cheeks, pulling him deeper.

His dick hits the back of my throat, causing me to gag before he slides himself out slowly. Looking up, I heat at the way his eyes are laser focused 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 again. 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 didn't know possible.

“Are you wet for me?” he asks when I writhe on my knees, my body seeking release as he seeks his on my tongue. I try to speak, but he pulls me into his groin, choking me on his dick. He's not wrong. He does taste real 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 that I know is pooling on the floor right now, and use it on your clit until you 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 on my throat continues, his dick pulsing with each thrust.

My clit tingles when I touch it, and I moan around him, which only makes 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.

He tugs on his length, his fist moving rapidly over the shaft for another minute before a hot jet of cum hits my face, coating my cheeks, and running down to my chest.

“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 away with Leonardo in Nico's house, pretending as if my life will not fall apart the minute I step back into it.

We've laughed, we've held hands, we've fucked, and even made love. And 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 as he stares at me. His face wrinkles in sadness, his eyes dipping when I lock my 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 he can't. He's still behind me, standing at my back, but there's a distance between us now.

“You don't get to call me that,” I snap, shaking my head in annoyance as my heart splinters at the sorrow etched into his

features. “You lost the right 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 hand out, stopping him in his tracks.

“No.” Pulling in a deep breath and straightening my back. “Just no. I 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, and 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 right now, he deserves nothing more.

He opens his mouth once more, no doubt ready to plead with me again, but Leonardo takes over the conversation. “I got some news on Alexei and his 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, unable 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. *What a fucking joke.* “You have the same mum.”

“Do they know?” I ask him, dreading his answer. It’s one thing to know 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 even more at his admission. “Don’t blame her, Pippa. I swore her to secrecy. 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.

Was I always just a pawn in this game between two Mafias?

Hours later, my sisters stand in a line, each looking at me heartbreakingly as the plane stirs behind them. One week they’ve been in New York. A week that was supposed to be healing and help put back together some of those 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. They each 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’m so sorry, P,” she whispers into my ears, her hands gripping the back of my jumper. “You *are* our sister, don’t ever doubt that. Please. Promise me that you won’t push us away.”

“She’s right,” Elisa agrees, joining us with tears in her eyes. My mouth opens, ready to make the promises to them, but the words don’t come. My 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.

I pat my sisters on the back, smiling softly at them as they wipe away the tears on my cheeks. “Give me a minute.”

Moving over to her, I hold my hands out to her. A lone tear falls over her lashes, the sight breaking my heart for the girl who never cries. “Please don’t hate me.”

“I could never,” I tell her truthfully, squeezing her hands tightly. “I’m mad, Sof. But you are my sister, and I believe in you. So I trust that you didn’t tell me because you felt you couldn’t.”

“I’m so sorry, Pippa. You are the light in all of our lives, and I hate him for what he made me promise. I hate him.”

“I know.” Pulling her into me, I fold my arms around her. She’s always hated Papá, almost as much as she loves him. For as long as I can remember, they’ve never seen eye to eye and argue more than any of us. It’s only now 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 answers or give him anything back. But he’s Papá, and we only have him. Forgive him. Please. For me.”

Nodding, she squeezes me once before pulling away and straightening her back. Sofia is the strongest person I know, but also the most stubborn. If she can forgive him for what he

made her promise ... then maybe one day I can find some forgiveness to give too.

“Time to go,” Sofia calls over my head, her words directed at Elisa and Rosa. The three of them give me a final hug, stealing my breath with the strength they pour into me. Whispered apologies, more tears and promises of a better tomorrow are all I’m left with when they pull away, stalking towards the plane and leaving me alone on the tarmac.

My father steps out of the car then, holding the metal frame of the door for a long moment when I turn to face him. His eyes are glassy, his mouth turned down while he stares at me over the runway. He looks older than when he 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 okay. 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. That same ominous feeling that struck me on my wedding day. Rain pours, 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 back 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 one here but us. Nico waits in the car,

ready to take me back, but on this runway it's me and the man I thought to be my father my whole life.

So why do I feel sick?

Why do I feel the eyes of someone, of many someone's watching us?

"Papá, please," I urge, my eyes widening the closer he gets. "Get back in the car. Something's wrong."

He reaches me finally, his hands curling over my shoulders and squeezing gently. "I love you. Always. Remember that."

"There's something wrong," I whisper, repeating myself. "You need to go back."

"I can't, bambina. The wheels are turning, and we can only go forwards."

"Why does it sound like you're saying goodbye to me?"

"I hope you can forgive me one day," he says, squeezing my shoulders once more before leaning in and pressing a kiss to my forehead. Tears spring to my eyes once more, spilling over my lashes as he pulls away.

One step backwards, then another. A sad smile passes over his lips, and he gives me a small wave before spinning on his heels and starting towards the plane once more. Only this time, he doesn't make it far.

A shot rings through the air, the whizz of a bullet passing my head before it strikes his stomach, sending him flying to the ground.

A vicious scream tears through me, my throat burning under the pressure. Pain reverberates up my spine when my knees buckle and slap against the concrete. Blood seeps through Papá's shirt, staining the white in a crimson coating. My heart shatters into a million pieces, watching as he clutches his abdomen, his face contorted in pain.

Hands clutch my arms, trying to pull me up but my body refuses to cooperate. Everything shuts down as tears roll over my cheeks, my skin 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. Or 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 could ever be ready for the day he leaves me behind.

Hushed voices carry over me, but the words don't penetrate me. White noise is all I can hear. Men rush to Papá, coming out of nowhere, their hands pressing against his wound to stem the stream of blood that continues to leak through the hole in his stomach.

Time moves slowly—so fucking slowly—as I watch his life leave him. His eyes flutter closed, and in that moment, all I see is darkness. A world without 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 into a strong chest. The scent of sandalwood hits me instantly, though the usual 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 fail me as sobs continue to take over my body. He holds me tightly against his 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.



A sea of black stares at me when I walk into the church. Men and women sitting in the pews, their eyes focused on the black casket at the end of the aisle. Antonio walks beside me, his hand on my lower back as he pushes me towards the front row.

Appearances matter, apparently—lest me losing my father be a grieving experience and not a public fucking spectacle. My sisters weep, tears spilling down their faces, leaving streaks in their make-up.

All my tears dried up the moment we got back to the penthouse after it all happened. I locked myself in the bedroom, hid under the covers, and refused to come out until today.

Everyone came knocking. Demanding my presence, but I couldn't give it to them. All I feel is anger. I'm angry at Papá for lying, and I'm even more angry that he abandoned me here to deal with the fall out.

It's funny when someone dies.

People you never even knew grieve them, as though they meant something to the deceased. And maybe they did. But honestly, who gives a fuck. Men I've never met offer handshakes to my *husband*; passing their condolences on to him as if losing a father-in-law he never even got to know is somehow painful for him.

The only saving grace in my father's death is that Antonio hasn't come near me in days. Hasn't spoken of getting me pregnant or tried to force himself on me. Small mercies exist.

"Pippa," Sofia urges, holding her hand out to me when I stop at the end of 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, the goodbye feels final. Blowing out a shuddering breath, I ignore the eyes 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 lean over. A single tear spills over my lashes, breaking free while I fight to hold myself together. I press a kiss against the casket, steam cascading over the metal as I exhale.

“Dormi bene, Papá. Mi mancherai per sempre,” I whisper for only his ears, 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 and 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 thighs bouncing uncomfortably.

“You forget your place, wife.”

“No, I know my place,” I tell him, a vicious smirk lifting at my lips. “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 I only 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 them. Especially when Antonio clenches his jaw, his eyes darkening as he stares ahead.

The fact of the matter is, I don’t know why I’m still here.

Sure, I signed a contract, but I did it to keep my father happy. What's the point now? He's gone, yet I'm still here.

"Pippa," Sofia snaps, her voice taut with frustration while she tugs my hand. "Not here."

Her anger is understandable, while laughable really, considering she herself said she hated Papá on the day he died. But I let her think she's won and keep quiet for the ceremony.

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.

But through it all, my anger continues to rise.

It's inappropriate and beyond ridiculous; yet I can't stop the anger burning inside of me.

My father would be so disappointed in me.

But he's dead.

So what does it matter?

Sofia keeps a hold of my hand through it all, never letting her grip relent as the tears stream over her face. Rosa and Elisa hug each other close, their eyes red and puffy as they struggle to keep themselves together. Antonio remains beside me, looking bored.

The only person I don't see as I move my gaze over the church is the one person I want to see. Leonardo. When he dropped me off at the penthouse, I'd expected him to come inside—to offer some consolation—but nothing. 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 anything real. Even if I ran from Antonio, he can't live a life in hiding from the Italians all 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 casket for a long beat, my heart thundering against my chest as Sofia pulls on 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 tears have finally dried, but her glassy eyes are haunting as they watch Sofia, 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 side at the lost expression etched into her features and the way she lifts her shoulder. 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 haunt me forever as she pleads with our eldest sister. “Please, Sofia, you have to know. We need you to tell us what we do.”

Sofia stays silent, the lack of answer more telling than any words she could find.

She doesn't know ... and if *she* doesn't know, then we're truly fucked.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A party reins in the nightclub we've been dragged to. A nightclub for a wake. Because where else would you host one? I guess I can 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 Papá.

"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, though we have kept in touch through text. Thankfully, Margo and her were both 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 forced in my hand earlier. "I'm supposed to be sad, right?"

"But you aren't?" she asks, tilting her head and watching me with curious eyes.

"No, I am, I think. But it's blanketed in rage. I'm so angry, Felicity. All the time."

“That makes sense, Pips,” she tells me. “There’s no right or wrong way to grieve. You loved your father, but he also lied to you and left you with no 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 over the sea of guests. Most are laughing or talking loudly. Very few look upset 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 plays 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 bite my tongue to stop the words spewing from my mouth. Felicity gasps beside me, and I can feel the burn of her eyes on my profile, though I refuse to look at her. We fall quiet, the silence deafening, though, I’m only grateful she doesn’t ask me to elaborate.

My anger towards him is unwarranted, I know that; it’s hard to put into words 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 look like—and for that, I hate him. I hate him for giving me a glimpse into a future 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 standing over in the corner, talking quietly amongst themselves. Watching them together, the way they cling to one another cracks something inside of me. They will always have each other, and I’m grateful for that ... but who do I have now?

“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 doing little to stave off the cold.

I brush my palms over my black trousers, wiping away the lint that sits there before following Felicity to her car. Her little white Audi comes to life, heat pouring through the vents as she pulls away from the nightclub, leaving the wake behind. The sky cries, coating the world in darkness. It’s fitting for the day and yet depressing all the same.

“Where are we going?” I ask when we’re still driving an hour later. We’ve long since left the city lights behind and are now driving down a dark side street that looks like something straight from a horror film.

She doesn’t answer, just keeps barrelling down the road until we come up 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 from a boarded-up

window. Anxiety creeps inside of me, coiling in my stomach when she switches the engine off.

“Felicity.” She twists her face to mine, her eyes lowered as she blows out a deep breath.

“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 so sorry.”

“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 family, Pippa. I couldn’t let him hurt them.”

“Felicity, what the hell is going on?”

“I hope you can forgive me one day.”

“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 filling with tears as the rain soaks us both. “Talk to me.”

“I can’t,” she whispers, pulling out of my grip before closing the car door. She walks to the driver side, her body trembling as she slides back into her seat. The click of locks sounds, and she looks at me once more through the windows, shaking her head and mouthing a silent apology.

My eyes widen, watching as she pulls away, leaving me in the middle of nowhere.

Alone.

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 seeps through them, pinning them against my skin.

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.

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 Felicity dropped me outside of. Whatever she was apologising for, I'm pretty sure it's inside of there—which tells me I need to run in the other direction and not look back.

Unfortunately for me, I've never been good at running.

The sound of heels clicking on the concrete echoes down the street, swallowed up in the roar of thunder as I make my way towards the door. 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 to attention in the darkness before me. The space is barren and silent. Nothing for the eye to see as I traipse across the floor, moving towards where the light flickers in the distance.

Dread trickles over my spine, my hand moving to grip the gun tucked into the waistband of my trousers. One of the many things I learnt from my father, never leave the house unarmed.

Coming up to a staircase, I pull the weapon free, clicking the safety off before moving up the first step. Before moving to New York, I lived my life fearless. Confident and strong. But over the months, something changed inside of me.

Life hit me like a tonne of bricks, smashing my perfectly built confidence into a million pieces. And now, when I need to find myself again, I feel like that same little girl that first walked into the shooting range with Papá.

Scared.

My hand trembles around my gun, my breaths falling out of me in heavy pants while I try to pull myself together. My heart slows as I take the final steps. A steel door waits ahead of me, the flickering light spilling from the slight opening.

Closing my eyes, I pull in a deep breath, holding the oxygen in my lungs for a long moment. Something tickles at the back of my mind, a memory from being eleven. The first day I ever shot a gun.

The words Papá whispered to me.

For me.

“Sii coraggiosa, mia dolce ragazza. Solo tu puoi salvarti quando arrivano.”

Be brave, my sweet girl. Only you can save yourself when they come.

The memory spreads over me, filling me with warmth as I remember the man who loved me my whole life. Tears spring to my eyes, though not in sadness as expected.

He taught me.

He trained me.

My whole life, he led me along this pathway, preparing me for the day 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 steel, the door opening slowly.

"Hello, wife." Antonio's voice follows the sound of cocking guns, all 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 upon a time 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 couldn't defeat.

But what if life is worth the fight?

What if when we're truly faced with death, we choose to live instead?

"Take a seat." He gestures to a rickety wooden chair to the left of me, 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 to the floor when my arms are pulled backwards, the grip on them unrelenting as the feel of metal

closes over my wrists, keeping them pinned behind me. “And it wasn’t a question.”

An ache forms in my shoulder blades at the position of my arms, but I bite my tongue to stop from wincing. Never show them fear or pain. People like Antonio 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 as he continues to smile at me. His legs are wide, and he lowers his arms over them, his hands limp over his thighs.

“I’m sure you have questions.” He cocks his head, leaning forwards as he speaks. I clamp my mouth shut, biting my tongue. “I wanted to make this union easier for us both, you know. Muddle through life together, pop out a kid or two, and live peacefully.”

He chuckles, though it’s a brittle sound with no amusement. His eyes never leave my face, but he cocks his head, his tongue swiping over his lips.

“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 twist 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 you 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 very 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, my eyes falling to the floor.

"Yes," he answers, his voice cold. "There was something between the two of you that day, it was palpable, and I can't compete with that kind of thing. I don't even want to. I don't want your love, or even your loyalty, Pippa."

"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 your father." Bristling as he mentions Papá, my gaze snaps back to him. There's no smile on his face anymore. He looks angry, and my heart slows as he aims that at me. "Darius Marchesi. A former Capo who asked my father to pardon him from his role in exchange for you, when you turned twenty-one. Did he ever tell you why?"

I shake my head, unable to find the words as I bite my tongue. The taste of copper hits my tongue, warm and bitter. He laughs, the sound brittle, before he continues, "There are very few ways a Capo can leave his post. Usually none of them are good. But with you, Darius had an ace up his sleeve. A power up, if you will. The bastard daughter of the Bratva."

I tighten my hands into fists at my back, ignoring the way the metal cuts into my skin. My breaths come out heavy as he confirms what I thought that night at the casino. Aleksandr isn't a normal man who stumbled into this world. But still, nothing adds up.

“My father was more than happy to let your family leave, knowing one day you'd be back in our clutches and we'd have the ultimate power over the Russians with you. But that isn't what happened, is it?” He looks at me expectantly, his brow raised as he waits for my response. But I have nothing.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Traditore.”

Traitor. My heart thumps against my chest, my vision blurring while blood rushes to my ears. My skin becomes clammy, my legs shaking as understanding pours through me.

“For sixteen years, your father worked behind our backs, colluding with the Bratva—your *real* father. The moment you stepped into that church, the Russians came. Because of him. What happens to traitors, Pippa?”

Shaking my head, I fight the tears that threaten to spill over my lashes.

“Answer me,” he barks, rushing over to me and fisting my hair before pulling my head back.

“They die.” The words slip out in a whisper, my voice cracking. 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?

“Do you know how easy it was to kill him?” he asks, shrugging as if taking the life of my father was nothing more than a day at the office for him—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.”

“I was there,” I grit through clenched teeth, blinking ferociously to stem 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 stepping back. He rubs his hands together, sighing almost comically when he’s finished. “I would have killed you too, you know?”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because we’re married, Pippa. And you owe me a child.” He stands, hands running over the lapels of his black jacket before he turns away and starts towards the staircase.

“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, Russian blood runs through those veins of yours, making you the heir to the Bratva. Half Italian, half Russian. You’re the most powerful person in this world, Pippa, making

me the most powerful person the moment you birth a child of mine.”

Deafening silence follows the retreat of Antonio and his men. When the door closes behind them, trapping me in this room, my arms bound to the chair, I finally let the tears fall. My mind whirls around, confusing me more 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 say he was lying, that the words from his mouth were pure fiction. But the more I sit on them, the more I believe them to be fact.

But that doesn’t stop the questions. Questions I can no longer get answers to, because I refused to hear my papá when he begged me to listen. Instead, I ran away. I hid like a child, scared of the truth.

Why would the Russians let me go, let me live with an Italian family if my 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 Antonio and tie our two families together?

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 bindings. A trickle of warm liquid runs over my

hands, a sting of pain following the metal cutting into my skin. My gun stares at me from the floor, my one chance of freedom beyond my reach. But still, I have to try.

I press my heels into the floor, pushing myself backwards until my weight topples and the chair falls to the floor. My head bounces off the concrete, white spots spreading across my vision, while my arms remain trapped at my back.

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 clear my vision before looking over the room. There is nothing but the broken chair, the one Antonio sat on, and my gun on 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, coating 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 into waves down her back. A simple black dress covered her body, stopping mid-thigh, the material loose and

flowy. Her face was bare of make-up with a natural flush spread over her cheeks as she laughed at something her sister Elisa said to her. Even then, long before I knew what it meant, the urge to protect her crawled into my skin.

I saw her again at seventeen, dressed in jeans and an oversized hoodie while shopping for Christmas presents with her oldest sister, Sofia. Her hair 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 clinging to every inch of her lightly tanned skin. Her hair was pin-straight down her back, the brown shining under the fluorescent lights. Men circled her like vultures, her sister Rosa encouraging the attention—but she was too lost to 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 her for years.

The urge to go to her was too strong to resist, and I stalked through the crowd of moving bodies. She looked up at me, her deep brown eyes eager 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 alcohol. But she remembers me, deep down. I saw it when I stepped into St. James church in London two months ago.

In her white dress, with fearful eyes as she took me in when I walked down that aisle. The glimmer of mischief in her expression when I stood beside Antonio. The ghost of a smile when I caught her gaze. The swipe of her tongue when I let my eyes travel over her. The way her heart pounded when I held her in my arms on the dancefloor.

Tiny interactions on the most important day of her life ... important not for the reason she thinks.

The sound of a door slamming pulls me from the memories, a hurried voice following after.

"Leo," Nico breathes, waiting for me to turn to him.

I tap the man in front of me on the face, my knife nicking his skin beautifully before I pull the chains taut to his neck again. Turning slowly, I drop my knife onto the table beside me. My brow raises at Nico, waiting. "She's gone."

"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 hopeful eyes. The poor bastard. For years I've been working against Antonio. Turning his men 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 he only saw what he wanted to see. Idiot. Gio was one of the last few. If he truly 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 shrink into himself, 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 seem so easy. A simple swipe of your knife, and they die.

But that's fictitious.

Layers of thick muscle come first, and you have to break through all of that before you can reach the carotid artery. It's a gruesome task. For many, they'd rather take the easy route. A bullet to the head is preferable in this world.

I don't like easy.

His head lolls, blood pouring from the open wound. A satisfied smile pulls 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 blood before facing Nico once more. He looks wary as he watches me stalk across 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. It's why he had her father killed. He needed the

distraction of a funeral to get her alone. Get her away from me.

Letting him take her goes against everything intrinsic inside of me. But it's a necessary evil. Just like letting him think she was his wife. The moment I first held her in my arms, I knew she could never be his, no matter what their contract stated.

I was already working against him long before then, working with the Bratva after he took something from me. Something that was never his. And 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 no choice.

There are few people I'll stand at the back of, guarding with my life.

Only her.

My wife.

Switching out marriage contracts was easy. A simple slip of hand, a signature from myself, and the deed was done. However, I still had to let him think he had her for a little while—even when the thought of them together 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 quiet of my house. I pull it out, glancing at the coordinates flashing against the screen for a moment before lifting my head.

“You ready, Boss?”

My smile widens at Nico’s question as he steps beside me. I was born fucking ready.

New York City is mine.

And with Pippa at my side, we’ll rule the city together, the entire force of *my* Italian Mafia and *her* Russian Bratva behind us.

Till Death Do Us Part.

To be continued ...

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 day 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 how it needs to be. 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 Solemn Vow duet ... *coming soon!*

Follow the link to pre order now
<https://mybook.to/FBFWOSV>

OTHER TITLES BY VIOLET

Eyam Green Academy.

Play By The Rules (Book 1)

Play In The Dark (Book 2 coming soon!)

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Till Death Do Us Part

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To you, the reader, thank you! Thank you for taking the time to read *Till Death Do Us Part*. There are very few words that can explain how truly 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 doubts for a moment when I changed course and started writing *Play By The Rules* when I should have been writing this book. I definitely had my doubts, but finally these two were ready to talk and there's no way I could have got their story out if it wasn't for your unwavering support over the weeks. The meltdowns, 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 know I needed! Love you all!

Gee Gee and Flockster. I have to thank you separately and for very different reasons, but I'm going to try and keep this short and sweet ... and this is definitely the last book I'll do it in, because I'm pretty sure you don't read these anyway.

Gee, you are my smut approver, my arse kicker and my deprestie. There truly isn't a way this story would exist without you ... and if it did, it would be the cleanest romance ever and nobody wants that. I tolerate you always!

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 daughter and fur baby. When she isn't writing, you can find her tucked up on the couch, wrapped in a duvet with a glass of wine in one hand and a book in the other.