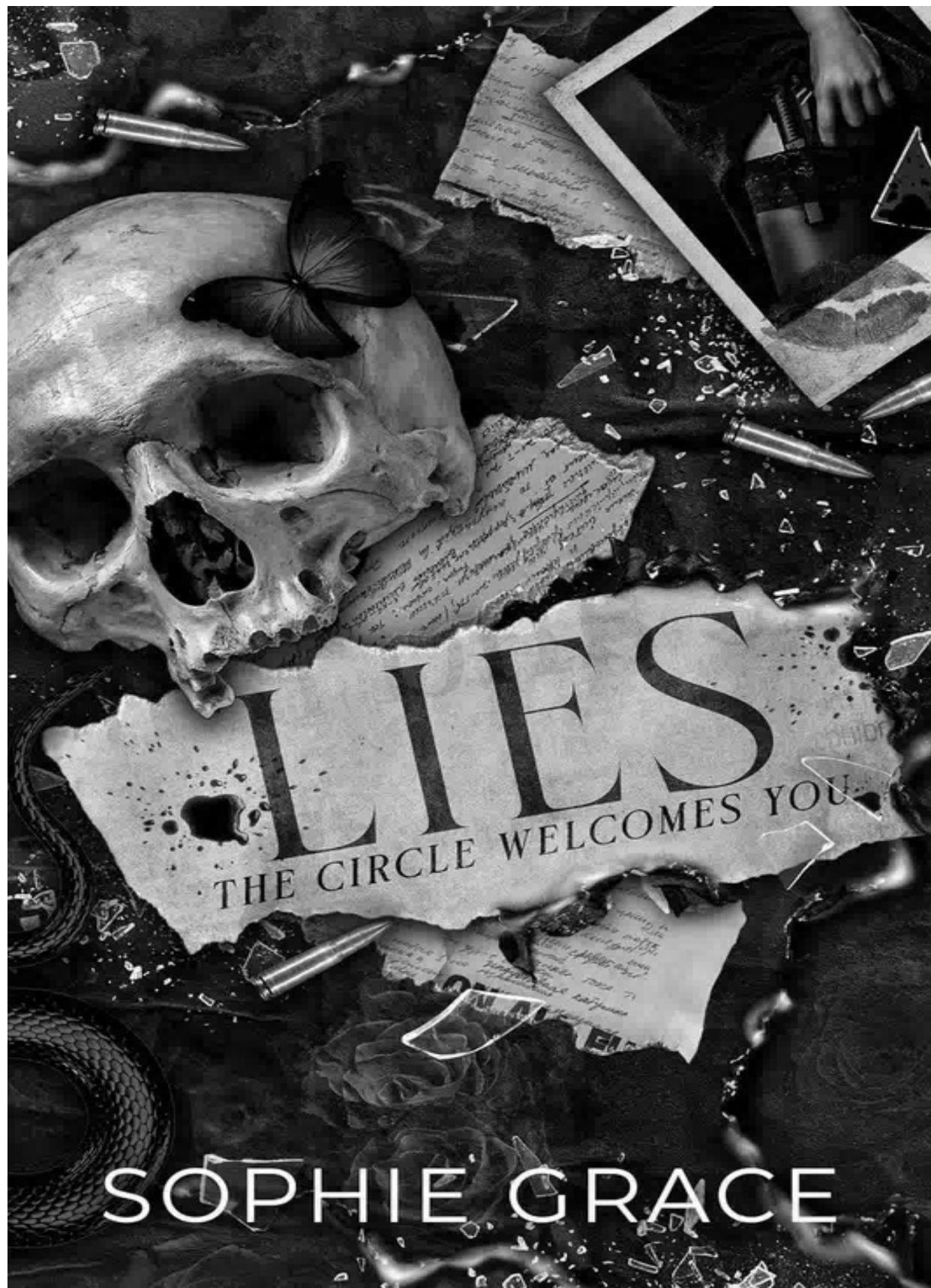


# LIES

THE CIRCLE WELCOMES YOU

SOPHIE GRACE



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# TRIGGER WARNINGS

Torture, murder, blood, gore, arson, graphic sexual scenes, anal, breath play, bondage, forced proximity, attempted rape (not between main characters), sexual assault, kidnapping, human trafficking, drugging, substance abuse (mentioned), blackmail, electrocution (mentioned), organised crime, gun violence, psychological abuse, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, revenge, loss of a loved one, cheating (not between main characters), cancer (mentioned), traumatic events, PTSD and emotional turmoil.

*Lies* is the second instalment to *The Circle Welcomes You* duet. *Secrets* must be read first. Please be aware this book is darker than the first. Please take these warnings seriously.

To stay true to these characters, the story is written in British English.

Your mental health matters.

Love, Sophie

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# PLAYLIST

everything I wanted – Halsey

Nightmare – Halsey

Arcade – Duncan Laurence

Ethereal – TXMY

Power – Isak Danielson

STUCKINMYBRAIN – Chase Atlantic

NDA – Billie Eilish

BODY – SYML

As the World Caves In – Sarah Cothran

All For Us – Labrinth, Zendaya

Breath of Life – Florence + The Machine

I'm Gonna Be – Sleeping At Last

Start A War – Klergy

Gethsemane – Sleep Token

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*You look so good on your knees crawling back to me.*

*Good girl.*

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*Your bedroom light's still on, princess.  
That bed not soft enough without me in it?*

*Sincerely,*

*Harry St. James*

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*"These violent delights have violent ends."*  
– William Shakespeare

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# ONE

*Gigi*

I have plans to kill my mother, and *no one* is getting in my way.

I'm teetering on the edge of breaking point, haywire emotions dangerously close to tipping the scales of my sanity. I refuse to bring forward anything other than unmistakable rage as I narrow my gaze on the doors of my family home.

I can't think of anything. Nothing other than the fact every person who's supposedly cared for me has lied. That's all they do. They always fucking lie.

A single tear slips from the corner of my eye, burning my iris with white-hot pain from the wound that hasn't fully healed since Richard's brutal beating.

Richard.

My father.

The thought alone is absurd, but the signs were always there, so disgustingly obvious that I'm embarrassed by how blind and stupid I really was.

Taking me under his wing. The insistent subject changes whenever Jack was brought up in conversation. The near mirroring features Jack and I share with our mother but not our "dad." I don't know what to call him now.

Who is the stranger who's been living in my home, posing as the family man who never shared an interest in either mine or my brother's childhood?

I subconsciously rub the area of my heart as it pounds harder with thoughts of Jack. And to think Richard isn't the only secret Harry kept ...

*Harry.*

I shake my head, refusing to allow the thought of him in even momentarily.

Pushing open the front doors of the detached house, I whisper, "I'm home."

I tread through the entry hall. Dark lights give way to tall shadows as I silently make my way upstairs. The floorboards creak beneath my feet with my next step, and I freeze, awaiting the next moment, but no sound or presence follows. I straighten, inhaling a deep breath before stopping outside my mother's bedroom and pushing the ajar door open all the way.

*Empty.*

*Fuck.*

I curse and drop my head, but something to my immediate right causes me to hesitate. Jack's room stands just a few short paces away. I look towards the sealed room as if I'll be able to see straight through the door.

The answers I've been searching for all these years are ingrained in these very walls, but after my time with the Circle, I'm left only with endless questions.

How long did he know?

Did he never once consider telling me the truth?

What else was he keeping from me?

It isn't long before I'm charging into his room. I drop to my knees beside his wardrobe, tearing through the array of belongings in search of something—anything. Fuck, just a sign.

Only once was I ever brave enough to step into this room. At the calling of a dark, mysterious stranger who sealed my fate and destined me for danger. Now I'm kneeling on the beige carpet ripping through the paperwork with fiery determination.

A singular footstep sounds behind me. I wrap my hands around the baseball bat propped up against the inside of Jack's wardrobe and spin towards the door, my breath catching in the base of my throat.

Harry barely moves. Standing in the same fuck-off casual pose, with his legs slightly parted, hands pushed into his front trouser pockets, as if the world will simply stop and wait for him. I fell for that only recently. Now,

as I hold onto the bat with arms too shaky to be considered confident, I imagine smacking him around the head with it.

Past his striking exterior – the captive gaze, tousled black hair, and arms that once provided comfort – I just see a man. Someone who claims to love me, promises me the world, and yet still betrayed me. And after the descent I've suffered in recent months, perhaps I deserved it.

But that doesn't mean it hurts any less.

I drag my eyes over the length of his body, locking gazes with the piercing green stare that strikes me through the moonlit room.

"You don't want to do this."

"Where is she?" I ask, but Harry turns his head away.

My heart thumps furiously, making it a struggle to keep my emotions at bay. I hesitate, giving in to what I really want to know. "Was it really worth all the lies?"

"Listen to me," he pleads.

"You have no right to tell me what to do anymore."

"Killing your family, Gigi!" He scoffs. "Are you insane?"

*Family.* The word grates on me.

"Possibly." I shrug, repositioning my grip on the weapon if only to give myself the confidence not to drop it between us. "What?" I taunt, trying to evoke the authority that was once comforting, though everything just feels faulty now. "Are you offering to take her place?"

He chuckles low. "You couldn't lay your hands on me even if you wanted to, sweetheart."

*Sweetheart.*

That. Name.

The name both my parents call me.

The name used by my mother and Richard, a reality that still only seems plausible in the very depths of hell. At the reminder of the evil spoiling my blood, I act on pure instinct. Swinging the bat from my left hand to my right, I tighten my grasp and aim straight for Harry's side. But he responds just as fast. He catches the end of the bat in his strong hands, and the sudden jolt of the force sends a ripple through my body, screwing my thoughts momentarily.

Harry charges forwards, the length of the bat impaling my stomach as we slam into the wall behind us. The air whooshes out of me, and I barely have

a second to catch my breath before he rips the bat from my hands and drops it to the ground.

He lays his palms on the wall behind me, his hands cushioning the sides of my head. “You don’t want to do this.”

Crying out in rage and frustration, I withdraw my head before launching it forwards and connecting with his temple. My skull screams with pain, but I was prepared for the attack, and he wasn’t. Harry stumbles back, hovering his hand near his head.

I retrieve the bat from the floor, toying with it between my fingers. “I don’t think I want anything more than this.”

He backs up a few paces. “Listen to me!”

“The last time I did that you lied.” The words tumble out of me. “Say it. Tell me the other secret you’ve kept for years. I want to hear you admit it now.”

Harry pulls himself to his feet slowly, subtly shaking his head, but I manage to catch the movement.

Tears cloud my vision, and I barely have control over my own actions as I lift the bat behind me. Elbows bent, I charge the bat downwards with hard intent, straight for Harry’s skull. Darting forwards, he catches it again, his hands shaking as he holds it a few short inches from himself. Our eyes meet, and I witness the mix of emotion swarming him.

My posture weakens.

Yanking the bat away, he twists it parallel, pinning it to my neck as we tumble back against the wall again.

“Hate *me*,” he pants breathlessly. “Fight *me*.” Through the heavy expression drowning his face, I barely notice the distance that’s shortened between us. “*I’m* the one who lied to you. Hate me enough that you want to kill me—if only to spare her life. That’s what you want, right? For me to tell you I betrayed you?” Tears swarm my vision so viciously I can barely see him through it. “I. Betrayed. You. Gigi. And I’d do it again.”

An outcry slips from my throat, and I shove at his chest. Harry stumbles backwards onto the floor, catching himself on his hands. I slide down the wall slowly, trying desperately to catch my breath.

His breath falters, chest heaving. I have no doubt the push barely weakened his stance, yet he looks utterly defeated on the bedroom floor, watching with a heavy expression through his dark eyes.

“How ...?” I stop myself to catch my breath. “How long have you known?”

Harry blinks once, twice, before bowing his head. His eyes close as exhaustion seems to sweep over him.

I laugh weakly. This isn’t a recent discovery.

“You knew when you met me, didn’t you, Harry?” I press.

The only indication he heard is the tick in his jaw.

“You knew before we met at Greg’s house ...”

The vein in his neck starts to jump.

“Just tell me the truth—”

“Yes.” He whips his head towards me. “I knew Richard was your father before you met me.”

“Say it.”

He finally meets my eye. “That night at Greg’s was not the first time I met you.”

I tear my face away, blinking back the traitorous tears that flood my vision.

Harry’s voice wavers. “I thought I was doing the best for you.”

“Tell me. Tell me what happened.”

“It’s not that easy, baby,” he all but whispers. “I’ll have to tell you everything. From the beginning.”

I nod, barely trusting my voice.

There’s no question about it. I need to know the truth.

With the moonlight streaming in through the window, I’m still swept up by his captivating eyes as he whispers, “But you might not look at me the same.”

# TWO

*Harry*

## *Flashback – Aged 15*

“Tell me what I can do,” I beg. “Please.”

Greg’s body rocks with sobs as he buries himself further into the pillow. The duvet cover swamps him, hiding the frail ten-year-old boy mourning the presence of a father who’d be better off absent from our lives.

The cycle is heartbreaking. The weight loss, the dark circles under his eyes from a lack of sleep caused by the male laughter echoing up the stairs from the living room of our home.

I scoff at the word.

This is no home of ours.

My hand hovers near Greg’s back, wanting to offer him that comforting touch he so desperately craves, but each of my attempts is met with the same protest. Dad should be here, comforting him and providing the parental bond his son persistently needs. Instead the past decade has seen him grieving the loss of his wife through alcohol and drug misuse.

Though this isn’t a man grieving anymore.

This is a man enjoying a life without the responsibilities of being a husband *and* a father.

I scrunch my fist at the thought, narrowing my eyes on the lingering scars on the backs of my knuckles. They’ve faded over the years and will probably only exist as a distant memory by the time I’m in my twenties, but the reminder is embedded in my brain. The altercation I had with one of

Dad's friends who wouldn't shut his fucking mouth, and then the price I paid afterwards.

I roll my neck, pushing away the unwanted thought.

At the reminder of what we've been through, I vow, "I'll fix this."

Greg's sobs soon subside, replaced by steady breathing from exhausting himself to sleep. The heavy burden loosens from my chest only slightly.

Silently, I leave the room and pass him one final look before pulling his bedroom door to. I creep down the hallway, each step equally quiet, until I'm able to look over the banister into the crowded living room. A group of men are gathered, uncaring about the boys upstairs. Smoke wafts through the air around them, though it's not like the smoke from the cigarettes I've been stealing to ease the stress. This stench is harsher, kind of metallic.

One man throws his head back on a deep chuckle, slamming the beer bottle down on the table. The crash of glass on glass is jarring, but they make no effort to lighten their voices with Greg sleeping.

At the thought of him, I spare a slow glance over my shoulder. I can see the outline of his body under the covers, the steady movement that tells me he's still asleep. But when he wakes, we'll be repeating the cycle again.

This kid needs his father, and while I'll always be there for him, I've had enough of the adults around us refusing to pull their weight.

A sitcom plays low in the background as I make my way downstairs, flickers of light from the TV screen dancing across the walls in the dark room. They're eerie, the shapes moving across the walls like ghosts. But I hope those aren't real. Our mother doesn't deserve for her eternal peace to be tainted with such depressing images.

I pass by the sofa as I step into the kitchen. Dad lifts his chin slightly, turning his attention over his shoulder to where I stand. It's the slightest indication I still exist in his world.

*Say something.*

*Anything.*

*Ask what you can do to help the kid upstairs.*

A few seconds pass before he bows his head. Whatever hope I prayed for that some kind of interest would be shown dissipates quickly.

I pour some water, hoping to distract myself from the anger steaming up from underneath my skin.

"What's got you down, Michael?" A man with grease-stained jeans and a red checkered shirt draws in his thick brows. He slaps Dad across the back

of the head, muttering around the stick that's balanced between his lips.  
“You shoulda told me your beer was empty.”

“Fetch me another, would you?” Dad throws his arm across the back of the sofa, where it hovers above the shoulders of a woman passed out over the armrest, something sour spilling from her mouth.

The man who spoke – Brian, I think his name is – pulls himself up from the sofa with an uncomfortable groan. It takes effort, his fist closing around the edge of the table as he brings himself to his feet. Spotting me beside the sink, his mouth holding the odd-smelling cigarette morphs into a sly smile.

The glass groans in my grip as he comes closer.

He stumbles up to my side, wrapping his hand around my shoulder with a firm squeeze. “I imagine you’re the little fucker who got Daddy’s mood down.”

My jaw ticks, and I roll my shoulders back until his hand slips. Brian stumbles with the movement and his lack of balance. Features schooled, I buck my chin towards his mouth.

“What’s that?”

“Why?” He takes a strong inhale, letting the smoke fester in his throat before blowing it right in my face. “You want some?”

I bite down hard on my tongue to suppress the reflexive urge to waft the smoke away—or punch him square in the face. The cloud dissipates, giving me focus on the white powder lingering around his nostrils.

*You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.*

Anger like I’ve never known it swarms through me. Though I remain still, I feel a fire burning in my eyes as I stare directly at his bulbous nose. My heart pounds ferociously, and with each passing second of gritting my teeth I can feel myself beginning to falter.

“I ...”

*Don’t fucking do it, Harry.*

“You say something?”

A metallic taste fills my mouth as I bite down so hard I cut through skin. Brian’s mouth pulls wider, into that comical, dangerous grin, forcing the words directly out of me.

“I don’t want that shit here,” I mutter.

“Come again, son?”

*Son.*

I inwardly cringe, but I paralyse my features, refusing to give anything away. Though I can't help my sidelong glance at Dad to see if he has any emotional reaction to the word that feels foreign spoken out loud.

Nothing.

He doesn't lift his head once. Not even the bat of an eyelid.

"I don't want that shit here." My voice turns stern, rising with the anger that struggles to keep itself under the surface. "Not in this house."

A blink of his shrunken eyes indicates his initial shock, but it's quickly overtaken by a smug smile. Brian takes a step forwards, the burnt tip edging closer to my cheek, until I feel the singe of heat. I remain stoic, but my fists are near shaking at my sides as he persists, laughter slipping through his chapped lips.

Rage.

I just feel bitter fucking rage.

And if Brian takes another step closer, he'll be right in the firing line of my slipping restraint.

His smirk gives way to rotten yellow teeth. "Have a puff, *son*."

*That's it.*

I drop the glass of water and dart my hand out, locking his wrist in my closed fist. His dark gaze – which I found petrifying as a kid – falters, and his eyes dart to where I'm holding his wrist captive.

I'm just inches away from fracturing his distal radius – a bone I became well-acquainted with after our run-in a few years ago.

"Not in this house," I state, the words clear and unforgiving. "Are we clear?"

Other than the laughter from that rerun of *Friends* playing through the TV, silence swarms the room.

"I said ..." I step closer, the smashed glass fragments cracking under my feet. But I feel nothing. "Are. We. Clear?"

There's a moment of pause before Brian blinks, and shocked laughter rumbles from his chest. "Michael, control your kid. He's fucking insane—"

I hear the crack of a bone as I twist his wrist. I force my weight down to snap the joint, applying further pressure as Brian drops to his knees with a wail of a noise. With my opposing hand, I force his head down too, pressing his cheek directly into the broken pieces of glass scattered across the floor. Blood spills over the dirty tiles as I tangle my fingers in his dark hair, forcing him further into the sharp fragments.

“Just so we’re clear ...” I bring my mouth closer to his ear, but I direct my focus on Dad, who finally spares me a bit of the attention that’s so hard to receive. “Don’t ever associate me with that cunt again.”

Dad’s expression is a mixture of shock, anger, and perhaps an inch of pride, but I choose to ignore it. Cautiously, he rises to his feet with his hands outstretched like he’s seeking a truce somewhere in this odd middle ground. His voice is wary, as if he’s trying to sober himself up quickly, but I know that’s not true.

“Harry ...”

“Don’t,” I warn, my hands shaking near a large piece of shredded glass. It would only take a fraction of a second to impale Brian’s neck. There’s an artery where any type of damage would be fatal.

Dad’s eyes dart down to where the glass sits just inches from my grip, and he blinks suddenly as if hearing my internal battle. His voice turns soft. “Son—”

“Don’t fucking call me—”

“Harry?”

I whip my head towards the landing as the soft voice croaks, “What’s going on?”

Greg’s standing at the top of the stairs, his navy astronaut duvet draped across his shoulders as he rubs his eyes tiredly. It takes a moment for the sleep to clear from his vision. Then his eyes sweep the room, from the woman still passed out on the sofa, to the few other men lingering at the kitchen table, down to where I’m crouched over the tiled floor, with Dad turned towards me in that prepared-to-talk-a-bystander-off-a-ledge stance.

Greg blinks twice, doing a double-take as he looks back at me. “Is ... is that—?”

*Oh fuck.*

As if jolted by a spark, I stumble to my feet. “It’s not what you think.”

I dust my hands over the front of my jeans, trying to rid of the evidence. Making cautious steps to the bottom of the stairs, I wrap my hand around the banister, my eyes trained on his lost ones.

“Greg ...” I beg. “Look at me.”

His eyes are glued to the crime scene like a calling he can’t refuse. I turn my attention back to where Brian’s still lying on the floor groaning with exhaustion. The blood from the shredded glass seeps over the tiles quickly, spreading from the initial wound on his cheek.

*What have I done?*

When I turn back to Greg, it's like he's lost in a trance. All my worst fears are coming to life. I'm forcing this young boy into a trigger response, deep into his subconscious, his only haven.

I'm supposed to be his mentor, his saviour.

But I'm no better than our father.

A final plea. "Greg?" My heart pounds against my ribcage, and my attention darts frantically across the room. Dad makes me pause, frozen since the moment I forced Brian to the floor.

"Tell him. Tell him it's not what it looks like. He'll listen to you."

His weary brown eyes turn to me, glassy with the effects of alcohol. They're nearly identical to Greg's, though my brother's are stained with tears. The comparison forces me to croak, "As his father ... please."

I can feel the weight of Greg's eyes on the back of my skull. Our Dad could change the severity of the moment with only a few words. No matter the trauma he's been put through, a son will always listen to the ones he admires most. Despite the poor decisions they continue to make.

A boy needs his father – trusts his father – above all else.

White noise rings in my ears, tension thick between us all.

Dad clears his throat, relaxing his stance, but his face tells a completely different story. "Your brother ain't to be trusted, Greg. Don't believe a word he says."

I see red. It drowns out the noise behind me as I take aggressive steps forwards.

"You fucking—"

A hard blow to the back of my head sends everything dark.

*Gigi, you're probably wondering what happened after that night. Regretfully, I don't have much to tell you, but the truth is, I selfishly enjoyed the quiet in those few hours I was asleep. It was easier for me to hide in that darkness. Easier for me to revert to being a boy with no responsibilities rather than a man who had to face what would come next from Greg and my father.*

*But I found out the hard way the silence I initially craved made things far, far worse. It gave me time to think. And someone was up to something.*

*For the most part, life continued on in a new normal. Dad's routine altered slightly ... or so I thought. It was only in the last remaining months before my eighteenth birthday that the nights of booze and rowdy laughter*

*transcended into eerie silence. As if he and his fucking mates were behaving themselves.*

*His putrid friends still visited occasionally, yet silence swarmed the room whenever I made my presence known. That thought alone was far more disturbing than any kind of alcohol misuse.*

*I just wish I'd known then what I do now.*

*Wish I'd foreseen what life was about to throw at me.*

*But in some oddly fucked-up way, ignorance is always bliss.*

*Though Greg ... Greg is a different story.*

*He changed the night he experienced violence firsthand, and not for the better.*

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# THREE

*Harry*

## *Flashback - Aged 18*

“Dad? Greg?” I call out. “Is anyone here?”

There’s no answer. But that’s not much of a surprise.

The house has a chilling type of quiet to it that’s only achievable when it’s completely empty – a rarity these days. Between Dad not-so-quietly slipping through the front door past noon after drinking in the local pub and Greg slamming his door to keep me out (only for me to slip back in and spend the night sleeping on his floor), this silence is easily distinguishable.

No one’s home.

I turn on the TV, adding some background noise. The remote bounces across the sofa seat as I chuck it sideways, exiting the living room. But a news alert lights up the room before I can make it through the door.

“They hadn’t even stolen anything, from what I could see,” a woman says shakily, causing my steps to falter. “But they had a good time wrecking up the house and scaring Mittens. He was petrified, poor thing. I found him shaking in a corner. Scared in his own home.”

A chill creeps over my shoulders at the familiar voice, and I turn back to the TV screen. A woman I recognise from the end of our street – *our fucking street* – is cradling her cat close to her chest as she details the events of the break-in.

*Not again!* I want to yell.

This woman is no younger than seventy, clearly shaken from the disturbance, and I'm certain I know the identity of her intruder. A little too well.

The scene cuts to a police officer. She's dressed in uniform, "Officer Brady" branded on her nameplate. "We've brought in a suspect for questioning in connection with this incident. We believe they may be responsible for the break-ins in Surrey these past few weeks. But until we make an arrest, we advise that locals lock their doors and stay vigilant."

*Christ, Greg.*

A gust of wind turns my body cold, and I turn towards the open front door.

If not for the mess littering our small home and the overall lack of anything valuable, I'd think someone might have broken in. Whoever left the door ajar must have been in a rush, desperate to leave. Perhaps it was Dad missing his early dose of beer down at the local boozer.

I have little time to investigate as my phone starts to buzz in my back pocket.

"Harry?" Greg sounds irritated, a subtle sense of urgency lingering under the surface of his voice.

The trusty "one phone call" policy.

"Where are you?" I ask, already pulling on my shoes.

"Police station."

I shrug on my jacket to hide the dissatisfied growl in my throat. *Why? Why would you do this again, you fucking idiot?* It's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't bring myself to say it.

"I'll be twenty minutes."

Silence lingers for a moment through his end of the line as I walk the few steps down from the house to where my car is parked against the kerb. I pause with my hand resting on the door handle, clearing my throat to bring forth a gentle tone.

"Greg—"

"Just save it." He hangs up.

The drive to the police station is no shorter than half an hour, but having completed the route a handful of times in recent years, it only feels like a few minutes. I pull up outside the station in the dated motor. The car's nothing much, but it's what I'm able to afford. It'll most likely be Greg's one day.

I jog up the steps and push open the double doors, passing through the reception and heading straight past the “staff only” sign. Greg will be in the back for questioning like the handful of other times. The building is busy, several officers walking through and dishing out orders to one another, but my eyes are like magnets, drawn to the back of the room.

Officer Brady is giving Greg a stern talking-to in her open booth, her features set rigid and her finger wagging in his face, but his whole demeanour is off, shoulders hunched over, attention focused on the grey flooring.

He’s slipping his arms into the sleeves of his coat before I’ve fully approached. His face is blank, unreadable, though I know a smirk is probably lingering under there somewhere. The slight thrill of achieving some foolish crime, and then the satisfaction he’s been bailed out yet again.

An older woman sits in the booth adjacent to Greg, detailing her findings to the officer. There’s a cat perched on her lap, and I recognise her immediately from the TV. She seems more irritable now though, her shrunken pupils eyeing Greg as he acts so leisurely.

“I’m so sorry.” I approach her side, crouching next to where she sits on the end of the chair. “I’ll have him personally clear up all the mess he’s made and pay for all damages.”

“What?” Greg snaps, mid zipping up his coat. “That’s not fair.”

“Get in the fucking car,” I hiss.

He sighs, frustrated, storming through the police station and slamming the door behind him. The blind bounces back against it. I shake my head before drawing in a short, measured breath.

“Thank you,” the woman tells me, her shaking hands running over the back of the cat’s fur. “But he’s just a troubled kid – there’s no need.”

And it’s not the first time he’s targeted her address either.

“Here.” I dig into the back pocket of my jeans, withdrawing my wallet. A few ten-pound notes sit crumpled at the bottom, and I hand out the money that was rationed for this week’s supermarket shop. “Take this at least to get a cleaner in to help tidy.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t take anything off you. The St. James family has lived down my road for years.”

“Please,” I encourage. “I’d feel awful otherwise.”

She gnaws at her lower lip before begrudgingly taking the cash. Her smile is genuine, and it helps to mask the sting in my chest from our empty

pockets this week. But I'd rather struggle for food than face the embarrassment of whatever stint of activity Greg is putting us all through.

I rise to my feet, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I'll have a word with him."

Her lips tilt up at the edges, and even though I see straight through the fake smile, both of us knowing a conversation will do little to keep my brother under control, she gives a gentle nod.

As I step away from the booth, Officer Brady comes up to my side. She's been looking over Greg's case for years, helping sweep the petty crimes under the rug. But time is ticking. There's only so much more that can go unnoticed before the heads of department start investigating.

Either Greg will have to turn his life around, or I'll have to find someone dodgy to—

I cut off the thought immediately. I'm not going to start bringing more people into my family business, especially not those who'll come with costly consequences. We have enough of those already with Dad refusing to pull his weight.

"Harry," Officer Brady sighs.

I inwardly cringe, running my hand through my hair, tired. "I'm working on him."

"I've exhausted all options." She lowers her voice, stepping closer. "This is the last time I can cover for him. They're already starting to suspect foul play."

I throw a subtle glance towards the end of the station, where a few officers are lingering. They pass us a look through their laughter.

"I told the people what they wanted to hear. They think the suspect has been taken off the streets, and luckily, your neighbour isn't looking to press charges."

I lower my head, grinding my jaw as she keeps her voice quiet.

"The next time Greg crosses the line, I'll be forced to make an arrest. And given the evidence against him, he won't hold out much hope—"

"Yes, yes. I understand. I'm trying."

She presses a hand against my back. "None of us want to punish him, but our sympathy can only spread so far."

I can't expect her to choose – not when her job stands on the line. Not when I know the hardship of a family struggling for cash. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. But the voice in my head screams, *He's just a kid.*

A kid who I'd defend to no end.

It would take utter heartbreak, something so drastic, near impossible, for me to ever turn against him.

"Thank you, Officer. I really appreciate it."

I offer one last apology before slipping out of the police station and getting back into the car. Greg remains tight-lipped as I settle in the driver's seat – not that I expected anything different. My days of expecting a thank-you are far beyond me, though the stuff that spews from his mouth nowadays continues to surprise me.

A radio station plays low, but Greg turns it off and sinks further into his seat with an irritated sigh.

I focus on the road. "What made you act up this time?"

There's a breath of silence before he grumbles, "Had an argument with my girlfriend."

"I see." I nod slowly, pursing my lips to hold in the laughter. "What relationship issues can you be facing at thirteen?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Pain stabs me at his dismissive tone. I'd listen if he really wanted me to. Do anything to stop this behaviour he's slipped into.

I spare him a glance out of the corner of my eye. His head is resting in the palm of his hand, attention directed out the window.

"You want to talk about it?" I offer. "About her?"

"No," he grunts.

"She must be pretty special if you're getting this down about an argument."

I can almost hear the eye roll as he argues, "Just fucking leave it, okay?"

A smile plays on my mouth as I try to lighten the mood. "That's pretty foul language for a teenager."

"Who are you – Dad?" he spits. "He doesn't even tell me how to act."

I whip my head towards him. His eyes flare momentarily from the sudden outburst, but he doesn't attempt to bring the words back.

"Don't do that. Don't compare me to him," I say, my voice low. "I'm trying to help you."

He mutters under his breath so quietly I don't think he intends for me to hear. "Then just *stop* trying."

I fist the steering wheel, the leather groaning beneath the pressure of my palms. The question I ask myself time and time again slips out. "Why do

you always turn to violence? Just tell me.”

“You do it too.”

“How?” I rear my head back. “When?”

I’d never let Greg see that side of me. Not ever.

“With Brian, a few years ago.”

“That’s different. Brian—” I cut myself off to exhale a steady breath.  
“Brian deserved it.”

He throws back, “So if they deserve it, then it’s okay?”

“Yes – no! Fuck.” I rub my hand over my eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

The remainder of the drive continues in silence.

The little fucker has climbed out of the car before I’ve even pulled up the handbrake. By the time I’ve got out, he’s already stepped into the house and slammed the door shut. When I make it through the front entrance, I hear the remaining echoes of his footsteps before the final slam of his bedroom door.

*Fucking teenagers.*

I toe off my shoes and throw the keys onto the kitchen counter, but the sound makes me pause. The clatter of metal is obstructed by a piece of paper set loosely on the counter by the fridge, a pen discarded at its side.

Call it intuition, call it whatever you want, but something inside – something deep down – feels the weight of what that paper contains even from a few feet away. I stare silently before braving a few steps forwards.

I don’t trust myself to hold it, so I stuff my fingers into the front pockets of my jeans and read over the messy handwriting as a lump fills the back of my throat.

*Harry,*

*Don’t look for me.*

*The house is yours.*

*Sincerely,*

*Dad*

*P.S. Happy 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.*

I grip the piece of paper in my hands, squeezing pressure into the words, until it crumbles under the weight.

*No. No. No.*

Does he not understand that this is the worst thing he could've done? Just leaving us to fend for ourselves *again*?

How can he just up and leave? And without sparing a single thought for Greg?

I never wanted this.

I want him here. With us. I want him to *try*. To spare Greg some of his attention and help steer him onto the right path. That's all he needs. Greg's just craving attention. That's why he's acting out and I'm cleaning up his mess every time.

He needs a dad, but his father didn't even try.

He didn't even fucking try!

When I bring my attention back to the crumpled piece of paper, I only find more. Documents scattered across the countertop that didn't first catch my eye.

Mortgage documents.

Forged signatures putting the house in my name, and my self-declaration to take on the debt. The monthly payments that are far more money than an eighteen-year-old can make.

Eighteen.

I'm eighteen, shackled with the burden of paying for the house and providing Greg with a home. A home I've vowed to give him above all else.

In some sick, twisted way, maybe this is my destiny.

I wonder now what I'd say to Mum if I'd met her before I was born.

The answer hits me quickly.

*Don't marry him. I'd rather not exist.*

# FOUR

*Harry*

*Flashback – Aged 21*

“Oi, kid!” the grating voice bellows. “How long you gonna be?”

Sweat trickles from my hairline down my temple, dampening a few strands and sticking them to my forehead. I shake them out of my eyes as I turn the wrench against the underside of the BMW.

“Almost finished.”

The setting summer sun beats down as I reach my tenth work hour. Despite this being one of three jobs I have on the go, I’m barely scraping by on minimum wage. But Jimmy at the mechanic centre insists I’m working a cutting-edge role that requires my full time, attention, and ultimately my left kidney.

But it’s money. Money that leaves us with a roof over our heads. A home, even if it doesn’t feel like one, and something – however pathetic – for our evening meals.

“You jacking off under there, or what?”

One final tightening of the bolt and I’m pulling my way out from underneath the car. As I get to my feet, I squint against the golden-hour sunset. Sweat dampens my skin, and I wipe away the excess moisture with the hem of my T-shirt, the dirty fabric probably leaving more of a mess than I started with.

I reach for a cloth resting on the bonnet, and as I start to clean my hands, heavy footsteps round the vehicle. Jimmy drops to the tattered sofa a couple

metres from me, bouncing his foot on the concrete until I finally give him my full attention. His vest does little to cover the rounding of his stomach as he lounges back into the cushions intended for waiting customers. His legs are spread, though I imagine he looks extremely uninviting to any woman unlucky enough to find themselves in here.

I force a smile, directing my anger into fisting the cloth. “I did the trick with the brakes to have them tire quicker … just like you asked.”

Jim chuckles loudly and throws his head back. “Fucking ’ell, kid. Lighten up. You look like I just murdered your mother.”

I wince, fisting the fabric harder.

“That trick with the brakes is the only thing paying your wages.”

A slight nod – that’s the best I can give him. But my desire to hurt him is becoming a growing concern lately, niggling at me under the surface, ready to be unleashed with a slight, gentle push.

I crave to hurt him like I crave air.

“What you doin’ tonight?” he asks.

*No. No. No.*

*Absolutely not.*

It’s my first night off in weeks – months, even. I very rarely refuse overtime, but I can’t afford to not spend time with Greg. Not when I fear the elderly bloke down the street may be at risk of falling prey to his hit list.

I shake my head. “I can’t tonight.”

Jimmy stands, taking steps in my direction. Enclosed in his hand, he waves the wad of notes, close enough that it smacks my nose. I tilt my head away, gritting my teeth.

A molar cracks. “I—”

He waves the cash closer, purposely taunting me, until he smiles wickedly with his dismissal. “Customer.”

My jaw aches with the restraint of refusing to snarl. “On it, Jim.”

“Looks like a right freak.” He lowers his voice as I start to walk away, drawing my attention back to him. “One of those expensive designer suits I’ve only ever seen in Hollywood crap—” He rushes towards me – the fastest I’ve ever seen him move. “He’s probably loaded with cash. The suit alone could be worth thousands.” He’s so close I can smell the stale cigarette smoke from his breath, and I fight to avoid cringing. Though I’m a huge hypocrite, since they’ve been a much-needed stress relief since the moment Dad left. “Do double on his brakes.”

“Double?” I blink, turning my attention towards the silhouette of the customer positioned at the entrance. “Don’t you think that’s a little unfair?”

“Life is unfair, kid.” Jimmy gives me a shove. He bucks his chin in the direction of the mysterious man. “Now hurry. If you complete it during your overtime tonight, you can charge him for the faster service.”

I twirl the wrench, spinning it between a few fingers, if only to distract myself from sending it into his thick fucking skull. He beckons his hand at me, shooing me away. I turn with a sigh, throwing the cloth over my shoulder and pocketing the tool in the back of my jeans.

Approaching the garage entrance, I ask, “Can I help you?”

A few seconds pass before the man twists his head over his shoulder, regarding me with a cool smile. Then he turns his whole body in my direction.

There’s nothing overly special about him considering the immaculate state of his suit. He looks to be at least fifty, if I’m not mistaken. But I could have guessed that from his dark brown hair, a few odd streaks of grey running through it, highlighting his age. Yet it’s his attire that makes me pause. I find myself near cringing as he leans a little too close to the dirty bumper of a Mini.

“Harry.” The confidence with which he addresses me makes me pause. His lips turn up into a smile at my obvious confusion. “Your nametag.”

“I see.” I duck my chin, reading my name upside down where it’s pinned to the top of my shirt. “How can I help you?”

He pushes his hands into the front pockets of his trousers, nodding towards the car. “I was hoping you could give her a maintenance check – she’s been playing up a bit recently.”

I do a double-take as I turn my attention to the vehicle he’s talking about. To say it’s ancient would be putting it lightly. Condition seems fairly average, but the age alone will really test me, and I haven’t yet found a car I’ve struggled to fix.

“You say *this* is your car?”

His response is a mere smile at my hiked brow.

“That’s not yours.”

His head tilts sideways. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, for starters, you’d be lucky to get five hundred pounds for that at your local boot sale.” I bring my attention to his outfit. “Your suit doesn’t have any obvious branding, but I can tell from the seams it’s hand-stitched.”

I squint as I look over the texture of the material. “Even from a distance I can tell it’s tweed. I’d estimate your suit alone is probably worth over ten grand, so it’s safe to assume that’s not your vehicle.”

The slight twitch of the corner of his mouth is his only reaction. Slowly, he folds his arms across his chest, and although it may not be an invitation for me to continue, I can tell from his posture I’m on the right path to figuring him out.

“Or perhaps … you’re simply doing this to throw me off.” I turn back to the vehicle, approaching the driver’s side door. “You did say ‘she’, indicating you have a relationship with the car.” I climb into the front seat, bringing my attention to the steering wheel. It’s expensive, not suitable for a car like this, but there’s a fault in the material. I flex my hands before fitting them over the steering wheel, right over the worn grip marks. They’re slightly smaller than my hands and in perfect proportion to his own. “The position of the seat is telling enough for a man of your size, the worn leather, and not to mention …” A cigar sits in the driver’s side door. I smile, picking it up before climbing back out of the car. Palm up, I hand it out to him. “And I knew you smoked cigars.” I nod towards his jacket pocket, to the outline of an identical shape.

Slowly, the man dives his hand into his pocket and takes it out. He smiles, but it’s not like the expressions he wore before. This is far deeper. I cross my arms, if only to shake off the feeling from the man’s stare. As if he’s looking far closer than just at me; as if he’s looking further within.

I force a cough to clear the silence in the air.

“Can I pick it up tonight?” he asks. “I’ll be in the area around ten o’clock.”

As if I can feel Jim’s eyes staring daggers into the back of my head, I sigh, “We’ll have to charge you extra.”

“Money is no problem,” the man tells me. “You’ll probably find an old car like this has a lot of issues. I’d say you might struggle with where to start, but something tells me you’ll be just fine.”

He turns, walking off towards the exit.

“Wait,” I call out. “What’s your name?”

With his back to me, he stills for a moment before lighting that cigar from his pocket and bringing it to his mouth. “Richard,” he tells me, the cigar obstructing his words slightly. “But few people call me that.”



“I just don’t get it.”

I pull myself out from underneath the car, wrench still in hand, and shake my head as I look over the exterior. The utter shock of it all causes a smile to tilt my mouth.

The car is in immaculate condition, everything simply pristine, as though it only went for an inspection this morning. Tyres well within their legal limit, brake fluid topped up to the max, pads only recently changed.

Why would he even bother bringing it in?

That man, Richard, clearly had me fooled. I look at the clock on the wall. He’s due to pick up his motor in ten minutes. I’ve been working to triple-check my findings since he left.

Movement to my right has me turning in the direction of Jimmy, whose wonky footing makes him stumble into the side of one of the vehicles. The bitter, stale stench of alcohol is ingrained in my senses thanks to Dad, so I’m able to sense a drunk from a mile off.

Liquid sloshes over the top of the beer bottle as he nears. He takes a hefty swig from the top of the glass. “You did that shit with the brakes like I told you?”

*For fuck’s sake.*

“I can’t.” I bow my head, shaking it. “The car is in perfect condition. He’ll know, and then we’ll have a lot of shit on our hands.”

He scoffs, nearly toppling over from the exaggerated gesture. “That piece of shit?”

“It’ll be too obvious for me to tamper with anything.”

“Can’t leave you stupid kids to do anything.” He reaches forwards for the wrench. “I’ll fucking do it myself.”

“Jim, don’t.” I curl my fist. “Just leave it this time.”

His upper lip curls into a snarl. “Don’t test me, kid.”

I despise the guy, but I can’t let him lose everything for this one job.

“You could lose the whole garage.”

He pulls harder at the wrench, his anger rising. “I’m not asking again—”

“Just listen to me! The guy will be here any minute.”

I duck as he throws his right hand over my head. The glass bottle, intended to smash into my temple, slams into the shop wall. It crashes on impact, the beer seeping down the wall and glass littering the floor.

Taken aback, I freeze.

The cunt could've fucking killed me.

In my moment of distraction, Jim fists the front of my shirt, bringing me closer. I tower over him, but with the sheer weight of this man, I know a blow of any magnitude may hurt. But that's not what scares me. The real fear is the way my fists shake with the desire to hurt him. *Really* hurt him.

I ache to inflict pain on him.

“Get off me,” I warn, for both of our sakes.

But it’s too late – the tether has snapped.

He reaches for the wrench again, and everything happens in a blur. I pull it harder, with force, the intention to shove him away mixing with my wicked desire to cause damage. Right from wrong blurs, and before I know it, I’m slamming my fist with the weapon down on top of his head.

His eyes stop first, his vision frozen in a moment of disbelief as he shakily brings his hands to the droplets of blood running down his temple. Jim’s mouth starts to morph into that sly grin he loves to wear. Before I can even bring myself to see it, I slam the wrench down again.

That’s all it takes – one final push.

His body tumbles forwards, onto his knees first, and then onto his front as he slams down on the concrete. My chest heaves with exhaustion and adrenaline, my heart racing a mile a minute. The wrench slips from my hand from the mess of blood, clattering against the floor.

A dark cloud washes over me as I watch the blood seeping across the concrete. The crimson staining my palms. He’s dead. And I ... I killed him. But I don’t feel anything.

I don’t feel anything.

I don’t feel.

I don’t—

Taking in the crime scene, I pause.

*What the fuck have I done?*

*I’ve killed someone. I’ve fucking killed someone. I—*

Frantically, I wipe my hands against my thighs. Again. And again. Until my palms start to burn from the friction.

Blood rushes towards my feet, and I nearly stumble over myself with my quick retreat. My hip meets the side of a car, and I grab onto the bonnet to help stabilise myself, leaving a dirty handprint.

On unstable legs, I manage to make my way to the bathroom to wash away the evidence. Blood runs down the drain, but I keep my hands under the running water until every tiny pinprick of evidence is gone. I'm not sure how much time has passed as I finally walk out the door.

It's fine. It was an accident. A simple misunderstanding. He slipped—

Fuck yes. I'll call the police in a panic and say I found him like this. I'll say, "He must have slipped and banged his head."

I step around the car to where Jim lies.

This is good.

This is—

Bad. Really fucking bad.

Jim's body is gone.

Not only is his body gone, but there's not a speck of blood on the floor. Blood that I know was there, forming a circle round his head.

Am I going insane?

It was right there.

I look down, confirming there's still blood staining my jeans. In the rare case he survived the blow and the excessive blood loss, he wouldn't have cleaned up the mess before making a run for it. What kind of sick freak would do that?

Maybe I *am* going insane.

I run my palms over my face aggressively, scrubbing my eyes to try to wake myself up from whatever nightmare this is. But as I pull my hands free, I feel the colour quickly seeping from me at the sight of Richard standing next to his vehicle.

*Fuck!*

I grab my hoodie from where it's hanging over the back of the sofa and tie it around my waist, concealing whatever blood is on my clothes. I double-check I've rid myself of all the evidence and take a heavy, needed breath before making my way over.

Richard turns towards me, oblivious to the disaster that just occurred. "How'd it go? I hope it wasn't too difficult."

"Nothing to be concerned about." I take his keys from the hook and fist them in my palm. "You've got a good ride on your hands."

Counting the cash in his wallet, he asks, “How much do I owe you?”

Though the cash would give me and Greg some extra security for the week, I can’t bring myself to charge this man now he’s unknowingly walked into a crime scene.

I shake my head. “It’s on the house. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Richard nods casually, slipping the wallet into the inside pocket of his suit. “At least I won’t need to charge you for the clean-up of the body I found in here.”

I freeze.

“I-I … I don’t know what—”

“I think the correct words are ‘thank you’.”

A lump forms in my throat quickly. I’m prepared to act on the defence again until movement over Richard’s shoulder makes me pause. My eyes focus on two burly men, each of whom is hurling something into a truck. It’s wrapped up tight with material and duct tape, dark red liquid visibly seeping out. They chuck it in the van and slam the doors.

Cleaning equipment litters the pavement outside their vehicle, and I squint further to double-check what I’m seeing. *They cleaned up the body. Richard’s men.*

*Christ.*

“Harry?” Richard presses. “Everything okay?”

I whip my head towards him and rush out, “Thank you.”

As casual and mundane as the moment he walked into the garage, Richard repositions his suit as if we’re merely talking business. “The adrenaline will wear off the next time.”

*The next time? The next time? Is he fucking joking?*

He steps towards me, offering out a business card. I hesitate, but he nods insistently, encouraging me to take it.

“What’s this for?”

Richard’s posture is casual, as though this is the start of something far bigger. “If you ever find yourself in trouble again, just give me a call.”

He’s about to turn on his heel when I instinctively take a step forwards. “Don’t I owe you anything for … you know?”

“You fixed the car, didn’t you?” He smiles wickedly, and at my bewildered expression he chuckles. “I’m certain I’ll be seeing you again

soon, Harry."

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# FIVE

*Harry*

## *Flashback continued*

My heart is pounding ferociously by the time I've closed the front door behind me.

“Greg?” I call out. “Greg, are you here?”

Normally, I'd expect the lack of response, but I can't risk anything today. I'm already pulling myself up the stairs two at a time. I reach his bedroom and knock impatiently.

“I'm giving you one last chance before I'm coming in.”

It's a breath of silence before I'm opening the door and pushing my way inside. But there's no one in here. No one's home despite it being past ten o'clock. I'm certain Greg had no plans for tonight. That's why I was planning to come home early. To see him.

Call it intuition, call it my heart practically climbing out of my mouth, but something in my stomach – something toxic and deadly – tells me something is wrong. As if the situation earlier, with Richard and Jimmy, was just a brief indication of something far deeper. It's as if I can sense tonight is destined for disaster.

I say that since this feeling is one I recognise all too well – the kind of discomfort I only ever get around family. When Greg would cry himself to sleep. The anger and rage I'd feel towards my father when he'd openly drink and smoke joints in our living room.

Practically falling down the stairs, I slip my phone from my pocket, balancing it between my jaw and my shoulder. “Pick up, pick up,” I plead.

Greg never answers – not ever. Not unless there’s something to worry—“H-Harry?” he stutters down the phone, gasping from shortness of breath. “Where are you?”

“In some a-alley, next to the club in town.”

*Fuck.*

“Stay there, and don’t move. Tell me exactly where you are.”

Over the commotion on the other end of the line, it’s hard to hear. But that’s not what stalls me. Instead it’s the unwavering certainty I just heard Dad’s voice. Though that’s absurd. We haven’t heard from him since the moment he left on my eighteenth birthday.

I’m already speeding in the direction before Greg’s finished relaying the details.

I pull my car haphazardly against the pavement when I arrive. There’s a small crowd of people gathered, and I recognise my brother instantly, tears misting his eyes through the flickering of neon signs and dull streetlamps. But the weapon in his hand stands out more than anything. The hilt of a kitchen knife curled inside his palm.

*No. No. No.*

If I’d just stayed home this evening, none of this would have happened. I wouldn’t have killed my boss, and Greg wouldn’t be inches away from potentially stabbing someone in the back streets of Surrey.

As I draw closer, the disbelief of hearing Dad suddenly makes sense. Greg isn’t about to hurt anyone; he’s about to hurt his father.

*Can’t the world just give me a fucking break? As if this night isn’t fucked-up enough.*

I put my hands out in a gesture of peace as I approach Greg and the group I now recognise as Dad and those lowlife friends of his who’d drink in our kitchen. It seems little has changed, judging by the alcohol spoiling their breath and the way they’re tripping over their own feet.

“Greg,” I say warily, “put the knife down.”

He whips the weapon in my direction, his hands shaking. “You left me! You were supposed to be home.”

“I know,” I breathe. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oi, oi, son!” one of Dad’s friends chants. “I could take ya!”

“Come get me!” another wails.

Greg's face is distorted with pain, and although his eyes are staring straight through me, I know I'm not the one at risk here. He's been a completely different person since the moment Dad left.

And despite abandoning us and being barely able to keep himself upright with his drink in hand, I take a hesitant step in front of our father.

I refuse to allow Greg to carry the burden of murder, no matter how much I think our last remaining parent deserves it.

"Greg," I say again, calmly, "give me the knife."

He waves it in front of him and shouts, "You're defending him?"

"Listen to me."

"He left us, Harry!"

"I know."

He takes aggressive steps forwards. "I'd be doing us a favour."

"You don't want to hurt him, trust me. Violence is not the answer."

A tear slips from the corner of his eye, his voice catching. "And you would know, right?"

I clear my throat. "I do."

A strong emotion swarms his features, and he takes several deep breaths before cautiously lowering the weapon, his posture stiffening. I sigh, thankful, and drop my head in sheer relief.

"Fucking pathetic kid," Dad mutters from behind me.

I lift my head quickly, but Greg is already charging forwards, the knife aimed high above his shoulder. He stumbles into our father, impaling the knife deep into his chest as they crash to the floor.

"GREG!" I roar.

He pulls the knife free with a grunt, and blood starts to spurt from the open wound like a hose, spilling all over Greg's clothes and onto the dirty pavement.

In the far distance, I hear mutters of, "Oh, fuck," and, "Let's get out of here," before the crowd sobers quickly and stumbles into a weak run down the alleyway.

While the world around me seems to freeze and kick-start all at once, I fall to Greg's side in a blink. Tearing the knife free from his hands, I throw it across the ground so it's far out of reach. Grabbing his face, I bark his name, trying to get him to come to his senses.

"What the fuck have you done?"

His hands are shaking violently, his body struck still, staring at the scarlet liquid staining his fingers. He slowly lifts his head and turns his attention to me.

“Harry.” His voice wavers, and he takes a step back. “He … he deserved it.”

The worst part about it is he isn’t wrong. In fact, Dad deserved a fate worse than death. He deserved to live a shameful, awful life. If he ached for death, I’d wish for someone to grant him immorality just so he’d be forced to rot for eternity.

But I can’t bring myself to say that. I refuse to accept murder as a plausible option when it seems to be swarming me tonight.

“Get out of here. Get home and lock the doors,” I demand.

Greg stalls for a moment, his eyes running over the lifeless body on the floor.

“Just go!”

He pulls himself to his feet, hesitating again before retreating a few steps, one foot behind the other, before turning and sprinting down the alley.

I made a mental note to never contact Richard again after what he witnessed at the garage merely two hours ago. Ideally, he would be my last resort. Yet it’s like a chemical reaction as I slip out my phone and the business card, dialling the number on the front of it.

Richard picks up on the second ring. “Harry?”

“I need your help.”

“Death really seems to be following you around today.”

I can’t find it in me to laugh. “I’m being serious.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes. Don’t move from where you are.”

He doesn’t bother to ask for my location before he hangs up, but strangely, that seems to be the less peculiar factor today.

I pass a sidelong glance to where Dad’s body is rotting on the ground. A thick red puddle surrounds him, moving quicker by the second.

“I thought I’d be the one to finally kill you.” The words fall from my mouth. “But Greg had the confidence to do it. He *deserved* to do it.”

I take small steps forwards, stopping only when the tips of my shoes sit just close enough to him that the seeping blood starts to slip underneath the soles. I tilt my head down, looking at the man who tainted my life with fucking misery.

Anger swarms my head so intensely I'm forced to roll it backwards to ease the weight.

I hate this man.

I fucking hate him.

I'm glad he's fucking dead. I'm glad Greg killed him—  
“FUCK!”

I slam my fist against my forehead, my hands shaking from the outburst. My fingers tangle in the front of my hair, pulling with such force it makes my eyes water.

Greg shouldn't have done that. He shouldn't have killed him, and he especially shouldn't be shackled with the weight of murder as a teenager. Everything I've fought for all these years has been for nothing.

Fucking nothing.

I start shaking my head, retracing my steps along the alleyway. My shoes are nearly worn out at the bottom, so I'm practically treading with bare feet against the pavement as I pace nervously. Yet, as promised, ten minutes later, Richard walks into the alley where the remains of my dead father lie, composed and in that same immaculate suit. The two men from earlier trail behind him, and I can just about make out the brief silhouette of someone else.

“Double kill,” Richard says when he’s only a metre away.

“It wasn’t me.”

“Greg?” he asks.

*He knows my brother’s name?*

*Christ, who the fuck is this guy?*

I bow my head, but Richard responds with an instructive nod. The two men get to work clearing the body.

“We’ll take it from here.” Richard tilts his head in a gesture to the person at his side. “Jack will sort you out for the night, but I’ll be in touch.”

Through the darkness, I can’t see much of their features, though from what I can see, Jack doesn’t seem much different in age to me. He carries himself similarly to Richard. The same straight back, rigid jaw. There’s no mistaking they spend a lot of time together.

“I won’t let you off as easily as the first time, Harry,” Richard says, that joking tone from earlier a distant memory. “You have nothing to offer me in return now. There’s nothing stopping me from sending your brother to prison.”

“I’ll do anything.” My voice turns strong in a desperate attempt to prove my loyalty. “I’ll help in whatever way I can. Just don’t … don’t get Greg in trouble.”

Even in the dim light, I spot the side-eye Richard and Jack throw each other. Like a moment of understanding. The guy, Jack, turns around and leads us onto the street. I follow silently, turning back one final time to watch Richard dishing out orders to those clearing up the scene.

Though my final look in Dad’s direction should be one of longing, I turn my attention to Richard, lingering for a moment as the questions surrounding him spiral in my mind. My brows pull together as he turns around, passing me a look. I turn away just as fast.

Jack approaches my car and holds out his palm for my keys. I hand them out to him and climb into the passenger seat as he gets behind the wheel.

“With each death you witness, the easier it gets,” he says as he drives.

“Richard said the same thing to me earlier, but I’m yet to see that.”

He chuckles and slaps my shoulder before switching on the radio. I’m thankful he doesn’t fill the car with small talk but regretful in the way my mind continues to spiral with the events of the day.

I don’t even think I could cope with facing Greg tonight – not after facing the reality murder now runs in our family – so I’m silently glad as Jack drives towards a detached brick house. He pulls onto the driveway and yanks up the handbrake.

“Welcome to my crib.”

We climb out the car, and he waits on the entrance doormat until I’m only a few steps away. He pauses as he pushes the key into the lock.

“My family lives here, so no mention of what just occurred back there.”

I swallow and clear my throat, rubbing my sweaty palms on my thighs.  
“Sure, yeah.”

“I’m nearing a kill of fifteen.” He finally turns the key. “I know what I mean about it getting easier every time.”

“Sorry?” I ask, certain I misheard him.

He opens the door, kicking off his shoes into the corner, but I’m still trying to bring myself back from what he just said. Shrugging off his jacket, he places it on the nearby hook, and I follow suit, cringing at the specks of red spotted across mine.

“Stay here, and I’ll get you a drink to help take the edge off.” He hits my shoulder playfully for the second time tonight. “Hey, relax. Just wait here,

and don't go killing anyone else."

Something between a laugh and a scoff falls from my throat.

Jack disappears down the hallway, turning a corner. With that jittery feeling still swarming over me, I start to move my feet, unable to stay still. One of the rooms casts a shadow of light through the entryway, and a TV echoes from within. I pass by it quietly, resting my shoulder against the wall parallel to the door.

In a moment of distraction, with my head down, a hand brushes my arm as though someone is trying to pass me. It's followed by a sweet scent stealing every bit of my attention.

"Excuse me," a voice says fluidly.

I apologise and take a step back as the girl squeezes past me into the living room. I keep myself hidden as I silently watch from behind the door.

The brunette with the addictive scent flops down on the sofa, passing a bag of popcorn to the blonde girl at her side. There's a silent exchange, the curl of a lip, and hushed laughter between the two of them. The face of the girl from the hallway is obstructed by long strands of dark, silky hair and a hand pressed to her ear.

"Yeah ..." She drags out the word, and it's only then I realise she's on the phone. "I can't see you now. I'm with Mia—"

The person on the other end of the line cuts her off, causing the organ in my chest to tighten.

"But I—"

She's cut off again.

"We've had this night planned—"

Cut off again. Something deadly curls in my lower stomach at whoever is disrespecting her—

*Shut the fuck up.*

*You don't know this girl. You don't even know what she looks like and your protective instincts are surfacing like some territorial animal.*

The thoughts appear almost simultaneously.

I'm fucked, entirely fucked, because when she hangs up, she pushes her hair from her face. The action is effortless, tired, but I completely freeze. As does the rest of the world, I'm certain.

Doe-brown eyes, capable of bringing armies to their knees, shine through the dark room. Eyes that perfectly compliment the hair I desperately crave

to run my fingers through. Lips, slightly plump and calling to me, forcing me to step nearer, if only to hear her speak again.

She is simply the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

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# SIX

*Harry*

*Present day*

“That wasn’t the last time, was it?”

Gigi’s voice pulls me from the depths of the memory. As I rub my eyes to pull my mind back to the present, she presses, “That wasn’t the last time you saw me.”

I rub harder, starting to see weird shapes, if only to stall her questions. But I’m forced to finally lower my hands. Even through the momentary discomfort of having my vision return to normal, Gigi’s tear-stained eyes are blinding.

“No, baby.” I force a swallow. “It wasn’t.”

Her mouth opens and closes until she finally sputters, “You should’ve told me sooner. I … I could’ve—”

“You could’ve what?”

Flustered, she pants, “Anything!”

“Would it have changed anything? Really?”

“I don’t know.”

“You wouldn’t have hated me any less.”

“You don’t know that.”

I shake my head. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking differently because I gave you a sob story about my life. You deserve to feel hatred, Gigi. You’re still worthy of that emotion.”

She tears her face away, inhaling a broken breath.

No matter how hard she tries to deny it, I know she's struggling with the new information. I can see it in the way she scrapes her nails against the insides of her palms, drawing a thin layer of blood to the surface, and in the way she grinds her teeth so harshly I hear them groan.

"Then tell me." She turns towards me, her voice slightly weakened but still strong. "Tell me everything."

I'm forced to crack my neck, fighting the discomfort of opening up further. I've kept these memories hidden my entire life. Yet I'd give this girl straight access to my mind, no matter how much it'd kill me to do so.

I promise I'll tell her everything, if that's what she wants.

I'll tell her how I surrendered every thought to her just to have a distraction from my painful reality. Throughout everything, she was the one who kept me sane yet fuelled a dark madness within me; a promise no man would ever hurt her.

"Harry?"

I can't tell her yet. But I *will*.

"Soon."

A loud knock echoes from downstairs. Gigi freezes as if second-guessing the reason she walked into this house. But when the second knock comes, louder and more determined, she quickly pulls herself to her feet.

"No!" I hiss.

I'm already grabbing her arm and pulling her back to the floor before she can take another step closer to the bedroom door. She whips towards me, her brows pulled inwards.

"What are you—?"

I throw my palm over her mouth. She watches me with a wild look but makes no attempt to move. I plead for her compliance with my eyes, asking for the simple lifeline that she'll listen to me.

"Trust me," I mouth.

She rolls her eyes, and a smirk tugs my mouth. But the playfulness quickly dissipates when a muffled voice shouts from the front door.

"Gigi!" Richard calls out. "We know you're in there. Come outside, and we can talk this through."

Her eyes flare suddenly. The action is subtle, a slight fear hidden in her gaze that was absent before. I remove my hand from her mouth, bringing my finger to my lips to encourage her to stay silent. My palm lingers mid-air until I receive her slow, approving nod.

I cock my head towards the window on the adjacent wall. Gigi's eyes follow, and we keep our steps quiet as we cross into the corner of Jack's room. I crack the window open, motioning for her to go through it.

"I know you're angry, but there was no need to run away. Let's talk about this—" Richard cuts himself off, dropping his voice to a hushed whisper. "She'll come out ... fucking trust me."

Neither Gigi nor I question who he's speaking to, instead directing our focus onto her exit. She extends one leg out the window and balances on the ledge, clutching the wooden frame. Noises pick up from downstairs, a commotion of raised voices and determination to get inside.

"Harry?" Strands of Gigi's hair dance in the cold breeze, giving way to a healing wound on her cheekbone. I'm half-distracted as she asks, "Why didn't you tell me about Richard—?" She cuts herself short. "About any of it?"

At the mention of his name and the reminder he's downstairs, I dare a second glance at her bruised skin. *Fuck.* I can barely pull myself together, let alone give her a coherent response.

The door handle starts to rattle, followed by another impatient call of her name. Our time is quickly running out, but I can't give her the answers she's looking for. Not yet.

"You'll understand when I tell you the whole story."

With a defeated sigh, she starts to pull herself further out the window. I grab her arm quickly.

"I will tell you, Gigi. Everything."

She tilts up her chin, just enough to make eye contact. "I'm not sure if I believe you."

"Then I'll prove you wrong."

"How?"

"By giving you a reason to come back to me."

"*If you don't run away, then tomorrow night I promise to tell you what really happened between me and Greg.*"

"Why not tonight?"

"Because it gives you a reason to stay."

"Don't you dare." Her voice is strained as if revisiting the same memory. She lingers on the ledge, half-inside, half-out. "Not this time ... not like this."

"It worked, though, didn't it? You did stay—"

“Don’t,” she warns.

“Gigi ...”

A window smashes downstairs. Shattered glass hits the floorboards, echoing through the home. At the reminder I’m still gripping Gigi’s arm, I turn to her back, encouraging her exit with a gentle shove. She throws her other leg over the window frame, and her palms curl on the outside of the wood.

“Stay safe,” I tell her. “And try not to kill your mother in the meantime.”

The advice is futile, but I try regardless. If Gigi were really determined to kill her mum, she’d find a way to go through with it. The determination and fire I saw in the Circle is only a brief indication of what she’s capable of.

“Are you not coming?” she asks.

“I’ve got some business to deal with first.” I gesture towards the open doorway.

More glass breaks downstairs, and determined footsteps hurry along the wooden floorboards. Gigi grips the frame, giving me a once-over. I’m still not certain whether she wants to kill me, but there’s definitely something unspoken in her gaze.

With a final exhale, she pulls the window closed and descends from the roof. Loud footsteps rush against the upstairs landing. I turn just in time to catch Richard’s stern expression as he skids to a stop at the entrance to Jack’s room.

“Where. Is. She?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Hell if I know.”

“Check outside!” he calls out, dropping his voice lower to address the person at his side. “She can’t have got far – go find her.”

A frown mars my face as I try to peer over his shoulder at who he’s speaking with. I only see a mess of dark hair as they start running downstairs. Richard’s hands curl around the doorframe, blocking my view.

“You’re on thin fucking ice, St. James—”

“Let’s get one thing straight ...” I leisurely step forwards until we’re barely centimetres apart. “I’m *out*. I don’t have to listen to your bullshit any longer.” My voice turns stern, deadly. “Though if you think about touching one hair on her head, I swear I’ll fucking *kill* you.” My voice wobbles on the word, the seething anger making my jaw shake. “I’ll rip your fucking heart out.”

“You’re all the same, you St. James men.” Richard’s chest heaves.  
“Fucking pathetic. You, your brother, and your fucking scum father too.”

Though I’ve never given a flying toss about my dad, the way he throws his name around brings forth an anger so strong it forces my upper lip into a snarl.

“I’ll make you pay.” Richard chuckles, shaking his head. “Oh, I will.”

Despite how much I despise the man, I’m no fool to play down his threats. I’m half-distracted as two men flank his sides – the large security guards who never seem to be far away. They take determined steps closer, but I remain still, shrugging my shoulders casually to accept the beating.

One grabs the back of my neck tightly, applying a pressure so intense I’m barely able to see the fist connecting with my stomach. My instant reaction is to crouch, but they force my back straight and send my stomach another blow.

Two times. Three times. Four. Five. Six.

I lose count, my vision turning black as one throws a fist across my jaw before finally releasing me. Through the discomfort of my sight flashing from black to rapid colour, I fight the desire to topple forwards.

“Is that ...” – a wheeze tumbles out of me, and I spit blood onto the carpet – “... all you’ve got?”

“I’d kill you, but I’d rather watch you suffer.” Richard ushers the guards away, almost exiting the room himself, but he turns back. “*I will* find her eventually, St. James. And trust me, you’re going to wish you were both dead.”

He disappears from the room, walking downstairs. It isn’t until I finally hear the front door close behind him that my knees crash against the carpet.

I’ll make him pay.

I’ll make him fucking pay.

And I’ll get her back in the meantime. If it’s the last thing I do.



The CCTV cameras in my house give little away despite them covering every street in London. Every side road. Every alley. Every drunken deal,

dodgy drug exchange, and embarrassing one-night stand witnessed through the endless screens.

They're meant to show everything, yet I can't lay eyes on the one person I'm looking for.

Crossing my ankle over my knee, I ask aloud, "Where are you, princess?"

It's been nearly a week since I confronted Gigi in her brother's room. I thought I'd at least catch a glimmer of her whereabouts, having kept my primary focus on the Thomas family home, believing Gigi would follow through on her desire to kill her mother. But nothing.

She's strong – far stronger than I give her credit for. I thought she'd have caused major harm by now after the consistent mindfucks thrown her way. Not only did her family lie to her, but *I* lied to her too.

Sick. I'm fucking sick. And I'm sorry—

Am I sorry?

No.

No. I'm not fucking sorry. But I am sorry for how things panned out; how the past played into our present.

Refusing to tell her that her blood is poisoned with evil only intensified my hope of protecting her soul before it shattered completely. But she's clearly nearing the edge, preparing to unleash an anger so intense it'll be life-threatening. I know firsthand how rage can make you do unspeakable things.

Her anger should be screaming at me, pinning me down for the turmoil I've put her through, but it's directed at her mother instead. A mother who had no option but to withhold the truth for years.

The possessive streak in me itches to chase Gigi down, claim her, fucking chain her to keep her if I must—

"Have you stopped moping yet?"

*Fucking Poppy.*

To be frank, I forgot she was here.

I lift my gaze from the computer screen, taking in the tilt of her hip and the disapproval practically oozing off her. She slouches against the doorframe, her brows raised in mock enjoyment.

"You're an obsessive freak – you know that, right?" She brushes off my smirk with a roll of her eyes and an impatient gesture over her shoulder. "Pete will turn into a rotting corpse if we leave him in the car much longer."

"But I haven't found her yet—"

“Harry,” she sighs, exasperated. “Give her time.”

I don’t have it in me to argue, having pushed my luck by leaving one of Richard’s men in my car for three days now. He’s a nobody in the grand scheme of things, merely a phone contact of one of the cunts who attended the women’s bidding war, but it’s a breadcrumb I’m not willing to lose. I’ve delayed wrapping the surveillance room in plastic sheets, knowing what will come of Pete before I kill him, and directed my focus onto the CCTV footage. But business never stops, and we need information. Information on where vulnerable girls are being held.

I reluctantly turn my attention from the cameras and stand up from the desk. “You grab him, and I’ll start wrapping up.”

Poppy makes quick work of unloading Pete from my car and ensuring he’s unconscious for the short journey, while I get to work protecting the floor. My limbs groan from the bruising on my stomach as I start taping down the corners.

“Some help over here!” Poppy shouts.

I pull myself to my feet, meeting her in the entryway of my house as she struggles to get Pete over the threshold. “Christ!” I jog over, grabbing him behind the shoulders and hurling him up. “Someone could’ve fucking seen you.”

She grunts, “Then Pete would have a buddy for me to play with.”

My abs scream in protest as we manoeuvre him through the house, narrowly missing the kitchen worktops. It’s a mission, quickly interrupted by a ringing phone. Poppy pays it little attention as we try to divert the body around the dining table. The phone cuts out, only to ring again. Whoever is trying to get hold of her is clearly doing so with urgency.

“Are you going to get that?” I deadpan.

She sighs, aggravated, dropping Pete’s feet from her grasp. I tighten my grip on his shoulders, fisting the material of his shirt, and Poppy manages to prop the phone between her chin and her shoulder to haul up his legs again.

“What is it? I’m a bit busy right now,” she pants breathlessly into the phone. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Her distraction from the other end of the line causes her to loosen her hold on Pete’s legs, the soles of his shoes brushing against the carpeted runner in the hallway and leaving a trail of fine dirt.

“Poppy,” I bark, frustrated.

She hangs up and looks at the phone, dumbstruck. “I have to go.”

I raise my brow, awaiting her answer.

“Someone has set the Circle headquarters on fire.”

I rear my head back, shock and confusion slapping me across the face.

“Your woman really knows how to execute her revenge, doesn’t she?”

Shocked laughter slips from Poppy’s mouth. “She’s good – I’ll give her that.”

Pride overwhelms me just as fast.

*Go get ’em, baby.*

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# SEVEN

*Gigi*

The flames tower high above the building – far higher than I ever imagined them to.

*Well, shit.*

The scent scratches my nose, making it ache so profoundly I'm forced to stuff my face in the crook of my elbow to conceal the burn. Common sense tells me to step back, but the satisfaction of being so close to the blaze is worth any momentary discomfort. That and my pettiness at watching the chaos unfold as people scream there's an intruder in their midst.

Petrol stills soaks my clothes, and the tightness with which I held the bricks to break the security cameras lingers as blisters on my palms. Blinding them of footage is only a short-term reward until Whizz Tech Dan has some backup camera restored, but the satisfaction was never intended to last long. So I fully expect the short, clipped tone as I answer my ringing phone.

“Someone’s having a temper tantrum,” Richard says, his voice eerily calm despite the rage I know is coursing through him.

*I beg to fucking differ.*

It's an effort to rein in my anger, but I divert my attention to stuffing equipment into my backpack. “I’d say my emotions are pretty intact given the circumstances.”

Richard was right when he said I'd hate Harry for the secrets he kept from me. There's no news more heartbreak than knowing this sick,

twisted human is not only a relation, but my fucking father. My *father*.

My own flesh and blood.

The raging-hot fire I felt when the truth was unveiled was so all-consuming I directed my anger in every direction. At Harry. At Richard. At my mother. At William – the stranger who's been living in my house.

Richard had his reasons, as well as Mum for that matter, which I'll soon discover. I just need to find her whereabouts. In the meantime, she's hiding. Probably fled to Paris or something equally as pretentious.

And as for Harry ...

My heart stammers, slamming against my ribcage at the thought of him. Harry comes with lies, secrets, but somewhere through the chaos, impossible truths.

It's taken me close to a week of sidestepping security cameras to unleash my anger on the Circle. I have a plan to undertake, with Mum as a top priority. Harry is on the list somewhere, with a question mark scribbled by his name, since my body can't decide whether I want to be drowned in his touch or to slap him square across the face. Perhaps both. *Probably* both.

Richard needs to die, yet the repercussions teeter on too hefty. Perhaps I'd welcome death as my punishment if it weren't for the trafficking. I will not allow myself to foolishly kill him when there are far greater issues at hand. But the odd humiliation, arson, won't hurt in the meantime.

"For fuck's sake, Gigi, pull yourself together and get back here."

"Careful – your temper is showing."

Shrugging off the jacket covered with embers and dust, I stuff it into the backpack for disposal later, propping my phone between my jaw and my shoulder. "Tell me ... what part were you most disappointed about – that I betrayed your trust, or that my aim was off?" Taking out the oversized hoodie, I pull it on over my torso before returning the phone to my ear. "That I wasn't capable of more destruction? I promise this is only the beginning."

"You're playing a dangerous game," he says slowly. "I'll bring you back here myself if I have to."

"Perhaps." Fitting a baseball cap on my head, I peer over my shoulder towards the chaos I've caused. "But I'll figure out a plan first."

"You fucking—"

I hang up the phone, clutching the device tightly before launching it far in the opposite direction. It lands with a splash, hitting the surface of a lake on

the outskirts of the Circle headquarters. If Richard and his men really were drugging me unknowingly for months, I wouldn't put it past them to do something as simple as tracking my phone.

And I don't intend to head back to the Circle. Not yet anyway.

The fire is enough of a distraction, meaning I can slip out of the area unnoticed, but the reminder of vulnerable girls facing potential danger forces me to pass another glance at the burning building. My throat bobs, my heart screaming to run into the chaos while Richard's vulnerable and see what information I can find. Just to fucking *try*.

God knows I've fucked up recently, but I'm not prepared to mess this up. I'll give these girls every fighting chance, no matter the consequences. I just pray that the fire stalls everything long enough until I'm able to return with reinforcements.

Determination lining my path, I throw my head down and start running in the opposite direction. I purposely avoid the weak spots of the cameras, knowing there are several eyes seeking my whereabouts.

While I dissected my plan for arson, I kept a close eye on the house, but no matter how long or hard I watched, I came no closer to finding Mum. No matter how much I ache to let the betrayal go, I simply *can't*. I'm not ready to step back into the Circle, but there's someone with access to footage who can help.

Thankfully, Harry still resides down a quiet street. I trust my luck with climbing the neighbour's fence, hoisting myself over it and landing in a squat at the back of his garden. Approaching the house, I keep my legs crouched and flatten my back against the brick wall, peering around for signs of an open window. It'd be far easier to knock on his front door and demand answers, but there are two issues with that.

First, I doubt Harry will allow me to access files that would lead to my mother's whereabouts and potentially harm her.

Second, I don't trust myself around him. It'll only be a matter of time before he weaves his web and I'm roped in by his strong gaze and persuasive storytelling.

Even the thought is distraction enough, so it takes the neighbour's barking dog to snap me into focus. With a shake of my head, I push open the cracked window leading to the kitchen and pull myself through. I shimmy my body inside and land with an "oomph" on the floor.

I rise to my feet cautiously, treading on the tips of my toes as I make my way to Harry's surveillance room. Slipping out the trusty bobby pin from underneath my cap, I make light work of the locked door. It gives way with a click, and I slip through, halting my steps just over the threshold.

Shock causes me to mutter, "What the hell ...?"

The entire room, floor, ceiling, and walls, is coated in plastic sheeting. All footage is covered, the transparent texture making the screens appear warped and distorted. A bright light from one panel reflects onto the floor, drawing me closer. I crouch to my knees, inspecting the scarlet droplets.

*Since when did this turn into a fucking torture chamber?*

"Well, well, princess ... that entrance was quite the show."

My eyes shoot open.

"You really couldn't keep away."

**SHIT!**

My immediate reaction is to grab the first item on the floor laid out beside the remnants of blood. Curling my fist, I turn quickly, putting strength into the throw. It connects with the side of Harry's head. He tumbles from the shot unexpectedly, collapsing straight into my arms, his legs giving way underneath him.

*Oh fuck!*

Fuck, fuck, *FUCK!*

I curse with the effort of trying to keep his body from connecting with the floor, forcing my fingers to cooperate with gripping his T-shirt. But he's far too heavy. His body slumps against the floor, as graceful as I can manage to let him drop. His face falls to the side, giving way to a red mark forming on the side of his temple.

It isn't until Harry's lying on the sheets, arms sprawled out at his sides, that I realise I picked up a golf club. Blood drips from the end, smothering the floor. With a double-take of his unconscious form, relief sweeps through me that I didn't open a wound, but I probably left one hell of a bruise instead.

The blood is someone else's, which strangely fills me with comfort.

*God, why did he have to be here?*

*Why did he have to scare me like that?*

*And why did I have to act in self-defence?*

Guilt has me pacing the square room and peering towards Harry. With fear eating me alive, I crouch beside him and push my finger into his side.

An uncomfortable groan slips from his lips, and he starts to stir.

“Oh, thank God,” I breathe.

I hoist him up by his armpits, pulling him back towards the desk and resting him against one of the wooden legs. Tearing down the sheets from the walls gives way to screens that force me to squint against their harsh light.

I pull open one of the drawers and retrieve a roll of duct tape. If Harry weren’t so persuasive about trying to turn my thoughts sideways, then maybe I’d think twice about restraining him against the leg bolted to the floor. But if I’m looking to escape here unscathed, I need something substantial to keep him still.

Since I can’t climb behind the desk, I mount his lap, kneeling over his thighs to tighten the restraints around his wrists. I pull tight, making sure he can’t bamboozle me by escaping the makeshift cuffs.

Harry stirs further, his head rolling against his shoulders as he starts to come to. I focus on making his wrists secure despite how distracting his mouth close to my neck feels.

“I would say I’m surprised ...” Harry drawls. “But it was only a matter of time before you came crawling back to me.”

I pull the cuffs, content with the work. “Who says I’m crawling to anyone?”

He chases my neck with his mouth, brushing his lips over the skin with a gentle hum. “You are on your knees, aren’t you?”

I scoff. “I hate you.”

“I hate you too, baby.”

I shake my head, shimmying off his lap and approach the desk. I search for my address in the computer system, greeted by several angles of my family home.

*Bingo.*

I enlarge the view, allowing it to take up a few screens as I tinker with the trackpad and the keyboard, bringing up the past few weeks of footage. I brace my palms against the desk, watching closely at a times-ten speed for any signs of my mother. Or anyone of any importance, for that matter. God, just a fucking indication of where I can find her.

“Why’d you tie me up anyway?” Harry asks.

I gnaw at my lip, keeping a watchful eye on the CCTV as a dog-walker scurries past. “If you kept out of the way, then I wouldn’t have had to.”

“It’s my house,” he barks a laugh, composing himself quickly. “Seriously, why?”

“I don’t know – shit.” I hit pause, rewinding back a day’s worth of coverage after getting distracted by Harry’s prying. “I guess I just didn’t trust you.”

“I wouldn’t have hurt you. You know that, right?”

The vulnerability in his voice has me peering towards him. His candid behaviour and the truth in that statement forces me to brush off the comment as I return to the computer screen.

“Not like knocking you out with a golf club to the temple, right?” I joke.  
“Sorry about that.”

“I’m serious, Gigi.” He pauses, repeating with quiet emphasis, “I would never intentionally hurt you.”

“You should have thought of that before lying to me.”

The comment tastes stale on my tongue. I’ve dealt far worse to hurt Harry than a few non-truths, even if the latter hurts so profoundly it feels life-shattering. My discomfort basks in the silence between us, extending to the point I debate whether he heard me at all.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” I admit.

Harry exhales a tortured, “Fuck.”

The vulnerability in his voice forces me to turn towards him.

“Don’t do that.” His long legs are spread out on the floor, arms still tied behind his back, yet he makes no effort to move. “I’m sorry for not telling you.”

My gaze returns to his face. “Are you?”

“Yes … but not for the reasons you might think.”

I clear the lump in my throat with a cough. The desire to pry holds strong, but the pain that inevitably comes with truth forces me to brush it away. A few minutes pass of noticeable silence, accompanied by the tape running at speed. With each passing second offering no sign of my mother, anxiety claws at me.

I don’t know what I’ll do if I can’t find her.

I can’t explain it – I just *have* to.

I *need* to.

A hiss breaks through my intrusive thoughts, followed by shuffling on the sheeted floor. I ignore the distraction until it comes a second time, and a third.

“Something the matter?” I ask.

“You really worked hard on the restraints.” Harry stops his pursuit, and I practically hear the smile in his voice. “Don’t suppose you can loosen them a little?”

“Hilarious.” I maintain my focus ahead of me. “Any excuse to get me back on your lap.”

“Guilty as charged,” he muses.

A few minutes pass, and though this time they’re subtle, I pick up on the adjustments of Harry’s posture in an attempt to seek a comfortable position. I pass a subtle glance over my shoulder, watching as he tries to adjust himself. A wince in his expression as he attempts to sit up straighter has me pausing.

“Is everything oka—”

“Fucking fantastic,” he retorts, his response clipped.

He’s fighting clear discomfort, and I’m already making my way over to him before I can second-guess myself. He lifts his head on my approach.

“It really was just a guilt trip so you’d straddle me,” he says with a slow Cheshire-cat smile, though this time I don’t believe him. “Scout’s honour.”

I gesture towards his lap and crouch to my knees. “May I?”

His head moves sideways in a mocking tilt. “You never have to ask, princess.”

Carefully, I manoeuvre myself until I’m hovering above him, far enough away that I can sit back on his knees rather than whatever is causing him pain. As my hand draws closer to the bottom of his T-shirt, that teasing expression immediately drops. He turns his face away just as I lift the fabric to reveal black-and-blue skin.

*Fucking hell!*

“That’s no guilt trip!”

Jaw rigid, he groans, “Just loosen the cuffs.”

“Harry!”

“Gigi.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“The cuffs,” he announces again, bored.

Aggravated by his lack of answers, I reach around him towards the tape. “Why didn’t you tell me—?”

In one swift movement, he clasps my wrists in his large hands and forces his knees up against my back, pinning me to his chest. My head falls into

the crook of his neck, forcing me to inhale his cologne. With nothing between us at all, not even air, Harry comfortably rests his chin on my shoulder.

“If it’s any consolation ...” he says, while I’m still pulling myself together, “there’s several things I haven’t told you.”

I twist my wrists, trying to pull myself free, but Harry has the upper hand. *Literally*. My fingertips just about scrape the remnants of tape on the floor. If his lips weren’t peppering kisses across my jaw, I’d shake my head in disbelief.

“You got out the cuffs.”

“Mmm.” His smirk ghosts my skin. “I did.”

“How—? Never mind,” I cut myself short, sagging against his chest in defeat. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s nothing.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.” He draws his head back just enough that I can see the attention in his gaze. “In the grand scheme of things, it’s *nothing* compared to the lengths I’d go to for you.”

*Oh God.*

And I just knocked this man unconscious with a fucking golf club.

I twist as far as I can from my locked position on his lap, studying his face and the way his eyes hold mine. I watch him intently, knowing that whatever we are, whatever this is between us, it’s something only we’ll ever understand. It’s toxic, dangerous, and fucking complicated. But it’s *us*.

Harry leans closer ever so slightly as the truth barrels through me.

I would undertake just as harsh a punishment, if not infinitely worse, for him.

“I would have—”

“I know,” he says softly.

He leans so far forwards his mouth leaves a trail of hot air against my throat. His nose brushes the spot between my neck and my shoulder, followed by a passing graze of his lips. I could shove him away. *Should* shove him away. Instead I let my head drop against Harry’s shoulder as heat floods through me.

A near-silent growl reverberates through his chest as I lean more against him, widening my thighs a little. Harry shifts his hips, rubbing against my

backside with enough pressure that I'm quickly reminded of the length of him.

"You feel that?" he whispers low. "You were made for me."

The part of me screaming, "Traitor!" dissipates. I'm already starting to move against him. He hisses at the contact and swears, "Gigi—"

I bring my hips further down, deeper, pressing far enough against him that I feel the pressure of his cock pressing exactly against my—

"R-right there," I breathe.

I inch closer, arching my back, until I can feel every inch of him through our layers of clothing. He pushes himself harder until there's no room left between us at all, the friction against my clit nearly unbearable. Harry swears again in a long exhale, releasing my hands and tangling his fingers into the back of my hair, wrapping the strands around his wrist. He keeps me on him as we move breathlessly against each other.

"I'm going to tie you up next," he vows against the shell of my ear. "Make you scream my name until your throat's raw—" He cuts himself off, pressing his lips against my neck, where his moan reverberates against me. His other hand splays out against the blood on the floor. "Baby, fuck."

The friction of my nipples against my bra and the tops of my breasts against my T-shirt has me bowing further into his touch, silently begging for *more*. My arm wraps around the back of Harry's neck, clutching onto him and dragging a groan from deep in his throat.

His curses and filthy words sound like whispers through the heartbeat pounding in my ears. Heat builds at the base of my spine, and I arch my back, my breathing uneven. The tip of his tongue slides up my neck, bringing me close to breaking point.

"Please," I beg.

"Gigi," Harry grits out, strained, the words hot on my neck. "I've got you."

He tangles his fists tighter in my hair, moving my head back so he can bring me forwards to rest my temple against his. I buck my hips, my head fully against his now, as I feel the build-up in my core. He's staring at me so intently I let out a moan.

I can't think. Can't breathe.

I palm the back of his head, bringing him closer, and debate slamming my mouth against his. My eyes zero in on his lips and how he trails his tongue over the bottom one.

“Fuck, I want to kiss you so badly—” He cuts himself off with a growl.

Release barrels down my spine, and I break apart. Whimpers escape me, and my eyes screw closed, but I can feel the weight of Harry’s intense gaze through it all. His legs jerk, and he swears again, breathing hard, until I collapse in his arms, limp and trembling.

Breathless, his forehead falls against mine again as if I’m keeping him together. But truthfully, he’s the one preventing me from collapsing in a heap on the floor beside him. I close my eyes, selfishly basking in the moment, wanting to stay here.

*Needing* him to be holding me.

“Gigi?” Harry breathes.

Short of breath, I gasp, “Yes?”

“Last Tuesday.” He clears his throat. “3 p.m.”

“What?”

A raspy exhale of breath. “Your mum was seen at home last Tuesday, heading to the airport. She’s due to return tomorrow.”

My eyes flutter open, and as his words settle, I slowly withdraw my head. I pull myself back far enough that I’m able to look into his eyes properly. His hand untangles from my hair, dropping to my side. A mixture of scepticism and relief curls inside of me, leaving a lingering feeling of doubt.

“Why would you tell me that?”

“I’m not here to make decisions for you. I just hope you make the right ones.” The calmness with which he says it, and the strength of his words, is incredibly convincing. “Your mum is not the enemy here. Trust me.”

I almost believe him.

“Well, she can answer that for herself, can’t she?”

# EIGHT

*Gigi*

Everyone's primary focus is still on dealing with the aftermath of the fire at the Circle headquarters, which makes the journey to my family home easy work. The damage isn't as extensive as I hoped – I heard from Harry that once the fire engines arrived, the blaze was under control within a few hours. The flames were limited to the east wing, a collection of cellars, cleaning closets, and storage space.

Richard will recover quickly from the loss.

Fucking typical.

Despite knowing their attention is elsewhere, I slip down dark alleyways rather than use the main roads, letting the cover of nightfall mask my journey. I approach the familiar street, mistakenly stepping in a puddle on the pavement. The water soaks through my shoes, dampening my socks and making my next steps squelch.

I can practically feel the shake of Harry's head; his plea for me to turn around and head the opposite way. The weight of his presence; the beady eyes I can feel through his computer screen as I trail up the driveway towards the front door. It's enough for me to flip my hand up and offer the street's patrol camera a middle finger.

The distance to his house is short – twenty minutes max, albeit quicker on the Harley. Mine still stands at the Circle headquarters, if Richard hasn't smashed it up by now.

Determined to find my mother, to *hurt* her, I approach the house with little plan. No fancy weaponry – Richard took that away from me, my Glock now a distant memory. No right or wrong way to approach this situation. Just an overwhelming desire to discover the truth, no matter what it takes.

Yet Harry's words ring through my mind.

*"Your mum is not the enemy here. Trust me."*

I've grown accustomed to brushing off similar comments, but Harry knows far more than I give him credit for. Anything he says nowadays seems to be laced with elements of the truth. He's cryptic in a way I despise but have learned to willingly accept.

Mum's Audi sits on the driveway. I peer through the windscreen, spotting the suitcase on the back seat, still there after she returned home from her flight.

I stop a few paces from the front door, an eerie calmness soaking through me. But I'd be a fool to think I have time on my hands. Harry's on his way, or someone far worse. The thought pushes me forwards, and I twist the front door handle, which is suspiciously unlocked.

Without making a sound, I slip inside. A low light shines through the hallway, lighting my path as I sneak into the kitchen and take a knife from the rack. I wrap my hand around the hilt, the metal cold against my palm.

I tighten my grip, giving myself the confidence to continue. *Do it*, my mind shouts in encouragement. *Just do it!*

Taking steps forwards, I turn the corner, skidding to a stop. Someone's standing in my path. My chest constricts sharply, causing an involuntary sound to catch in my throat as I'm confronted with the barrel of a gun.

"Don't fucking move," the voice says.

I look past the weapon towards where William stands at the end of it, his expression harsh and his gaze narrowed. I always thought "Dad" was weak, yet he looks merciless where he stands in the doorway.

"Where is she?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Around."

William slips his phone from his front pocket, bringing it to his ear. The call rings only once before someone answers. "She's here ... I won't let her leave ... I will." He hangs up, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

"Was that Richard?"

He lifts a shoulder, deflecting the comment.

I breathe, “Who are you?”

“A father.” He smiles wickedly as he repositions the gun in both hands, directing it against my temple. “Or a stranger, in the grand scheme of things.”

My gaze moves over his shoulder, checking for any sign of my mother. Is she around? Is she all right? The knife in my palm suddenly feels unbearably heavy as I turn back towards William.

“I just want some answers,” I say calmly, attempting a step around him. “Just tell me where she—”

“SIT. DOWN!”

He charges forwards, gun still in tow, and pushes with enough force that I stumble against the floor. The knife almost slips from my grip, but I tighten my palm, hissing at the burn of the sharp metal.

“I’m not fucking around!” he shouts, shaking the gun in my face, the metal groaning with the movement.

“Okay … okay …” I bring my free hand up in a sign of mercy. “I believe you.”

“You fucking kids. It’s *always* you fucking kids.” He starts to pace, muttering under his breath with each step. “Years … years I wasted my life, all because she put you rotten kids first. You were always the fucking priority.”

The priority? No. I witnessed Mum’s behaviour firsthand, her disdain towards me when I tried to *prioritise* Jack. William has it all wrong.

A sly grin slowly forms across his mouth at catching the confusion sweeping over me. I watch his every move, from the way his hand loosens around the gun to the way he crouches just a metre away.

“Maria swore her life away to protect you and your brother. Had me rot in this house just because he didn’t want people knowing what happened.”

“He—?”

“Fucking Richard! Who else do you think?” He tsks, hissing through his teeth. “Richard made a vital error having you kids. He never wanted children, but of course, your mother was young and besotted with him.” He scoffs, shaking his head, but I can sense the anger in the way the vein in his neck starts to throb.

“She had Jack, knowing Richard wanted nothing to do with him. He let her live quietly at first, planting a story about a drunken one-night stand, but you—” He cuts himself off, trying to retain the fury building inside of him.

“You were always the fucking problem. One night together after years of limited contact – that’s all it took. All it took for her to get knocked up again, and for Richard to form a plan that would sign *both* our lives away.”

The words tumble out of me. “I’m sorry.”

“I told her! I fucking *told* her she should just abort you – even pushed her down the stairs once. Didn’t fucking work, though, did it?” He’s near seething at this point, his palms starting to shake against the gun. “If people found out he had kids, it was all over. His dirty offspring would be entitled to his fortune. *That* and the fucking Italians and whoever else would have leverage over him.”

“But that doesn’t explain ...”

“Richard needed a stand-in-father to foolproof his story. Someone to sit and do his dirty work while he acted like his double life didn’t exist. So the story was planted ... The drunken one-nighter who was riddled with guilt and looking to make amends miraculously reappeared, wanting to take responsibility and become the father he ought to be.”

*William.*

He was forced to play the role Richard should have stepped into by acting as our father, albeit not a very convincing one given my childhood. Not an ounce of interest in anything. Never taking Jack to football practice, nor me to ballet class. It was always ... it was always Mum.

“Why?” I breathe. “Why did you do it?”

“Why does anyone do anything in this world?” He gets right in my face and screeches, “MONEY! It’s always about fucking money!”

The urge to back away on top of the information overload has me clawing at my temples. I can’t handle all this, yet I can’t find it in me to pass up on a final opportunity to learn the truth.

I push my luck further. “But that makes no sense ... If Richard was so adamant we couldn’t know, then why were we allowed to join?”

“Because he’s a fucking fool?” he says as if the answer is obvious. “Plans changed when Jack came snooping. Richard was awestruck with your brother and saw a part of himself in him. He thought he could create a weapon while trying to keep his deepest secret hidden.”

It’s the most insight I’ve ever received about Jack’s time within the Circle, though it feels farther from anything I’ve ever dreamed of.

I press, “What happened?”

William catches the glimmer in my eye and snaps his mouth shut.

*Fuck.*

I was so close.

Instead, he says, “After Jack died, Maria was under strict instruction to never let anybody discover the truth. She loved you kids more than anything, but she had to convince me she wouldn’t let you get as close as Jack did. Even if that meant laying a hand on you.”

Something sour envelops my stomach. “So, what … you were reporting everything back to Richard?”

“Every. Insignificant. Detail. No matter how much it broke her, Maria tried everything to keep you quiet. But Richard knew you were close to finding him, and he was tricked into seeing the same potential in you he saw in Jack. He simply made it easier for you to find the Circle. And by finding the Circle, you’d find him.” He sneers. “Your mother was punished for not upholding her end of the bargain.”

My face pales suddenly, and I feel as cold and numb as ice.

“That should have been the end of it. I was so close to getting out of here. I should’ve been free—” William cuts himself off with a curse, hitting himself over his head with the weapon. “Maria wanted you to move out so badly, but of course, you didn’t listen. Then she forced you to go live with that fucking kid, Greg.”

William starts to pace, having riled himself up to such an extent that his whole body is shaking with tremors. He starts muttering under his breath. “I could’ve left … I could’ve been free …”

In the moment of distraction, I edge closer towards the open doorway, fearful of what’s become of my mother. I make my movements slow, darting my attention towards William where he continues to mutter, faster and more jumbled now. He switches off the safety of the gun, white-knuckling it in his grip.

Words I never thought I’d say flood to the forefront of my brain.

*Please tell me Mum’s okay.*

I’m just a few short inches from slipping out of the room unscathed when I hear a cry for help. It’s muffled, but it screams for my attention.

*Mum.*

William’s head whips towards the open doorway, catching my near escape. I dart forwards on my knees, slicing the knife across the back of his heel. He falls to the floor with a shout, clutching the back of his leg and seething in pain.

“GET BACK HERE!”

I pull myself to my feet and run out of the room. A gunshot whistles through the air, sending glass flying and impaling a wall light. I shriek, shielding the side of my face from debris.

“WHERE ARE YOU?” I scream.

My hand splays against the wall, trying to find my balance as I run through each room. Another cry for help steers me towards the living room.

The air whooshes out of me. “Mum!”

She’s lying gagged and cuffed on the carpet. Her hands are purple from the restricted blood flow, and her wide eyes are tear-stained and-red rimmed. I rush over, crashing to my knees and running my shaky hands over her.

“Tell me what to do,” I rush out, flustered. “What’s hurting you?”

**EVERYTHING.**

*Everything is fucking hurting her!*

“We need to get you moving, okay?” I start working on the cuffs at her wrists, slicing the knife against the rope. “I’m going to get you out—”

A bang echoes through the air, but I duck just in time, feeling it pass closely above my head. The bullet hits the wall behind me. I whip my head up as William stumbles into the room, ready to fire another shot.

Barely thinking, I launch the knife through the air, and it lands with a *whoosh* in the centre of his chest. He looks down at the blossoming wound in disbelief, taking one step backwards, then the next, until he’s stumbling, his back slamming against the wall. Death drowns his every facial feature, yet he steadily lifts the gun higher. Straight towards us.

“NO!”

He fires the shot and falls to the floor.

The body I’m clutching onto jolts with the landing bullet, and a heavy dose of liquid sprays over my face. Red blinds me, limiting my sight. But I know. I can fucking *feel* the devastation sweeping through me as I wipe the blood from eyes.

“M-Mum?” My voice wavers. “Mum!”

Her weary gaze finds mine, a tear slipping from her eye. I rip the remaining cuffs from her wrists, tugging the gag from her mouth. Blood pours from her chest, soaking the clothes on her frail body.

“FUCK!” I throw my palms over the wound, but it gushes faster than I can prevent it. My hands are shaking so violently the liquid slips between

my fingers. “I-I … I’ll call for help. Just stay here—”

A shaky hand wraps around my wrist, halting my movement. My gaze falls to my mother, who keeps me still, and the weak shake of her head. Her chapped lips move over the word: “Stay.”

“But you need help.” My voice cracks. “Please. Please, let me help.”

“G-Gigi.” Her smile is broken, pain seeping through her, yet her eyes still glow with flickers of life. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. It’s not fucking okay—”

“Don’t …” She inhales a breath, wincing. “Don’t s-swear.”

Laughter slips from me, masking the sob falling from my chest. She still manages to retain that smile despite her pressed lilac shirt being drenched with scarlet. God, she’s soaked in it. Her hair. The floor.

“Gigi?” she asks. “D-do something … for me.”

“Anything,” I breathe.

“Take the r-rug … to the … dry cleaners. It’s t-too pretty to be … ruined.” She somehow manages to pull a smile from me despite the pain I know is tearing through her. It turns sad quickly as I watch how she winces with the slightest movement. “I-I’m sorry for everything I … I did to you.”

“It’s okay,” I soothe, brushing her hair back from her forehead. “I-it’s okay. Just hold on. Please. S-stay with me, okay? I’m so sorry.”

She shakily grabs my fingers, but her grip slips from the blood seeping off our skin. “I hope … I hope y-you can forgive me.”

“Of course. Of course I forgive you,” I whisper. “B-but why? Why would you do that for us?”

“You … you do anything … f-for the ones you love.”

Her eyes start to droop, her attempts at gripping my hand loosening, until her palm falls limp at her side.

“Mum!” I grip her stained shirt in my hands. “MUM!”

A car pulls up outside, tyres screeching against the driveway. The headlights shine through the window, pinning me to the spot. But I can’t find it in me to move. I can’t leave. I can’t.

“Run,” Mum whispers so quietly I barely hear her.

“But Mum—”

“G-Gigi.” She brings unbearable strength into her voice. “Run.”

# NINE

*Harry*

I'm torn in two directions. My head screams at me to give Gigi the distance she needs and the opportunity to seek the answers she craves. The answers she *deserves*. But my heart shouts louder, desperate to run after her and protect her from the dangers she might face.

The middle finger directed right at me through the security camera made me smug for merely a second, yet the minute she closed the door and disappeared out of sight, I was already mounting my Harley.

The roads are suspiciously quiet at this time of night, as if I'm being given a saving grace to race to the house as fast as possible. Yet with each mile closer to the Thomas family home, the nearer I get to vomiting in my helmet. Will she still be there? Christ, will she be all right?

I just fucking pray she thought better of her anger and hasn't inflicted pain on her mother. But who am I to share my opinion on violence when I smashed Pete's head into a bloody pulp only yesterday?

Each thought has me revving the gas harder, racing down the streets through the increasing downpour, until I'm skidding to a stop outside the house. The headlights of the bike line my path, shining through the bay window. I keep the engine running, kicking on the stabiliser as I rest the helmet on the driver's seat and dismount.

Everything is quiet. Suspiciously so. Even a step forwards seems too loud. But I saw Gigi enter the home, and that's enough motivation for me to head up the driveway and twist the handle of the front door, stepping inside.

It's bitterly cold as I enter, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. The house is silent, save for a low whistle emitting from the back of the house. I follow the noise slowly, casting my gaze into each room. But the back door steals my attention as it swings off its hinges ... as though someone left in a hurry. It moves violently with a heavy gust of wind, the wood slapping the outside brick wall and echoing through the home.

I pull the door closed and turn the lock. The second it's sealed shut, the thick stench of blood invades my senses. When you've been doing this job for as long as I have, there's nothing more distinguishable than the scent of death. And this house reeks of it.

It's so unbelievably still that no living person could possibly remain here, yet an overwhelming sense of panic forces the word out of me. "Gigi?"

I might as well have not said anything with how loud my ears ring. The whole house seems to be high-pitched screaming.

I anxiously approach the living room, rounding the corner, only to be confronted by William. Though he's as dead as I've ever seen him, which is ironic given he had the personality of a fish. I don't feel an ounce of remorse at the sight of him lying dead on the hardwood floors, a gaping hole in the centre of his chest where something impaled him.

A gun rests in his palm. But the more concerning factor is the path of blood – a trail leading from the cream rug, now drenched crimson, to William's body, then off in the direction of the kitchen.

I don't know how I'll cope if Gigi's hurt, even if I betrayed her before. But this is far different. This is a regret I'll never recover from, knowing I willingly let her enter this house – *watched* her enter – without being by her side.

Richard could be here any moment, if he isn't already. And the thought alone that I'll have an advantage over him, over Gigi's possible whereabouts, has me striding into the kitchen. I step onto the tiled floors and follow that scarlet trail to where it rounds the corner of the kitchen island.

Something – no, *someone*. Someone lies there, legs spread out in front of them, emitting a bloody puddle from their body. My palms are sweating, my pulse racing as I gain each step closer.

Heart practically in my throat, I turn the corner.

*Jesus Christ.*

Maria, Gigi's mum, rests loosely against the counter, a knife clutched in her palm at her side. I brace my hand against the marble countertop, needing to hold myself up. Something foul, something like acid, burns the back of my throat.

Betrayal and disbelief curl through me. She hurt her mother in as gruesome a murder as any. This feeling that tightens my chest isn't anger; this is grief, burning. It's fucking wrong.

I thought I'd seen the worst of Gigi, but this is an act of hatred I refuse to recognise.

I pinch the bridge of my nose tightly. "Fuck."

My gaze moves over Maria's body once again, taking in her pale, ghostly white skin, made clear through the low light from the living room. Her eyes are barely open, glazed and distant. I'd think she were dead if her head wasn't lolling towards me.

"Richard?" she croaks, weakly attempting to lift the weapon. "I ... I'll k-kill you."

I rush into a crouch on the floor, carefully lifting her body. The knife moves from her palm, the metal rattling against the tiles as it slips from her pale fingers. Her dark hair, impossibly similar to Gigi's, is now matted with blood and fans across my lap.

"It's not Richard," I say softly.

Her pupils wander upwards slowly, towards my face, and a smile of recognition graces her mouth.

Her lips move.

I lean down, trying to hear her clearer. "What is it?"

"She ... she f-forgives me."

I force a cough to mask the flood of relief. It wasn't her. Gigi didn't cause this. But the solace turns stale quickly, morphing into devastation.

Maria croaks, "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I know ... y-you always ... loved her—"

A long, low gurgle catches the back of her throat. A cough whips through her, blood staining her teeth and slipping from the corners of her mouth as she nears death.

"It's okay," I tell her quietly.

Something gathers just behind her breath, like the body's last attempt to hold on. A rough inhale, almost like a faint whistling, comes with a

dragging resistance.

I've heard the death rattle, but never like this. The desperation to hold on for just a moment longer almost sounds like drowning. As though her lungs are folding inwards and her body doesn't know how to let go.

"M-make them pay ... f-for what they did to my children."

"I will."

She doesn't respond. Just one more breath – longer this time, almost peaceful – and then nothing.

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# TEN

*Harry*

## *Flashback*

My cheeks and my stomach ache, but in that fucked-up way where you laugh so hard your entire body hurts and you feel like you're about to piss yourself.

Life used to be drowned in misery, money shortages, and constantly watching over my shoulder for the next obstacle to rip my life apart. Now I spend my days reeling in a kind of happiness I've never known.

Who would've thought murder – something I used to fear so intently – would make me so fucking happy?

It didn't come easy. It took months of training, an initiation, then taking the life of an innocent man in front of an audience. All small prices to pay for the benefits I now reap. The feeling is toxic, otherworldly, and fucking addicting.

Jack punches the wheel three times, each hit sending a screeching honk into the evening rush-hour traffic. He swerves around motorists, racing down the hard shoulder to bypass the busy streets of London. The music blares, a tune by the Killers tearing through the speakers as he pushes further against the pedal.

Hands wrap against the back of my headrest as Andy leans between the two front seats. “Fucking turn it down, will you?”

A grin spreads over my face. Despite his command, he wears a smile just as wide. It's that intoxicating revelation after a successful heist. A bank

robbery and a side assassination en route home that we were paid money for. A lot of fucking money – a detail that camouflages any regret I’m supposed to feel.

Jack laughs over the shrieking speakers, turning down the volume a few notches. He rests his elbow leisurely on the door of his Jaguar, half-balancing out the window.

“Tell me,” Andy says from the back seat. “What was up with you and that redhead earlier?”

“Who – Poppy?” A smirk stretches over the lower half of his face. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. It was nothing.”

“Didn’t look like nothing,” Andy says. “She was fucking smitten.”

“Smitten?” I bark a laugh. “Didn’t you see her punch him?”

Jack rubs his jaw, a shoulder hidden behind his palm. He throws his hands in the air and confesses, “I’m fucking in love with her, lads—”

“The fucking wheel!” Andy shouts.

Jack slaps his hands back on the wheel, hitting it with such force the car barks its horn again. “It’s love, I tell you,” he emphasises with another three hits of the wheel.

The laughter rumbles in my chest, and I pinch my nose to try to rid the image of Jack and Poppy. I barely know her, though I’ve seen her around plenty of times. She’s been in the field far longer than us, especially Andy and me. And now, much to my surprise, Jack is supposedly obsessed with her.

I snicker at the memory of him trying to sweet-talk her into dinner, only to receive a fist to the face. It didn’t stop his persistence though. Poor lad. She plays hard to get with him, though I notice her sidelong glances in the cafeteria or on the field when he handles a gun with precision or slashes a knife with a confidence I aspire to.

“I’m passing home to change before we head out.”

It’s tradition that we bask in the adrenaline after a successful heist. Richard tends to rent out the most extravagant venues in London, keen to revel in the dark side.

Through my busy schedule, Greg continues to cause chaos, and Richard helps to clean the mess, sparing no expense to wipe his record and clear the crime scenes. Though he hasn’t gone as drastic as murder since Dad, thankfully. He’s even helped manage the payments on the house – a factor I’m grateful for, and I’m yet to return the favour.

“That all right with you both?” Jack asks, pulling me back to the present.  
“Just need to change out of these bloody clothes—”

*FUCK.*

Of course he’d need to get ready. It’s as simple a statement as any, but I didn’t understand the weight of it until now. Didn’t realise it would mean I’d potentially see *her* again.

I’ve spotted her a few times since my first visit. Nothing more than pathetic desperation as I hid around corners and just silently ... watched. But the simple act of witnessing her is enough to make my heart race.

I highly doubt Jack would appreciate me fantasising over his little sister. Christ, she doesn’t know my name. I don’t even know her name. But I don’t have to. I’ve learned very little about her since I first entered the Thomas family home, but I know enough. She’s kind, alluring, but also unreadable and complicated as hell.

“Oi,” Jack barks, giving me a quick once-over. “You all right, lad?”

I force my throat clear. “Fine.”

I catch the hick of Andy’s brow through the rearview mirror and brush it off, trying not to think about where we’re going too intently. Jack pulls up outside his house, and I make an excuse to step out the vehicle to stretch my legs, while Andy opts to stay glued to the back seat.

We step inside the home, and he waves his hand dismissively towards the downstairs. “You know where everything is. Just make yourself at home.”

I’ve only been here a handful of times, but it’s enough to know the layout of the home. Where they store the coffee, where the downstairs bathroom is. But I’m more interested in the secret spaces where I can hide, and the corner bedroom on the first floor.

I linger at the bottom of the staircase, waiting until Jack has entered his room before I quietly trail up the steps, missing each creak and weak spot in the floorboards I’ve come to memorise through my visits. The room with the chipped painted door calls to me. I linger outside of it, listening for signs of movement.

The last thing I want is to waltz in there and give myself away. Though, thinking about it, if she was changing, I wouldn’t mind—

*What the fuck is wrong with you?*

I’d slap myself across the temple if I weren’t so petrified the sound might give me away. Instead I divert my attention to twisting the handle and stepping inside.

The scent of her perfume washes over me, sweet and feminine, but there's something stronger too as I close the door behind me. Her en-suite bathroom door remains closed, yet steam slips through the cracks. The scent of shampoo, conditioner, body wash, and ... roses?

Yes, that's it! Roses. She smells like fucking rose petals. I haven't quite been able to put my finger on it until now.

Pocketing the thought for later, so I can scale the supermarket shelves for the scent, I sweep my gaze over her room. I address the details: the quilted bedspread hanging over the lower half of the mattress, the photographs lining her desk, even the fairy lights draped over her bed frame. Typical shit a girl would have, yet the last thing I would do is call her unoriginal.

A flash of pink hangs leisurely out of her drawers, and my heart practically lurches at the sight. Is that her underwear?

*Fucking jackpot—*

The door to the en suite flies open. I have a split second to throw myself inside the wardrobe and pull the door closed behind me before she moves further into her room. The slats in the wardrobe door allow me an obstructed view of the white towel tucked underneath her armpits, giving way to smooth olive skin. Her feet pad against the rug in front of the full-length mirror.

She's everything I remember and everything I don't.

She hums something under her breath as she pulls her hair up off her neck. The quiet sound hits me far harder than it should, invoking a dark madness within me. I ache to grab a fistful of her hair, twist it around my wrist, and yank her head backwards so I can look deep into her eyes.

She isn't just pretty; she's otherworldly, vaguely threatening, and capable of undoing me with just one breath.

People would have to tear the Circle from my cold, dead hands before I'd willingly turn the other way. I love killing. I adore money. I crave the darkness. But I know the only thing that could convince me to turn the other way would be her.

Call me delusional. Call me fucking psychotic. Christ, call me anything. But just promise me that one day you'll call me *hers*.

She rises onto her toes, reaching towards the matching pink silk pyjama set draped over the top of the mirror. Steam from the shower fogs the edges, distorting my view, but not before she drops the towel to her feet.

*Die.* That's the word that impales me.

I'd happily fucking *die* right now if it weren't for the simple fact I can't touch her.

I grip my jaw hard to conceal the smirk I can feel spreading dangerously fast across my mouth. I don't even know her name, but I know what her body looks like. The curve of her waist. The way her long legs stretch into the roundness of her ass. She bends over to slip her feet into the silk shorts, giving me a direct view of her perfect—

*Fuck my life.*

It takes everything in me to stay still, and I restrain myself, wrapping my fist around the doorknob from the inside. I can feel the resistance of the wood against my palm from the pressure, but I just want to fucking hold her.

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to clear my head of the image that will be forever ingrained in my memory. But it lingers. The shape of her hips, the dimples in her spine, the small sounds she makes as she moves to slip on her pyjamas.

I brave my eyes open. Clothed now and arms lifted, she stretches slightly, the dip of her waist disappearing into loose cotton shorts. Her skin catches the lamp's bulb in places. The back of her neck, the line of her collarbone, the soft curve of her back ...

My desire for her isn't just want – it's something deeper. Longing, confusion, and need all bleeding together. Like I can't decide exactly what I want. To touch her, fuck yes. Christ, if I could just get my hands on her—No. That's a dangerous thought when I've just seen her naked and I'm rocking a hard-on in her wardrobe. But just to understand her.

She isn't doing anything, just being herself. But that's what makes it so difficult to look away, causing friction to rise in my throat.

She pauses, eyes suddenly lifting and glancing at where I stand.  
I freeze.

She's staring in the mirror as if she can see straight through me. But she doesn't move. Doesn't call out. Just tilts her head slightly as if she heard something. Then, after a breath, she looks down again, adjusting the strap of her top, and slips back into the bathroom.

That was close.

Too fucking close.

Despite my body screaming at me to chase after her, I silently slip from the wardrobe and step out of the room. With a soft click of the bedroom

door, I take a moment to rest my forehead against the wood, keeping my breathing shallow. She merely looked towards me, yet the truth hit me fast.

I've never craved attention until I tasted a glimpse of hers.

With composure washing over me, I take a step backwards and turn—

A woman stands at the other end of the hallway, her head slightly tilted as she gives me a long once-over. Even from my passing glance, she's the spitting image of Jack and his sister, with thick dark hair and piercing brown eyes. Her expression is unreadable, but it's as obvious as ever.

Their mother has caught me red-fucking-handed.

Wanting the ground to swallow me whole, I run my shaking hand through the front of my hair.

“Jack’s looking for you.”

I nod. “Right.”

She cocks her head towards the staircase. “He’s downstairs.”

I duck my head, keeping a strong gaze on my feet to ensure I won’t trip from utter embarrassment. I slip past her with a quiet, “Sorry,” and descend the stairs, each step quicker than the last.

“Please.”

The woman’s voice freezes my steps. Her bottom lip wobbles, and her hand hovers over her mouth as if she’s trying to stop herself.

“Don’t hurt her. Not like that boy who—”

“Don’t tell me about him.” I cut her off. “I don’t want to know.”

The woman’s eyes flare, as surprised as me at my confidence. But I’m truly a pathetic man when it comes to the girl at the end of the hallway.

“Things are complicated.” Her mum passes a glance towards the room I just exited, keeping her voice low. “She doesn’t know what Jack does. She wouldn’t be able to cope with things in the way he has. She’s strong, but not in the ways you might think.”

“Oi, lad!” Jack calls. “You coming, or what?”

I smile uncomfortably at his mother. “I should go.”

She nods, and although her mouth is closed, she appears shackled with silence. Perhaps the absence of my own mother has me unknowingly aching to protect the peace theirs might be struggling with. I understand the guilt of wanting nothing more than the best for your family. Whether as a parent or a brother, it’s all the same.

As it’s the peace she longs for, I promise, “I would never hurt her.”

There’s a telling silence before she says, “I can sense that.”

Another impatient call from Jack forces me to exhale a tortured breath. My fist curls around the banister, aching to leave. Instead I push forwards, to the top of the staircase, and offer her my hand.

“I’m Harry, by the way.”

Her mouth moves around a genuine smile as she shakes my hand. “I’m Maria.”

“It was lovely to meet you, Maria.”

“You’re a good man, Harry. Your mother would be very proud.”

A sudden sting slashes my heart like a hot knife. Not Dad. Not family. *Your mother.*

I cough to mask the emotion behind my eyelids. The pain has me rubbing my chest to ease the sensation, but I withdraw my hand just as quickly, suddenly hoping it stays.

With a pained smile, I whisper, “I hope so.”

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## ELEVEN

*Gigi*

### *Present day*

My boots are soaked through from icy puddles, but I can't feel my feet. I can't seem to feel much these past few days. Just the cold, and the voice in the back of my skull – the one that sounds like Mum.

*"You do anything for the ones you love."*

Her voice, broken and wheezing, plays in my head like a cruel mantra.

Years of hatred and loathing, all shattered by a simple sentence.

*"I hope you can forgive me."*

Emotion clogs my throat, and I wrap both my hands round my neck, applying pressure. Perhaps to inflict pain and to assure myself I'm still here. That this isn't some cruel, vicious nightmare.

The city is too loud. Too fast. A double-decker bus rushes past where I stand on the corner near Charing Cross station. Laughter cracks through pub doors that slam shut just as quickly.

The world keeps moving as if nothing has changed, but everything has.

The lights of the West End are vibrant and blinding, mocking my mourning and the loss of what we could have been if our lives weren't tainted with Richard.

She told me to run, so I did, fleeing into London, blending in with the bustling streets, desperate to hide from his watchful eyes. The city's big enough to disappear in if I keep my steps right. But with each reminder of why I'm here, I torture myself with the memory.

She's dead.

The thought comes again.

*She's dead.*

I turn down an unfamiliar side street, where the lights are less daunting. Not trusting the eyes I feel on my back, I duck my head, confronted by my own reflection thrown back at me in the puddles. Eyes hollow, mascara sits cracked on my cheeks.

I turn to the brick walls closing in on either side of me, finding the same horror story. A missing poster featuring a hefty price tag and my own face staring back at me, albeit without the screaming grief, "HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?" capitalised in bold letters.

The desperation is pathetic, and it has Richard written all over it.

I pass a man pissing in the alleyway between two dustbins. He yells something towards me, though I can barely hear it. I don't flinch. I let him follow. Let him try, if only to see where it will get him.

When I can no longer hear his stream of urine, I peer over my shoulder to make sure I'm not being followed. I come to a stop, leaning against the brick wall and pressing my forehead to the wet stone so I can close my eyes and *breathe*. But her voice is there again, and now I can see her and the blood coating her body. Even on that carpet I need to get dry-cleaned.

"Hey!" a voice slurs. I turn towards where the drunken man is making his way closer on uneven feet. "I recognise you."

*Oh God.*

I turn, stuffing my hands in my pockets and scurrying away.

"*You're* the girl they're looking for!"

I throw over my shoulder, "Please leave."

"Not for that reward, I won't." He snickers, gaining closer. "You must be pretty important."

*For fuck's sake.*

His distance decreases with each passing second. The end of the alley comes into view, and I quickly round the corner, blending into the sea of people. They move round me, barely noticing I'm there through the buzz of London roaring round us. Sirens, laughter, the low bass of a club, and the Tube shrieking beneath our feet.

"Oi! Come back here," the man calls out. "I need that money!"

I throw a left towards the entrance of an off-licence and slip inside. A bell jingles as it closes behind me, the overhead light humming above my head.

The man behind the counter doesn't look up as I step inside, just keeps flipping through a dog-eared newspaper. I head to the back of the store, a flicker of movement outside the window catching my eye. Thankfully, the door remains closed.

Releasing that pent-up breath from my lungs, I move down the aisles, my gaze trailing over bottles of cheap vodka and warm wine. They're covered in a fine layer of dust, most with an expiration date of last year.

At the end of the aisle, the shop assistant flips the sign on the window from "open" to "closed".

"Hey!" I call out. "I'm still in here."

The man says nothing, returning to his place behind the counter.

I sigh, heading forwards a few steps, accidentally knocking a bottle off the rack in the process.

*Shit.*

It thuds against the floor, rolling out of reach. I crouch down, reaching underneath the shelf and splaying out my fingers to reach it. I grab the bottle in my palm and stand, ready to return it back to its position beside the other spirits.

"Gigi?" a voice says behind me.

My pulse skitters, and my back snaps straight. Slowly, I turn my head over my shoulder, taking in the familiar person merely a metre away. But nothing about the man in front of me is anything close to how I once remember him. Greg's hair is askew, his brown eyes sunken and the colour absent from his face. He looks exactly how I feel on the inside.

My head snaps down as his hand draws nearer to my elbow. I tighten my grip round the glass bottle and warn, "Try to touch me, and I'll shatter this over your skull."

"I'm your *friend*," he insists. "You know me."

"Do I?" I scoff, lowering my voice to a hiss. "You *killed* your dad. Why would you never tell me that?"

"It doesn't matter." He throws his hands in my direction. "As if you haven't hurt people yourself. Look at who you've become!"

"Jesus, Greg—" I cut myself short, trying to calm the racing of my heart. Defeated, I ask, "What are you doing here?"

He says nothing, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his brown jacket. I watch the movement cautiously, not trusting anyone these days. Greg was

once harmless in my eyes, yet the stories Harry graced me with linger at the back of my skull.

“I’m sorry about your mum—”

“Don’t.” My voice shakes.

“I heard what happened to her.”

“Please,” I beg. “I can’t hear it.”

But it’s merely a distraction – one I’m too late to discover.

That jingle echoes above the shop door despite the sign reading “closed”. But these are no regular walk-ins. It’s evident in the way the shopkeeper places his newspaper aside and slips out the front door.

Richard steps into my line of vision, his eyes finding me instantly.

I freeze, the people filtering in behind him going unseen as he stands in the centre. He smiles wickedly and slightly tilts his head, knowing I’m trapped in this small store.

My gaze turns shakily towards Greg. “Did you set me up?”

“They offered me *a lot* of money, Gigi.” A flicker of guilt is hidden in his gaze as he sharpens his jaw. “I’m not the enemy here. All they asked is that I keep you in here long enough.”

My attention moves towards the door. It shuts again, that jingle ringing a final time, sealing us inside.

Richard’s voice echoes from the front. “There’s nowhere to go, Gigi.”

Refusing to let my guard drop, I keep my eyes trained on my father, though I speak to Greg. “I hope the money’s worth it when they drag me away from here.”

“They promised not to hurt you.”

“Of course they did.” Disbelief makes me scoff. “Richard’s not a man to be trusted. I thought you’d know that.”

I shake my head, knowing the lies Greg has been dealt. It’s one of Richard’s narcissistic traits. Even from a distance, he smiles knowingly, patience keeping him still. A man standing near the adjacent aisle veers my focus, and before I can attempt a full glance, Richard starts striding forwards.

My heart drops from the brief distraction. Richard comes closer, *closer*, his fingers skating over my shoulder as I suddenly take off down the aisle to my right. Instinctively, I grab onto the skinny shelf filled with confectionery and pull it across the path. The food scatters to the ground.

“NO!” he yells.

I dart down another aisle, seeing B, my former colleague, jump into view. His knees are crouched, legs parted, attempting to block my escape. His eyes are alert and wild. He pants, “Gigi?”

His distraction lets me slip past. My heart screams for freedom, pounding against my ribs. I send more items flying to the floor, throwing open a fridge door and spilling out bottles of fizz, making them explode. I round the corner, nearing the door.

“Don’t let her leave!”

*That voice.*

The shock of the familiarity creates a fault in my step, and I narrowly miss a shelf.

My head whips to one side and the next, knowing I’m cornered in. In a split-second decision, I throw myself to the floor and crawl underneath the shelving. The metal slices a thin layer from my skin, piercing my back and tangling in my hair as I wrench my head away from the tiles. I cry out, pushing through to army-crawl through the tight space.

A hand wraps round my ankle, dragging me backwards.

With a frustrated cry, I white-knuckle the shelves, keeping myself still. I launch my foot back, feeling the crunch of bone as the sole of my shoe hits the person’s face. In the moment of freedom, I quickly pull myself through.

Determined to attempt my final escape by curving round the aisle, I make a run for the door. But I skid to a stop, two figures standing right in my path. I scream, nearly smacking directly into them.

Richard’s face is twisted in anger as he holds Greg to his chest, clutching his T-shirt. I do a double-take at the gun pressed to his temple, but the distinct click of the safety is enough to make me freeze.

Greg whimpers, “Gigi ...”

“I’ll fucking kill him,” Richard grits, spit flying with the threat. “Don’t think I won’t.”

Disbelief filters through me, limited to a harsh shake of my head. He wouldn’t. But the increasing fear inside of me rises like vomit.

“J-just like Mum, right?” My voice shakes. “You wouldn’t.”

Greg’s eyes find me, petrified, as his bottom lip wobbles.

A huff slips from Richard’s mouth. He recovers in a moment and quirks his brow, smiling a cruel grin. Realisation has every ounce of colour draining from my skin, numbness coating my entire body as his finger tightens round the trigger and he pulls.

“Please,” Greg croaks. “Gigi, I’m sorry—”  
The deafening gunshot roars through the store.  
NO. NO. NO!

A scream tears from my throat, loud and screeching, burning everything. The life drains from Greg’s vision quickly, his brown eyes glazing over with that unmatched shade of grey. Death. The colour is death.

“GREG!”

His body tumbles forwards like a rag doll, his knees crashing to the cold surface. I dart forwards with shaking hands to protect his face and neck before he hits the square tiles.

Shaking his frail, lifeless body, I cry, “Wake up!”  
He’s not moving. He’s not fucking moving.

He’s *dead*—

I gasp for air, but there’s none left.

The blood from the gunshot wound pours quickly down the side of his temple. I shake him again and again, but it rushes out faster.

Richard huffs. “That’s enough.”

I peer up at him slowly, Greg’s blood staining my hands and fuelling the anger seeping through my bones. My body is blistering with bitter, hot anger. I launch myself forwards.

“HOW COULD YOU?”

Strong arms grip my elbows behind my back, keeping me still. B whispers quietly in my ear, “I’m so sorry, Gigi.”

A cry pours out of me with my sheer determination to hurt my father. I manage to slip an arm free to send a fist barrelling into his cheek. He grips his jaw just as fast as B manages to restrain me again.

Richard purses his lips, shaking his head. The heartbreak is far too powerful for me to even feel an ounce of satisfaction at the graze of his skin.

He huffs as if prepared to unleash further harm, but instead, he says, “You can come out now.”

Through the devastation lining my features, I feel my face moving into a frown. Slow and steady footsteps echo on the tiles, starting from across the aisle and drawing closer. They stroll casually round the corner.

My eyes pick up on the shoes first, the immaculate leather, before sweeping slowly up the suit trousers to where the person rests their hands

casually in the deep trouser pockets. Then they slide to the matching jacket that sits on top of a freshly pressed white shirt.

I forget about fighting in B's grip as I'm hit with a wave of shock.

*It can't be.*

"Hello, darling," Jamie Callahan, my ex-boyfriend, says, his mouth twitching into a sly, wicked grin. "Missed me?"

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# TWELVE

## *Harry*

### *Flashback*

He's ... he's dead.

*He's dead.*

*Jack.*

And all I want to do is fucking *run away*.

The Circle is rotting in grief, drowned so heavily in it.

Poppy's eyes flicker towards me, unreadable with her smudged mascara. Andy stands behind the long oak table, hands pressed flat on its surface, head bowed. I can't see his eyes. I'm not sure I want to. Oliver is tucked in a red armchair, the armrests worn and cracked, his trembling hand pressed against his forehead. The lounge, which is often bursting at the seams with energy and laughter, is stunned to utter silence, the grief too heavy.

Richard is leaning against the doorframe, his head ducked, as though he can't bear to look at any of us. But he finally lifts his chin, eyes empty.

*"How?"*

*A freak fucking accident.*

Jack had a big ego, but this was a huge mistake on his part, practically walking into the path of an oncoming bullet.

He was still bleeding when I left. Still clutching onto the remnants of life. He begged – fucked *forced* – me to leave. I didn't want to, but I did.

*Stupid fucking—*

No. No. I didn't mean that.

I didn't mean—

I try to cover my mouth, but I'm quickly reminded my hands are still slick with blood that isn't mine. Blood that's *his*. My hands shake in front of me as I stare at them, droplets dried in the cracks of my knuckles, clotted beneath my fingernails.

“Harry—”

“An accident,” I whisper, still staring at my stained palms. “Just an accident.”

“Wrong answer.” Richard’s voice is clipped. “He died because of *you*. Because you thought you were smart enough to handle it.”

“Boss—”

“You were the only one with a firearm, Harry.”

“STOP!” I turn my head towards Poppy. She runs her hands in a futile effort over her tear-stained cheeks, but they keep streaming. “Stop it. Both of you!”

“Poppy’s right.” Oliver grips his jaw, shaking his head. “There’s nothing we can do about it now. It’s *no one*’s fault. Imagine how his family must be feeling right about now.”

*Family.*

His family.

I need to get out of here. Now.

Richard drops his head and shakes it like he’s quickly composing himself. He mutters something about a car accident in Surrey and the driver’s body reduced to ash, the perfect cover-up for Jack’s relatives with the fire department already on scene, but all I hear is *her* voice in my head. The grief she’s yet to suffer. The lies she’ll be dealt.

The words tumble out of me. “I have to go.”

“Harry?” someone calls.

Another shouts, more determined. “Harry!”

I’m not sure who it is. But I can’t stay here. I *can’t*.

I sprint through the courtyard, past the abundance of vehicles, out through the iron gates, and onto the main road. The rain is relentless as it hammers down.

I need to see *her*. Just for a second. Because she’s the only thing I have left.

A depressing statement, since she doesn’t know who I am despite meaning everything to me.

Streetlights blur, and my chest sharpens with each breath, but I don't stop. Whether it takes minutes, hours, days – it doesn't matter. The second I turn up outside the familiar brick detached house, my gaze is a magnet towards her bedroom window. Her silhouette moves behind the curtain, oblivious to the freight train that's about to hit her. She moves round slowly, with an intimacy she doesn't even know she's giving me.

The curtain moves aside, and she looks out.

For a heartbeat, I swear she's looking at me.

I shouldn't be here. Not like this. Not dripping and broken, watching her like I always do.

But her gaze slides past me, towards the pavement, where a car pulls up. The blue lights of the police car turn off, the vehicle blending into the night. There's a moment of hesitation before the driver's door opens and the officer slips out.

Officer Brady closes the car door behind her and steps onto the pavement, approaching the house. Her shoulders are still, her head ducked in a heavy exhale. Eyes squeezed shut, her fist hovers an inch from the door, a fraction away from the movement that will change the family's life forever.

She knocks her fist against the door. While she waits, she takes the black cap from her forehead, holding it to her chest.

The door opens.

"Mr and Mrs Thomas, may I come in?"

Maria stands in the entryway, her hands gripping the doorframe. She says nothing, and even from this distance, I can see the way she white-knuckles the wood as if it's keeping her stable.

"Mum?" a gentle voice asks. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

Jack's sister appears behind her mother, pushing to stand beside her.

Officer Brady continues to linger on the doorstep, her fingers fumbling round the edges of her cap. "It's best if I come inside."

Maria nods quickly, as if the world has only just caught up with her. She steps aside, and a moment later, Officer Brady crosses the entryway with a dip of her head. I wait for something, *anything*, but the front door closes, sealing me outside. I hover there in the darkness, behind the tree, with the need to go home but the desire to be with *them*.



The kitchen light flickers overheard, the consequence of a cheap bulb and faulty wiring, as I close my front door. The house smells of dust and last night's pizza, the empty cardboard box still discarded on the counter.

My keys slip from my fingers onto the countertop, the rattle loud in the silence. The living-room TV echoes a laugh track through the hall like a sick joke, but the room remains empty.

A voice drifts down from upstairs. "Harry, that you?"

"Yeah," I reply, my voice hollow.

Greg walks down the stairs, his steps loud and making me grimace. He appears at the end of the kitchen, hoodie half-zipped, and his hair still damp from a shower.

Doing a double-take at his appearance, I ask, "You're going out?"

His jaw tightens slightly. "Yeah. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing."

Truthfully, I want him to sit with me in the dark while I mourn and confess my best friend died today. I want to tell him how I saw Jack bleed out while people had to pry me off his dying body. I want to tell him how I'm drowning in guilt. I want someone to tell me it isn't real.

I just don't want to be alone. Not tonight.

Greg texts with one hand, not bothering to look up. "I'm going out to see Gigi."

"Gigi?" I reply flatly. The name means nothing to me.

"Yeah, my girlfriend. I told you about her."

"No, you didn't."

He pauses, finally lifting his chin to meet my eye. "Right. Well. I really like her."

I smile, if only to mask the unbearable silence weighing down on us. Greg gives me a once-over, his brows pulled inwards, but he shakes his head to clear his thoughts. He coughs, silently asking me to move.

"Sorry." I step aside, ducking my head towards the floor, as he takes the keys from the counter. There are still flecks of crimson on the tips of my shoes.

Greg's walking towards the door when his phone rings. He places it to his ear, his expression dropping quickly.

"Woah, woah. Slow down—"

The door slams shut behind him.

I lift my head, watching through the window as he rushes towards my car, the old banger, and climbs inside. His phone is propped between his chin and his shoulder as he turns on the engine and quickly pulls away from the pavement.

My fear of being alone comes to fruition quickly, the silence heavier than when I initially walked inside. It hits me hard, like a whip cracking against my back.

I'm forced to double over, leaning against the counter, palms flat, my breathing slow. Grief has never felt so lonely, and all I want to do is be with *her*.

But she doesn't know me.

She didn't see me.

She never will.

And I'll just keep standing there, watching her and wishing I took the bullet instead.

# THIRTEEN

## *Harry*

### *Present day*

The memory dissipates into thin air, bringing my attention back to the present and the dark wooden coffin being lowered into the ground. I clear my throat, moving my stiff neck round in a slow circle to shift the weight. Even now, even after all this time, I still ache for Gigi's presence.

But we haven't had contact in weeks – not since the death of her mother. I wonder what she's thinking; whether she's taken it hard.

It's a rare sunny day. Light breaks between the clouds, casting an eerie glow on the burial plot right beside Mum's. Her headstone reads: "Beloved Mother and Wife. Always in Our Hearts." It's never been in me to change it, but the connection to Dad always makes me feel unsettled inside. I gave him the same respect in death he treated me with in life – *fuck all*. His body could be rotting in a dumpster for all I care, and that would still be too respectful of a respecting place. Unfortunately, he's right beside her.

"Harry." Emily's voice is a hushed whisper. "You're snarling."

I blink quickly, hiding that anger with the same downcast expression you're supposed to wear at a burial. Greg's death is devastating, yet the wrath in my bones is too powerful for me to stay upset.

I stand at the edge of the grave, mud seeping into my shoes, hands clenched so tight my knuckles ache. It's just Emily and me. I didn't see the need for a family presence – not that we have any anyway – nor did I need a priest to drone on about peace, eternity, and souls being laid to rest when

there's still justice to be found. In addition to all of that, I wouldn't have the faintest idea what Greg would want for his funeral since he was practically a stranger to me in recent years.

I scan the outskirts of the cemetery behind the collar of my black coat, searching for any sign of Richard, only to come up empty.

Greg may have been a nuisance, but his death was inhumane. Body splayed out on the floor of a convenience store without an ounce of decency, a gaping hole in his head, cameras wiped, and footage erased. Only one other person has access to London's cameras the way I do, and they sit in the centre of the Circle.

I know it's Richard.

He'll think this ends with Greg in the ground.

But I'm still above it.

The pallbearers step back, dropping their heads respectfully. I thank them with a stiff nod as they walk away. Their footsteps exit slowly, leaving us in the quiet, apart from the occasional gust of wind making the remaining leaves on the sparse branches rattle above us.

Emily's hand settles on my arm. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

I give her a faint nod and the beginnings of a smile. "Thank you for coming."

She sniffles. "Of course."

"Do you think it's weird Gigi's not here?" I feel the weight of Emily's stare as I confess, "I'd have shown up for her mother's funeral if she'd had one, no questions asked."

"She's grieving, Harry." She sighs, digging into her handbag for her keys. "And she might not even know about Greg."

"You're right."

But I can't shake the feeling something is off.

I tilt my head towards the car park. The gravel crunches beneath our feet as we step onto the path, heading to our vehicles. I unlock my Bentley, watching as the lights blink a few metres away.

"Shall we grab a drink?"

"I've got stuff to attend to."

"Stuff?" She blinks, surprised. "Harry, you've just buried your brother. Let's grab a drink and reminisce about all the good family memories."

I hike a brow. *The good family memories. What good family memories?*

I might as well be saying, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

She shakes her head, correcting herself. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“With all due respect,” – I slip off my coat and chuck it across the passenger seat, slamming the car door behind me – “I need to get the fuck out of here.”

“I’m not fighting you on this.”

“Then don’t.”

I round the car to the passenger side, rolling the sleeves of my shirt up to my elbows and fastening the buttons. Emily watches me over the roof and sighs, exasperated, admitting defeat with the drop of her head.

“Fine. But call me if you need anything.”

“I doubt I will.”

She rolls her eyes. “Always one for honesty.”

“Take care of yourself.” I offer her a final smile before ducking into the car and starting the engine.



Thirty minutes later, I’m pulling up outside my house. Poppy’s familiar Corsa, dated and disgustingly bright, sits on the pavement. The piercing red is almost as vibrant as her hair.

I stride towards the front door, barely remembering to lock the car as I push inside. She doesn’t raise her head at my arrival, which makes my pulse race as I storm over to her. Her shoulders are hunched, eyebrows drawn in close, as she works on papers scattered across my kitchen island.

“Where. Is. She?”

“Who?”

“You know damn well who.” I press my palms flat on the surface, breathing steadily. “Gigi. Where is she?”

Poppy chews on the lid of her pen, not bothering to look up. “How would I know?”

“You’ve been at the Circle headquarters. Is she there? Have you seen her?”

“Only now and then. I’m obviously busy right now, trying to work out this stupid fucking seating plan.” She throws her hands towards the papers.

I tilt my head. The scene reminds me of when Gigi and Mia used to have their detective meetings, seeking answers for Jack's death. Thinking of Mia reminds me I'll have to check in on Andy at some point. He's something of a mystery nowadays. Now that I think about it, I haven't heard from him in months.

"And Leo's uncle wants to be seated beside us, but I can't say the feeling is mutual."

"Leo?"

Poppy raises her left hand, signalling to her engagement ring as if that's answer enough.

"You never speak about him."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Considering you're marrying him *next week*, I'd say there must be a lot." I follow her round the table as she starts looking through other scraps of paper, grunting with disapproval when they're not what she's after. "Poppy."

"What do you want me to say?" She empties her hands with a huff, finally sparing me some attention. "Can we speak about this later? I'm trying to make room for Richard's extra plus-one. He was so insistent about inviting someone last-minute, but there's *no space!*"

Defeated, she drops down into a chair, running her fingers through her knotted strands before dropping her head in her palms. I lean back against the table, folding my arms over my chest and crossing one ankle over the other.

"Give her my seat."

She grumbles into her skin. "Who says you're invited?"

I smirk, peering over my shoulder towards the million sheets of paper. She's scribbled circles and an abundance of names on pink Post-it Notes. Leo seems to have a huge fucking family, so I'm oblivious to most people, but the odd name I'm familiar with. I'm mid-search for myself or perhaps Gigi when Poppy withdraws her hands.

"I need to ask you something, actually."

I feel her gaze on my face before I peer down, watching her trail her eyes over my outfit.

"Wait. Why are you so dressed up?"

I push myself up from the table, uncomfortable. The reminder of today builds like a tightness in my throat, forcing me to cough. "Just had business

to attend to.”

“Business? You look like you’re dressed for a funeral.” She cuts herself off quickly, her face draining of colour. “*Oh God.* Was that today? Harry, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I brush it off, quickly finding a distraction in all the pink spread over my kitchen worktop. “What were you going to ask?”

“Never mind. It’s not a big deal.”

“What is it?”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“Poppy,” I say sternly, finally getting her attention. “Tell me.”

She peers up from her spot on the chair, watching me with a pinched expression. I nod, encouraging her to speak. She purses her lips, letting out a steady breath, her voice turning small.

“Will you give me away?”

I draw my head back in surprise and blink twice before letting a chuckle slip. Yet when I catch her neutral stare, my face softens. “*Shit.*” I gawk. “You’re being serious.”

The sympathy makes her grimace. She forces her head away. “Yeah, well, Dad isn’t really in a fit enough condition to be there, and I’d rather avoid looking like a loner on the aisle.”

Her confession renders me speechless. For perhaps the first time since I’ve known her, I feel sympathy towards the redhead. Something I never thought I’d say.

I’m still trying to wrap my head round everything when she shakes her head, trying to backtrack.

“Forget I said anything—” She starts to turn, but I catch her elbow. Disgust sweeps through her gaze, her attention dropping to where my hand rests on her skin. I remove it quickly, with a wince.

“Of course I will. If that’s what you want.”

She huffs, composing herself with a lift of her chin. “Great. Well, I had tons of other options if you said no. It’s no big deal.”

“Oh yeah?” I fight the grin spreading to my cheeks. “Like who?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs nonchalantly. “Hudson, maybe.”

The name I used to be well-acquainted with barrels through me. “Hudson? As in, Hudson Anderson?”

“Yeah … Not up to much nowadays though. He’s still at Richard’s side like a fucking lap dog, but the Boss has been distracted ever since Jamie

Callahan came back to town—”

“*Jamie Callahan?*” Even saying the name makes my stomach recoil.  
“You mean ...?”

“Gigi’s ex-boyfriend?” Poppy turns to me, giving a stiff nod. “Yeah, that dickhead. He’s been hanging round Richard for a while now, keeping quiet for the most part. But I’m telling you ... something’s not right about what’s going on there.”

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# FOURTEEN

*Gigi*

Everything feels too familiar. Too real.

*How have they managed to drag me back here?*

I know the answer, of course. Greg's bloody, lifeless body flashes across my vision like a painful nightmare.

I drop my chin to my chest, sidestepping those passing me in uniform, prepared for whatever Richard has in store for us today. The leather armour moulded to my skin is constricting, like a noose wrapped tightly round my neck.

Sunlight from the stained-glass windows in the hallway shines warmth onto my skin. It's comforting, yet I feel anything but. I hurry past the cafeteria, where laughter slips through the open doorway, and towards the iron door looming in front of me. My fingers curl tighter at my side with each step, nails biting into my palms.

A body steps into my path, tall and immovable, blocking my exit. Refusing defeat, I continue forwards until I'm a few steps away. Any closer and I'll be sending my knee into Hudson's crotch.

“Going somewhere?”

Aggravation sweeping through me, I buck my chin. “Move.”

“Gigi ...”

“Hudson,” I mimic. “Let me through.”

His jaw twitches. “Can’t.”

“You *can*. You just *won’t*.”

His eyes flicker over my face before that mask quickly returns.

“I need to see him. *Please*,” I say with quiet emphasis. “Greg’s funeral could be any day. I don’t want to miss it. I *can’t* miss it. Just let me out for a few hours.”

“I can’t let you do that.” Voice dropping low, he whispers, “Richard has me under strict instruction to not let you leave.”

“And you’re still yet to tell me why.”

He shifts the same way in my eager attempt to pass by his side.

I drop my head with a defeated, “*Fuck*.”

This can’t be happening.

A heavy weight closes in on my chest. I tiredly rub my face, sweeping my fingertips through my hair in a desperate attempt to pull myself together.

“*Fine*.” I lift my chin. “Then when?”

Hudson’s face morphs into a grimace, but he remains silent. My hands start to twitch at my sides involuntarily, making it a struggle to even look at him without the urge to send my fist into his jaw.

I *will* get out of here. Maybe not right now, but I *will*.

*You’ll get to him*, I promise myself, surprising myself with my own confession.

“Recruits,” someone booms overheard. “Everyone is to meet at the training grounds. The exercise will begin in ten minutes.”

I look towards the overheard speakers, which crackle with the projected voice. “Well, that’s new.”

“Richard took it upon himself to have an upgrade after your little stunt.”

A smirk tilts my mouth at the memory. I’m yet to see the extent of the damage, though there doesn’t seem to be much, having now spent weeks confined in the place I once called home. I’m nothing more than a prisoner here, limited to closed quarters and escorted from one building to the next. They’re keeping a watchful eye on me out of fear I might set something ablaze.

I muse over the idea, wondering how easily I can access a can of petrol

...

“Don’t even think about it.”

Hudson steers us the other direction, slight urgency in his step as he leads us away from the door. The hallways are less busy since Richard’s order to meet at the training grounds. In a final attempt, I turn back towards the door. Hudson grabs my arm quickly, forcing me back to his side.

My jaw tenses. “Fine … *Fine*.”

Plan B: Stay quiet. Don’t cause trouble. Follow along peacefully. And when they least expect it, work out a way to get the fuck out of here and stop the trafficking too.

It’s that simple.

“I’m sorry, okay?” Hudson’s voice slices through my thoughts. “I didn’t know Richard would hurt you the way he did. I have to listen to him. He’ll destroy everything I have.”

“He killed Greg.”

Something painful lingers in the undertone of his voice. “I’m sorry, Gigi”

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“Save it.” I cut him short. “I get it. No need to explain yourself.”

I can feel the weight of his stare, as though he’s on the cusp of trying to explain himself again. Instead, silence surrounds us until he pushes open the heavy doors leading to the “training grounds”. What used to be bustling gardens of blooming flowers is now all concrete and steel walls. The roof is clear, giving way to open sky and grey clouds.

Richard really took “upgrade” to a new extreme.

“I’ll just be over there.” Hudson gestures forwards. “*Don’t* run off.”

As if the mechanics heard his warning, the door we exited seals closed with an echoing groan.

The grounds, bare and with an apocalyptic feel, are populated with recruits, all prepped in that familiar dark gear. Through the crowd, my eyes zero in on a skittish figure, shoulders hunched like he’s afraid of his own shadow. There’s a familiarity about him, but I know no one in the Circle acts quite like *that*.

As if feeling the weight of my gaze, his pale, sunken face turns to me over his shoulder. Gaze hollow, he pins me to the spot with an empty stare.

*Andy.*

Oh my God.

I fight the urge to bring my shaking hand to my mouth to conceal my gasp, but it slips out easily. Tiredness that was once limited to red-rimmed eyes now drowns him. There’s a fear in the way he holds himself, but his movements are slow, mechanical, as he turns back to B.

*What … what’s happened to him?*

Fear for the man I once knew chills me to the bone, holding me still. I force my eyes away, though my body screams at me to turn back towards

him. I make a mental note to try to approach him when this “exercise” is over.

Laughter bounces off the walls, but my attention is drawn to the far corner, where Hudson lounges against a plastic table alongside Richard, Jamie trailing close behind him. Jamie’s hands are in his front pockets as he sweeps his gaze over an array of weaponry spread out across the rectangular surface. He towers over Richard by several inches, his dark hair gelled and styled away from his face. I narrow my gaze as if it will help me to see, watching as his mouth turns up at the corners in a calculated grin.

“What’s *he* doing here?”

I whip round, my heart in my throat, and find Poppy standing so close she might as well be resting her head on my shoulder. Her expression is tight, eyes lowered in a scowl as she looks in the direction of the three men.

She resumes her judgemental glare, making no effort to be subtle.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes, taking a step closer, the ring shining bright on her finger as she crosses her arms tightly over her chest. She lifts her chin as if she’s inhaling. I subconsciously dig my feet into the ground, halting my reflex to retreat.

“Whatever’s on your mind, just say it.”

“*Fine.*” Her eyes wander over me once more. “I thought you’d smell like him.”

My brows draw inwards. “What are you on about?”

“I thought you’d smell like Jamie,” she clarifies. “I assumed you were spending a lot of time with him.”

A laugh almost tumbles out of me. What does she take me for? I don’t spend *any* time with him, and I don’t want to.

Jamie’s distance is perhaps the most terrifying part of it all. Considering he made such a grand entrance, he’s kept to himself for the most part, glued to Richard’s side and looking over with the occasional glance. The silence is torture, like he’s part of a secret scheme I’m none the wiser to. Although nothing can be worse than the card death has dealt me recently. The thought has my heart slamming against my ribs.

“I’m not your enemy. Richard deserves to pay for what he’s done.” The vulnerable girls I’m yet to find come to the forefront of my mind, but for all I know, Poppy is oblivious to his cruel truths. “He killed one of my friends ...”

I stop myself to pass a steady breath through my lips.

Poppy pins me with that same watchful glare. The speakers screech as the mic comes into focus, making half the courtyard slam their hands over their ears, me included.

Unfazed, Poppy watches closely as the noise subsides, and I lower my palms. I truly believe she won't say anything until she speaks low, so quietly I don't even think she intends for me to hear.

"He's been worried about you."

Confusion washes over me. "Who are you talking about?"

"Troops," Richard's voice booms overhead, short and clipped. "Gather up. We need you all to take a weapon and a target. Each of you will need to stick one to your chests. Both are lined up on the table. Clock's ticking."

I'm barely able to pass her a final glance before the crowd start their pursuit towards the equipment. The set-up is some kind of joke, Richard's new courtyard appearing as a cruel bunker repurposed for play. I pick up a blinking neon target and Velcro it to my chest as if I'm a kid at a birthday party, not an initiate. Then I grab the matte plastic gun, drilling my focus into the barrel to ensure this isn't an assassination attempt.

Nope. Just a children's toy.

I peer up as Richard holds the mic to his mouth. Jamie stands idle at his side, hands behind his back, watching over us all as if we're pawns in his game.

"What's all this?" B steps up alongside me, taking a target and pinning it to his chest. "Laser tag?"

"Can't be," someone says by his side. "Richard doesn't do fun."

No, he doesn't. That's for damn sure.

"What are the rules?" another asks, passing the toy gun between their hands. "Do we shoot each other?"

There's no time to answer with Richard's voice wailing through the speakers again like nails scraping down a chalkboard.

"Welcome to today's exercise." He pauses, waiting for the commotion of voices to die down. "It seems we need to go over some basic training since people's loyalties have drifted. Being a recruit of the Circle is a privilege and *not* something we take for granted. Some of you have lost focus, and we need to change that."

"That would be my fault," I whisper, catching Poppy's sidelong glare. She returns her gaze forwards without another word.

“The rules are simple ...”

A groan rumbles beneath our feet, followed by the vibration of rubble. A woman’s shriek, alongside muttered confusion, is followed by crates and dark walls slowly rising from the floor, some tall, some high, but all seemingly harmless for the most part. This doesn’t scream “team-building exercise”, nor is it simply an “upgrade” for the Circle headquarters. The massive arena – if you can even call it that anymore – starts to pulse with flickering red lights and streams of artificial fog.

“If your vests light up, you’re out. Being out means you immediately forfeit your position within the game.”

Murmurs echo round us, but no one dares to pipe up.

“Any questions?”

Quiet sweeps over the courtyard, and behind the mic, Richard smiles wickedly. “Didn’t think so. Now go find your positions.”

The group slowly disperses, seeking shelter behind the walls and dark corners. I stay back, moving towards one of the far shelters, in a prime position to keep an eye on the other recruits. Though seemingly risk-free, I’ll still take my chances with hanging back.

The commotion starts to lessen, and the closer to the starting point, the further my pulse rises. I inhale a deep breath, trying to centre my focus on where a few people have crouched behind a boulder.

I jolt, feeling the presence of someone leaning in close behind me. Their breath fans the back of my neck, causing my shoulders to stiffen. Jamie’s voice turns low and intimate, like we’re sharing a secret.

“Try not to die,” he whispers, and the lights cut out.

# FIFTEEN

*Gigi*

The countdown begins.

*Ten ... nine ... eight ...*

Utter darkness surrounds me, and I tilt my chin up towards the ceiling, which is now sealed shut, capturing us inside. The generator groans as the system reboots, lighting the arena in flashing strobes and bursts of pulsing ultraviolet. Everything glows in sharp, electric colour, jagged graffiti sprayed across walls, green arrows leading the way.

The red target on my chest flashes with a steady rhythm.

*Seven ... six ... five ... four ...*

I twist to the side, but Jamie has disappeared, although he could just be lurking in the shadows. I adjust my vest, pretending the weight of it isn't too heavy.

*"Try not to die."*

I don't know whether the fucker was just trying to scare me, but I force myself to steady my breathing as panic quickens my heart.

*Three ... two ... one ...*

*"Good luck,"* the robotic voice echoes overhead. *"Let the game begin."*

I remain still, hovering near the safety of the corner. My fingers wrap round the laser gun – smooth, plastic, and humming faintly with energy – and for a second, I feel like a child again. Jack and I are simply at a children's party for one of his school friends, with equipment not too dissimilar to this.

A recruit's chuckle echoes just ahead of me. My ears strain, and in the distance I hear more people. Laughter, high and wild, far from the screams of pain I anticipated, and the sudden screech of someone getting tagged, followed by a chorus of, "Gotcha!" bouncing off the steel walls. No sounds of gunfire or anything equally as malicious.

*Fuck.* Jamie was truly trying to get under my skin.

I might as well enjoy this while I can.

Fog builds up by my feet, the curls of smoke smelling artificial now we're enclosed in this makeshift game. My combat boots thud softly on the floor as I move through the maze, ducking low behind a partition lit with flickering purple strobes.

A flickering target sprints my way. I throw my back to a crate, my heart hammering against my vest. I peer round the corner, only to see a flash of movement in the distance and a silhouette outlined in glowing blue.

"TAKE THAT!" they shout. "Should have found a better hiding spot."

The victim retorts, "Prick!"

The recruit snickers, starting a run in the opposite direction. The light across their chest blinks, alive and targetable, disappearing into the far distance.

Straining my gaze through the dark, I try to keep a watchful eye on the eliminated player, but his target drains of colour. He's simply disappeared.

Then I hear it – a step too close.

I whip round, my gun raised, heart leaping. A bright red beam slices through the dark from the barrel. A woman rounds the corner quickly, walking straight into the firing line. She skids to a stop, her light blonde ponytail swaying behind her, as the laser hits her square in the chest. She drops her chin with a defeated huff. The light on her chest blooms in colour, signalling she's been caught.

"Ah, man!" the girl sulks. "I guess you got me."

"Are you hurt?"

"They aren't real bullets. You know that, right?"

She lowers herself to the floor and props her back against the wall. The colour of her targets drains slowly until she's blended into the scenery. Through the dim light of the strobes, I still manage to see her hugging her knees to her chest, and the quirk of her brow.

*Right – focus.*

Holding the gun close, I pick up my pace, heading in the other direction. People run past, letting out those same excited screeches and the odd defeated curse. A mop of dark red hair rushes past me, forcing me to retreat backwards. I barely catch a glimpse of Poppy as my heels hit something solid, and I stumble.

My hands catch my fall, a fine layer of dirt, dust, and something thicker sticking to my palms. I bite back a silent curse at the liquid covering my hand. The ultraviolet light has it appearing dark and thick.

I lift my head, realising I've tripped over the player I watched lose to his teammate only a few minutes ago. I didn't notice him in the dark without his target. His legs are spread on the floor, knees splayed out at his sides. A trip hazard in plain sight.

"I'm so sorry." I pull myself to my feet. "I didn't see you there."

I wipe my hands on my thighs, noticing the sticky liquid transfers easily. Not only is it now coating my armour, but the squelch of my shoes gives away that it's underneath my feet too. Whipping my head to the side, panic strikes me still as I follow the trail to the man's chest. I can feel sweat gathering beneath my vest, sliding down my spine.

I prod his side with the end of my gun.

No twitch. No movement.

He's been shot.

The sticky liquid is *blood*.

Every breath I take feels like breathing in hot, acidic air. A scream – short, wet, and cut off – sounds somewhere in the distance, quickly confirming my suspicions.

Aggravation sweeps through me, pouring out of me with a strangled yell.

*I fucking knew it!*

It's like I can hear Richard's snicker in the back of my skull as everyone comes to the realisation they've been sent on a sadistic killing spree. Their friends and teammates, no less. I glance through the darkness, towards the blonde girl I targeted with my laser, barely seeing the outline of her body against the steel floor.

I killed her. I fucking *killed* her.

"He's dead?" Poppy asks flatly.

I spin back round. She's standing beside the man, prodding her foot into his hip. Raising her head, she meets my eye, and my hands tighten round

my weapon on instinct. If she wanted to kill me, this would be the prime opportunity to do it.

Instead she surprises me by throwing her gun strap over her shoulder as if I'm little threat to her. Months ago, that confidence would have severely pissed me off.

“What happened to him?”

“Shot,” I say. “There’s blood coming from the vest, but I didn’t hear a gunshot.”

“What the *fuck* is that?” B jogs up to our side, his palms falling to his knees to inhale deeply. Eyes wide, he pants, “Is he … is he dead?”

“Yes,” Poppy snaps.

Andy trails behind him, his head ducked low and his movements sluggish. My eyes are trained on him, watchful of his every step, though it’s difficult through the rising fog.

Poppy asks, “Did you hear that?”

Distracted, I say, “Hear what?”

She points upwards with the tip of her white-glossed fingernail, but I hear nothing.

“Wait,” she tells me impatiently.

I train my focus, listening out for any peculiar noise through the commotion. That’s when I hear it – faintly, in the distance. A near-silent, high-pitched whistle, followed by a *whoosh* as it impales its chosen target.

“A silencer,” Andy whispers under his breath like we’re not even here.

I nod, turning towards him, but his eyes are trained on the ground.

“I saw a flash,” Poppy says, placing her hand against the plastic wall. “Not from the laser. Like a camera flash, but with no sound.”

Whether they’re hidden in plain sight or in a secret compartment within these walls, they’re eliminating the fallen soldiers. Quite literally.

“So …” I turn between them all. “What’s the plan?”

“We just won’t shoot.” B nods stiffly, convinced he’s formed the perfect plan. “They can’t kill the players if there’s no more to be eliminated.”

In the distance, another toe-curling scream rips from someone’s throat.

“We have to tell the others,” I say sternly.

A hum kicks in from the speakers overheard, Richard’s voice pouring through. “It seems a few of you have rallied together. But if you don’t continue your play, I have no problem targeting individuals or setting off a few explosives.”

B's eyes look like they're close to falling out of their sockets.

"There's still far more loyalty to be taught. The game will end when I believe you've learned your lesson."

My eyes flare. *Loyalty? Fucking lessons?*

Isn't killing off recruits enough of a lesson?

The gun vibrates softly in my grip as if it's begging to be used.

"We just need to distract them ..." B pants, breathless, his voice hushed in the hope Richard might not hear. "Just shoot where we know is safe, and that'll keep them quiet."

He hurries backwards a few paces, too fast for us to register what's happening. Wrapping his finger round the trigger, he fires the laser haphazardly to the side.

"NO!" Poppy and I both scream.

But his shit aim has already lit up the target on Andy's chest like a Christmas tree. Andy's distracted, his attention trained on the floor, oblivious to how he's now a walking target for an incoming bullet.

The light on his chest flares bright like a racing heartbeat.

"I'm sorry! Oh fuck, I'm so sorry!" B mutters quickly, rushed and panicked, shaking the gun round. "I didn't mean to hit him! I was trying to \_\_\_\_\_"

"Put it down!" I snap. "Now."

He drops it immediately and throws up his palms, the gun clanging against the floor with its fall. I look up, my breath shaky. Andy's attention finally drops as the target eventually loses its light. Poppy whips her head towards me, a flash of fear in her gaze.

I don't even think, acting on pure instinct as I chuck myself on top of Andy. We fall to the floor in a scuffle, his back taking the brunt of the impact. Through the darkness, the burst of white light flickers, and I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing myself.

The faint whistle comes quickly. Like a blade slicing through my skin, the bullet catches my side, hot and sharp.

*FUCK.*

My hand catches my waist tightly. It's only a graze, but God, it *hurts*.

Andy's eyes flare suddenly. This close, I'm able to see the extent of his tiredness – the bloodshot eyes and the purpling bruises underneath his dark eyes.

"Get ... get off me!"

“Andy,” I try.

His thrashes grow frantic and feral.

“GET OFF!” he screams. “OFF! OFF! OFF! GET. OFF!”

Despite appearing incredibly weak to the naked eye, he shoves me off with force. The push throws me onto my back, and my skull hits the concrete. I hiss through my teeth, spots lighting the edges of my vision as I watch him bring himself to his feet on shaky legs.

“No, no, no. Oh *fuck*,” he mumbles, shaking his head faster, more determined by the second.

My head starts to spin from a mixture of the pain searing my side and the concussion straining my focus.

“She-she jumped in front of me! I didn’t touch her, I *swear*.” Andy’s head whips to the side as someone approaches, and he throws his hands towards me. “I don’t know why she did it. It’s the first time I’ve seen her in months.”

*What. The. Fuck?*

I hiss at the pain, palming my skin where the graze throbs.

Through the haze, I watch as Richard raises his palm, silencing Andy quickly with the rude gesture. Slowly, he approaches my side, staring down at me with that menacing, calculated scowl.

“I hope you take my threats seriously now, Miss Thomas.”

I blink, focusing my attention on his mouth as it forms an inhuman smile.

“You signed your life away after walking on that rope. You will always be part of the Circle, and you will *always* answer to me.”

## SIXTEEN

*Harry*

In a rare turn of events, and contrary to British weather, it's the perfect day for a wedding. Sunlight filters in through the arched windows, highlighting the high vaulted ceilings of the cathedral. The aisle I'll soon be escorting Poppy down is lined with candles, white, tall, and immaculate. Every detail has been perfectly curated.

I fucking *despise* how Richard spares no expense for events such as this, flaunting the money he potentially made by selling women against their will. But for today, I guess I'll just have to grin and bear it.

The animosity forces me to crack my knuckles, a stark contrast to the violin music floating on the air. The tune is regal, elegant – two words I never thought I'd associate with Poppy, but she's planned today beyond my expectations, especially since she's not the materialistic type. I turn from my spot at the front entrance towards where the guests are finding their seats in pews with soft pink ribbons draped across the back.

It's all so fragile, like a fairy tale, yet as I stand greeting the guests filing through the double doors, half of them look fucking miserable. It's easy to distinguish the members of the Circle since they're all wearing grim smiles as if they attended some kind of mass murder yesterday.

Sceptical, I smile as I shake hands, laugh when I'm supposed to, and even make a joke about the bride being fashionably late. But that's far from the truth – Poppy is in one of the corner rooms after demanding she needed

time for herself before the ceremony. That's why I'm standing in the doorway making small talk with people I barely know.

But in the grand scheme of things, I don't care. It's of little inconvenience, because if there's even a slight chance of catching a glimpse of Gigi before the ceremony begins, I'm taking it. The air smells like perfume and roses, and it only makes me think about her more. But she isn't here.

I've scanned every face walking through these double doors. Every pair of heels clicking across the marble. Every silhouette that isn't hers. I haven't seen these people in months, save for my leaving ceremony, but they aren't my priority.

"Harry."

A voice draws my attention back to the marble steps.

"Good to see you."

Whizz Tech Dan lingers in the doorway, glasses balanced on the end of his nose and his dark hair hung across his forehead. He offers out his hand. I take it, shaking it in mine.

"Dan, how are you?"

"Tired, to be honest with you." He pushes his specs higher. "It's always 'Dan, can you wipe this,' 'Dan, can you wipe that,' or 'Dan, can you find someone for me' ..."

His voice floats straight over me as my attention is dragged behind him. Hudson Anderson strides up the steps, his head ducked low. He purposely saunters past, dodging his shoulder inwards to avoid making contact. Despite me keeping my eyes heavily trained on him, he refuses to spare me a glance. I turn in his direction, watching as he silently slips through the crowd, sticking to himself.

"... and the wage is great," Dan continues, "but never enough for the hours."

I adjust the front of my black blazer to retain my focus, but the action only reminds me of the last time I wore this suit. Greg's funeral.

"The work is just fucking constant. You know what I mean?"

With the memory having thrown me, I lift my head quickly. While Dan is still awaiting my response, it's the figure beside him I'm captured by.

"Andy."

He freezes, eyes turning wild, before he slowly lifts his head. The sight of him forces the word to tumble out of me.

*“Christ.”*

I knew the recruits were looking worse for wear, but this is something far more extreme. Fucking hell. My best friend looks like a stranger in his own body. We have so much to talk about, so much to catch up on, yet I’m paralysed as I stare straight through him.

Before I can even consider getting words out of him, he visibly swallows, the thin, pale skin of his throat tightening against his Adam’s apple. Dropping his head, he slips past me quickly, leaving me dumbstruck. It takes my thoughts a second to catch up before I’m able to turn my attention back to Dan.

“Sorry, mate.” I place my hand on his shoulder, offering a smile. “We’ll catch up later.”

He waves me off, mumbling something under his breath as he follows the trail of people. My shaking hand hovers over my jaw, and I fist my chin, trying to pull myself together for the last remaining guests. They move through quickly, eager to claim their seats.

Once they’re all inside, not another straggler in sight, my brows draw inwards.

*Where is she?*

I linger at the top of the stairs, rocking back on my heels in the hope one final car will pull up and Gigi will scurry out. But at least five minutes pass with no sign of anyone else.

I spin on my heel, passing the ceremony room, where the laughter of hundreds filters into the hallway, headed for the corner room where Poppy’s hiding out. On my approach, muffled conversation filters through the crack in the door. I throw it open.

Poppy pauses, her finger held just an inch away from a man’s face, her nostrils flared and her expression harsh. He bends down at the knees, bringing himself down to her eye level. At full height he’d be at least twice the size of her.

Voice deep, he drawls, “Whatever you say, *wife*.”

*This must be Leo. He has a few years on me. At least. Dark brown hair, stubble lining his jaw. I barely spare him a glance, although the tattoos are hard to miss. They scale his neck, leading underneath his collar and imprinted across his knuckles.*

Poppy barks, “What is it?”

“I was just wondering if we were waiting for more guests to arrive.”

“Everyone should be here by now.”

“Well, they’re not.”

She throws her head back, irritated. “Harry, just give us a minute.”

I smile forcefully. I’m *not* about to lose my cool with the bride-to-be.

I close the door far harder than I should, making the wood groan. Lingering outside, I lean against the wall, resting my skull back against the cold surface. My gaze trails towards the ceremony room Poppy and I will soon be walking through, my attention passing over the occupied seats.

And then I see her.

Gigi.

Slowly, as if my body is in some kind of trance, I push myself off the wall and take cautious steps closer. It’s only her back, but I could trace her silhouette with my eyes closed. She hovers in one of the front pews, a few seats in from the aisle. Her chin is tucked down to her chest, strands of softly curled brunette hair splayed across her back.

Did she arrive through a back entrance or something?

I take a few steps sideways, trying to peer round the heads blocking my view. Richard comes into my line of vision, just two seats down from where Gigi sits. He’s dressed too well, perfectly aware he’s the most dangerous man in the room. As if he can feel my stare, he turns to me over his shoulder, smiling too wide for it to be sincere.

The door behind me opens, and Leo walks out a few seconds later, taking long, confident strides into the ceremony room. Poppy appears beside me, watching her future husband silently before he disappears round the corner, trailing up the aisle.

“Don’t ask.”

I raise my hands. “I’m saying nothing.”

I offer Poppy my arm, and she takes it, her fingers tucked into the crook of my elbow, trembling just slightly. I don’t point it out, predicting she’d happily ruin her manicure to hit me for noticing the detail. Instead I give her a small nod – the kind that says, “You’ve got this.”

“Shouldn’t you say something about how my dad would be proud, or something equally cringe?”

“I’ve lost track of your creative ways to murder a man. I’m not sure ‘proud’ is the right choice.”

She turns her attention ahead. “Fair point.”

The violin music swells, delicate and haunting, followed by the scuffed footsteps of guests rising to their feet. I wait for her cue, and after a steady breath, she nods. We slowly round the corner, taking the first steps under watchful gazes.

I tighten my grip on Poppy's arm – gentle, steady, the way I'm supposed to be. But inside I'm unravelling, awaiting the moment we're closer to the front.

Guests smile, women waving delicate fans near tear-stained eyes to keep their emotions at bay.

*Christ, it's all so fucking fake.*

But Poppy plays the part well, her footsteps slow and precise and the veil of her gown trailing behind her. It's enough to keep me focused – until I turn my head.

Gigi stands just a few feet away, a mauve dress hugging her body like it was designed specifically to ruin me. It's elegant, thin ruffles cascading down the fabric, and it hugs her in all the right places. A slit up the thigh gives way to soft skin ingrained in my mind since the moment she left. Legs that hugged my waist tightly as she came on my cock.

I can't take my eyes off her.

She's so fucking beautiful.

And then I see *him* beside her.

Jamie fucking Callahan.

The pretentious fucking wanker, with his hands on *my* fucking woman.

His arm is slung casually round her shoulders as if he owns her. As if she's his. His fingers toy with the ends of her hair. Possessive. Familiar. My chest turns too tight.

Poppy's voice is a distant hum beside me, thanking people softly as we pass.

Jamie's fingers rest there on Gigi's shoulder as if he *knows* what that does to me; as if he wants me to see it. My heart punches my ribs like it's trying to escape.

Gigi meets my gaze, and time slows in that cruel, cinematic way it does when the world wants to break you. There's something in her stare – rage, ache, love, maybe. Or what's left of it after we tore it to shreds and buried the pieces.

Her mouth is frozen in something that's almost a smile but doesn't quite reach her eyes. Eyes that mirror the war ripping me open from the inside

too.

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# SEVENTEEN

*Gigi*

Poppy turns the corner, taking my breath away. Her makeup is flawless, slightly heavier than usual, the red strands pulled away from her face in a delicate braid that tumbles down her back. She looks tasteful, refined. With each step matched to the fluid violin music, she walks closer.

A hand clasps the back of my dress.

Jamie leans in and whispers, “Don’t make a sound.”

His hand slips round my shoulders, pulling me into his side. I whip my head towards him.

“What are you playing at?”

He ignores me, drawing my hair over my shoulder and running his fingertips through the ends in a way that makes me cringe. My jaw clenches at the simple act, but I’m not about to cause a scene on Poppy’s special day.

I turn towards her as she comes into view behind the sea of guests, but my gaze is pulled like a magnet to the man at her side.

*Harry.*

He appears so striking, so familiar, I can’t help but to simply *stare*. Since when did he and Poppy become so close? Jealousy stabs me in the heart despite the bride walking towards her future with another man. Harry stands tall, looking devastating in his black suit. His strides are careful and confident, yet I swear a part of him falters as his heavy gaze sweeps over me.

And the moment it does, the world stops moving.

There's a kind of hunger in his eyes that never dies.

With a roll of my shoulders, I try shrugging off Jamie's touch. He tenses beside me, aggravated. His hand drops to my waist, and he presses his fingers possessively into my side, right where the wound is healing.

A warning to behave.

But even the threat of being impaled with another bullet isn't enough for me to connect with him. I'm not sure if *any* threat would have me persevere with this behaviour. He digs his fingers deeper. My jaw clenches, and my hands tighten.

Voice hushed, I hiss, "Don't fucking touch me."

Jamie's eye meets mine in a menacing stare. By the time I've turned back towards Harry, he and Poppy are already at the front of the aisle.

The groom takes Poppy's hand confidently.

The music dulls to a quiet hum, and the guests lower to their seats, with Harry taking the spare one in the front row. I hardly take an interest in the wedding, staring at the back of his head in a pathetic attempt to get him to turn round. But he's rigid throughout the whole ceremony.

And as the crowd cheers after the vows are exchanged, celebrating love and life, a chill inside of me makes me feel like I'm experiencing something deadly.



Poppy begrudgingly accepts the invitation to the first dance as a newlywed, led to the centre of the ballroom by her husband and stopping directly underneath a crystal chandelier. Her wedding dress, long, sleek, and draping by her feet, almost gets tangled in her shoes, and for perhaps the first time since I met her, she looks shy. Which is a rarity. She never used to care what people thought of her.

She and Leo are the epitome of complicated, yet so are me and the man staring at me from across the room. My gaze finds Harry's, and as he catches my attention, he refuses to let me go. For a heartbeat, everything round us slows. The silence between the soft music thickens. He doesn't smile. He doesn't blink. He just wears that raw, soul-finding look.

There's not an ounce of subtlety in the way he pins me to the spot with his demanding stare. And while I try desperately to look away, I simply *can't*.

Through my distraction, Jamie's hand coils round my waist.

His fingers grip my hip with the kind of pressure that makes me want to vomit. A claim and a threat strung into a tight hold.

Harry's expression changes. A flicker of something dark and primal cracks through the mask he wears. And then he looks away, straight ahead, his spine taut. But I can't keep my eyes off him.

Jamie demands, "Dance with me."

"No."

I refuse to fight him further, although it seems that's the game he wants to play.

His hand circles my wrist. "Come with me."

"Not now—"

But he doesn't care. Iron grip assertive, he pulls us out of the room, yanking me down a corridor. The laughter and the clinking of glasses fades as he guides us through the velvet-curtained hallway, past flower-strewn tables and locked doors. He shoves open a utility closet and pushes me inside.

He slams the door behind us.

"What the *fuck* was that?" Jamie growls.

"I beg your pardon?" A disbelieving laugh tumbles out of me. "I'm not your property."

*The fucking cheek of this man.*

I shake my head, reaching my hand out for the doorknob. It opens for a split second. Jamie snaps his hand round my wrist again, dragging me back into the room.

"I'm not done with you," he snarls, shoving the door closed with a loud thud.

I yank my arm. "Let. Go."

His grasp falls from me. And before he can speak or even touch me again, the door flies open behind him.

Jamie doesn't turn right away. He doesn't have to. Harry's voice is low, but it cuts through the room.

"Get out."

Jamie turns slowly, his mouth curling with amusement. "Excuse me?"

Harry doesn't repeat himself. The look in his eyes is enough. This isn't the same calm, collected man from the ceremony. This one is dangerous if provoked.

"I need to talk to her," Harry says, his gaze locked on mine. "Alone."

Jamie scoffs, stepping between the two of us like he belongs there. He tilts his head, his smile sharpening. "What would Richard say with you sniffing round her? You remember him, right?"

"Five minutes."

Jamie turns towards me at my demand, his expression livid.

"Let me speak to him for five minutes."

He clenches his jaw, hands twitching at his side. "Richard won't be happy."

"I don't give a *fuck* what Richard thinks!"

A war rages inside of him; he's visibly annoyed, his jaw rigid. He stares at me with an intense glare that once would have scared me.

I throw my hand towards the door. "Go tell him, for all I care."

"*Five* minutes," he emphasises, his voice cold. "I'll be waiting outside."

Jamie lingers for a second and drops his head with a curse. The wrath festering within me has my heart pacing as he shoulders past Harry, opening the door and slamming it closed behind him.

As promised, his silhouette lingers outside. *Fucking prick.*

I turn back to Harry. He's wearing that familiar flirtatious smile, pride practically oozing off him. Taking a slow, leisurely step closer, he asks, "Do you love him?"

"I don't love anyone."

Harry chuckles low, lips curling at the edges as his tongue slips out between them. "That's not true." He lowers his head, forcing me to look into those irresistible green pools. "You love me."

"Maybe I still want to kill you."

"That's love if I ever heard it, princess."

While his expression remains in that taunting smile, trying desperately to pull a reaction out of me, his eyes glimmer with amusement. I fight a smile, the pettiness in me eager to play along.

"Besides, we're just friends."

That's clearly a step too far. Harry strides towards me, forcing me back against a wire rack. The cleaning products rattle with the sudden movement,

a bottle of bleach slipping off the shelf and bouncing near my feet as it hits the floor.

“Gigi!” Jamie calls through the door. “What was that?”

“Tell him you’re fine,” Harry orders. Bringing his face lower, he balances his palm beside my head, the darkness in his eyes forcing a submissive streak to unfold within me.

My voice croaks. “I-I’m fine.”

“I’m coming in—”

“Five minutes!”

The door remains closed, but Jamie starts to pace behind it. Harry is so close I can smell the mint on his breath, the leather clinging to his skin. The scent makes my head swirl.

“Feisty,” he taunts. “Just as I remember.”

He presses himself against me, and my throat bobs with a difficult swallow as his hard cock presses into my stomach. His head lowers just slightly, fitting perfectly in the space between my neck and the shoulder I’ve subconsciously tilted to allow room for him.

“Tell me we’re just friends,” he whispers, breathless. “Tell me we’re friends, Gigi. I dare you.”

Through my fluttering eyelashes I see Jamie’s shadow hovering outside the door, a hairsbreadth away from storming in here. Yet on the borderline of being caught, the temptation and the risk dare me to play with fire, forcing the words out.

“W-we’re just friends.”

Harry chuckles, the shake of his head forcing that damn stray strand to fall into the centre of his forehead. “Now say it like you mean it.”

Lips ghosting my neck, he slips his hand underneath my dress. He’s pressing so close and so tight against me I don’t know where he starts and I begin. Everything feels too hot, too real, like he’s made his mark and he never intends to leave.

His finger traces the centre of my underwear, gentle and teasing. My gasp draws a smirk to his mouth.

“Mean. It.” His touch moves higher, and he circles his thumb round my clit. My head instinctively rolls forwards, but he nudges me back, his tongue slipping over the sensitive part of my throat. “Say we’re just friends as you drip all over my fucking fingers, Gigi.”

Pulling the fabric to the side, he slips two digits into my entrance. As if we never spent a moment apart, his fingers curl inside me, brushing against the sensitive part that has my knees bucking and my body submitting to him.

*Oh fuck.*

A whimper wobbles from my mouth, and I catch my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Tell me we’re just friends while you have the cheek to arrive here with another man,” he says, his voice hoarse. “Tell me to stop, and I will.”

But I don’t. I can’t

With one hand tangled in my hair, his other hand explores my body with unmistakable desperation. Harry presses into me, knuckles-deep, his thumb moving upwards still to tease me further. My brain feels heavy, the pressure behind my eyes intensifying. Releasing my hair, he wraps his arm tightly round my lower back, bringing me closer as he pounds his fingers into me harder.

“Say it.” He bites down on my neck hard, adding to the impossible bliss.

“I-I—”

My back arches, the skin of my waist tightening round the wound, but I can’t find it in me to care with the orgasm building intensely in my lower stomach. Harry drops to his knees. Bringing the material of my dress to my waist with urgency, he rips my underwear away and presses his lips against me. He sucks my clit into his mouth, lips pulsing round my most sensitive part as he brings his teeth down gently against it.

I nearly stumble forwards, but I force myself to grab onto the bars of the rack behind my head, white-knuckling the cold metal. Harry’s teeth are a sick torture, but the pleasure is practically unbearable as his slick fingers push back inside. My mouth opens on a silent cry, the pressure in my head forcing my vision to turn dark.

As my body trembles, one hand drops to the top of his head for stability, and I tangle my fingers in the dark strands of his hair as the orgasm rolls through me. My body succumbs to nothing but pleasure. Items topple to the floor, crashing round me, bursting and spilling, adding to the intense ringing in my ears, but thankfully, they mask the whines slipping from my throat.

With my chest heaving, Harry rises to his feet. Wiping the back of his hand against his wet lips, he taunts, “Friends, remember?”

I'm barely able to wrap my head round the post-orgasm bliss before the door is thrown open. Harry's attention whips to my exposed thighs. Thankfully, I have enough wits about me to quickly brush down the fabric so it's pooling round my ankles again.

Jamie comes to an abrupt stop in the doorway, his expression screwed tight. "What the hell happened?"

While his attention darts to the mess on the floor, sweeping across the empty bottles and their spilled liquid, I turn my attention to Harry, catching the way he watches me. With a level of truth I didn't think he was capable of, his mouth moves silently over the words, "You're *mine*."

My mouth twitches.

The fucker really has managed to crack a smile out of me when a livid Jamie is standing mere feet away.

Jamie grabs my hand, tugging me out of the room. As I cross the threshold, I turn back, catching Harry's wicked smile as he runs his tongue over his lips. Despite the hot blush flushing my cheeks, I desperately want to talk to him. About Greg. About my mother. Whether he's spoken to Andy. Just everything.

Before I can even consider pulling out of Jamie's grip and returning to him, he's already tugging us down the hallway, round a corner, away from prying eyes. My mind catches up with me a moment too slow. I tug at my wrist, pushing through the burn.

Jamie stops suddenly, tugging me against his chest so he can peer down at me with a grave expression. "Did he touch you?"

"If he did?" I raise my brow. "What's it to you?"

"I can just check."

His hand drops down with a speed I'm not prepared for, dipping underneath the hem of my dress. My hand darts out, capturing his wrist in a vice grip to stop his pursuit. The anger pouring through me is so intense I shake with the restraint to hold him back.

My fingernails pierce his skin, drawing a thin layer of blood to the surface.

"Don't you fucking dare."

He taunts, "What would Richard think?"

"If it isn't completely obvious, I don't give a fuck what Richard has to say."

“Do you really think a bullet is the extent of his limits?” Jamie brings his head closer, making no attempt to withdraw his palm. “He has his own plan for you.”

The only benefit to him being so close is that I spot the silver object glistening in his inside pocket. I dart for it quickly, circling my palm round the penknife. Flicking it open with my thumb, I press it against his wrist. His ulnar artery throbs against the metal.

“You wouldn’t.”

*Oh, but I fucking would.*

I shrug. “Try me.”

His expression lowers into a scowl, and his eyes dart over my shoulder in an attempt to distract me. But as he forces his hand between my legs with a strength I would’ve thought impressive in a less sinister scenario, I slash the knife across his wrist.

Jamie roars as the blade splits the skin, gushing a dark shade of red onto his pressed white shirt. Snatching his wrist back, the wanker pulls a handkerchief from his breast pocket and covers his wrist quickly, but it does little to stop the spurt of blood. The white cloth is instantly seeped in crimson.

“Did you know you can die from an artery bleed in as little as two minutes?” I muse. “Oh, how I love science.”

Hunched over, face paling quickly, he snarls, “You’ll pay for this.”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?”

He threatens, “Just wait for what Richard has in store for you.”

“I’m quivering in my boots.”

I dart my head up as Hudson rounds the corner, his eyes flaring when he catches the two of us red-handed at the crime scene.

He storms over. “Gigi, what did you do?”

“Nothing he didn’t deserve.”

Hudson passes me a sceptical glance before dropping his gaze to Jamie’s wrist. “There’s a doctor from Medical in the ceremony hall.” He turns it over, inspecting the damage. “I’ll take you to him now – he’ll be able to patch you up quickly.”

*FUCK.*

# EIGHTEEN

*Gigi*

The next few days pass by slowly, and I'm roped back into the mind-numbing routine of being escorted through the cold hallways of the Circle headquarters. To think this place once used to provide me with so much comfort and life is incomprehensible.

*What on earth was I thinking?*

The odd heist gives me a spark of adrenaline, but nowadays it's directed at dodging the attention of the police or powering through the tiredness that aches to tear me down. Poppy's wedding feels like some kind of fever dream now I look back on it. The following day saw us at a bank robbery in Knightsbridge. The next, we stole close to three million pounds of diamonds from a jewellery store in Belgravia. The third was a day's worth of performances at Pixies. And so on.

I'm fairly certain Richard is putting me through the wringer as payback for what I did to Jamie. Much to my disappointment, he survived. Victims rarely survive such an injury, but I should've known Jamie is notorious for rising from the dead when I least expect it.

I'm only powering through out of fear Richard might rope us into one of those deadly games in his desperate attempt to "teach me a lesson". It isn't myself I'm worried for; it's my colleagues who'll inevitably suffer thanks to my incompetence.

*Just listen and persevere until you can conduct a plan.*

If I can get through the death of my mother and Greg, silently suppressing my need for revenge, I can delay my anger from getting the better of me.

It's now been a full week since the wedding, and exhaustion is threatening to catch up with me, but life within the Circle never stops.

The wheels of the armoured truck crunch on the gravel driveway. A recruit throws open the back door, and I jump down a moment later, my boots hitting the stones. Slipping the balaclava from my head, I use it to rid the sweat from my brow.

"Thomas," a guard calls, catching my attention. "Richard wants to see you."

With a nod, I slip the balaclava into my back pocket and head through the open door towards his office – a walk I could do with my eyes closed. As I draw closer, I brush off the gun residue seeping into my skin. It falls away with a light puff of dust.

I stop outside the room, knocking my fist against the wood. It'll be at least a few minutes before he opens it. Sometimes I think he stalls merely to make himself look busy. Leaning back against the wall, I bring the sole of my shoe to rest against it.

Tilting my head back, I peer down the hallway towards the end of the corridor. It's a rare moment of silence since people are still counting the loot from today's heist. I turn the other way but whip my head back when a figure peers round the wall. It's a woman, completely out of place in her knee-length dress, with tangled hair. She unknowingly calls for my attention, subconsciously pulling me from the wall to take a few steps closer.

"Hey!" I call out.

Her head whips towards me, her eyes doubling in size as if she's been caught somewhere she shouldn't be. With fear pushing her forwards, she turns the corner, her hurried footsteps echoing down the hall as I chase her.

"Hey!" I shout louder. "Who are you?"

She turns her head back to me momentarily but returns it forwards just as fast, mousy hair tumbling down her back.

"Gigi," Hudson calls from behind me.

A final attempt. "I won't hurt y—"

"Gigi!"

*Fuck.*

I draw my feet to a stop. The woman disappears round a corner, her shadow blending in with the dark hallway. Muttering a curse, I tilt my head back and exhale a short, tight breath.

“He’s ready for you.”

I spin round and storm towards Hudson, raising my finger to his face.  
“Who was that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who was that, Hudson?”

He says grimly, “I said I don’t know.”

I throw my hands towards the closed door of Richard’s office. “How can you let him get away with this?”

“Gigi ...”

“You’re just as bad as them.”

I loathed Hudson after he sold me to Richard during a time I thought I could trust him, yet in recent weeks, I’ve been enjoying his familiarity in a place that now feels so foreign to me. But it’s times like this I’m easily reminded of where his loyalty truly lies. With Richard. Everyone in this fucking place answers to him.

Hudson clamps his jaw tight. My eyes cling to his, trying to analyse his agonised expression. In the waiting silence, he stares back before visibly clearing his throat.

“Richard’s waiting.”

I nod stiffly. “Of course.”

He withdraws a step to let me pass, pressing his hand against the door above my head to push it open.

When I step inside, Richard is lounging behind his desk in a deep leather chair. Pictures line the walls, and a fireplace burns in the corner, wood crackling and embers filling the air in front of the fire guard. At a glance, everything appears the same as when I was thriving in insanity only a few months ago. Yet everything has changed.

Anticipation burns itself into my skin. I settle in one of the burgundy seats. The fabric groans, the backrest towering behind my head like it’s attempting to swallow me whole.

Hudson opts for a chair in the far corner. Jamie rests against Richard’s desk, ankles and arms crossed. A bandage covers his wrist, and my mouth tugs up into a smile.

The foreboding silence forces me to clear my throat. “You wanted to see me?”

Richard smiles, tapping his fingers against the wooden desk in a lazy rhythm. “What did you think of Poppy’s wedding?”

*Is he having me on?*

“It was all right, I guess ...” I drawl, bewildered, and rise to my feet. “Well, if that’s everything—”

“Sit. Down.”

He barks the order with such ferocity I lower back to my seat with a level of submission I despise. Silence surrounds us again. Their watchful eyes feeling like phantom ants crawling up my back and lingering at the base of my skull.

“What’s your plan, Gigi?”

My shoulders turn rigid. “My plan?”

“Why are you here?”

*Because you’re forcing me to stay against my will?*

I would laugh if I weren’t so out of my depth. Merely a puppet strung up on display.

“You’re trying to fit in, trying to play the part of some avenging angel—”

“I wouldn’t call myself an angel, as such.”

Richard’s palm slams down onto the surface, the brass desk lamp shaking with the heavy whack. He crunches his hand into a fist, pointing his finger towards me.

“Do you know what it cost to have this building restored after your little stunt?” he seethes.

I open my mouth in preparation for a witty response, but with the visible rage coursing through him, I force my lips into a thin line, deciding it’s best not to push my luck.

His phone screen flashes, distracting him for a moment. A faint smile touches his mouth before he turns the bright screen over to face the wood.

“How do you expect to repay the expenses?”

“Thankfully, my dad puts women up for auction for extortionate prices ...”

His menacing glare crashes my amusement.

Instead, I offer, “I’ve earned more than enough money by working on the heists.”

“I’m not interested in cash.” He shakes his head before I’ve even drawn the sentence to a close. “But I am interested in using the Thomas family name to my advantage.”

“I don’t follow ...”

My confusion has me peering at Hudson as if he holds the answers, but his head is ducked down, eyes boring into a piece of imaginary lint on his trouser leg.

“I enjoy wedding season.” Richard’s voice is cool and clear. “And it’s about time I make use of the sacrifice of allowing you within the Circle.”

I almost get whiplash with how fast I turn back to him. “What?” A low, disbelieving laugh rumbles from my throat. “You want me to get married?”

No.

No.

*Absolutely not.*

While Richard smiles, a glimmer of amusement crosses Jamie’s mouth.

“To who?” I throw my hand towards Jamie. “To *him*? You must be out of your fucking mind.”

“Out of my mind?” He raises his brow in mock recognition. “Jamie was ‘perfectly placed’ in your life at a time when you needed him. That wasn’t just a coincidence, sweetheart. I made sure your mother would love—”

“Don’t you dare.” My voice shakes, fury almost choking me. “Don’t ever speak about her.”

Richard smiles in excitement at my anger. “You were only ever going to be a pawn, Gigi.”

My heart slams against my chest with a blinding wrath I’m powerless to resist. “And you?” I choke. “What’s in it for you?”

Jamie shrugs casually as if unfazed about being shackled down with a woman who wouldn’t hesitate to sever another of his arteries. “I’ll be marrying into a bloodline with access to a billionaire empire.”

“No. No.” I spit the words. “I’m not doing it.”

Richard lounges back in his office chair, not an ounce of fear at my rejection. Jamie raises his left brow in enjoyment as I sputter, shaking my head again.

“I’m not marrying you,” I repeat sternly, trying to embed it into their small fucking minds. “I’d rather die.”

My hands shake with the desire to grind my emotions into something solid. Times like this, I long for my Glock despite it being gifted by a cruel,

sadistic man. I fist the chair's armrest, digging my fingernails into the leather until it cracks beneath the pressure.

"I knew you'd say that," Richard says leisurely as a hot ache grows in my throat. "You really do seem to be throwing your life round far too casually these days." He rises to his feet, pressing his palms against the wood as he leans forwards. "You will marry him—"

"I'm not your property."

"Perhaps not." Richard tilts his head. "But lives are expendable."

To distract myself from my heart slamming against my ribcage, I rake my gaze across the room in search of a weapon, only to come up empty.

Collecting himself quickly, Richard repeats with a lethal edge, "You *will* marry Jamie, otherwise I'll kill St. James."

Hudson bolts to his feet across the room. "Do you think that's really necessary?"

I turn back to Richard slowly. My voice is deathly calm despite the bitter rage threatening to unleash. "You're bluffing."

Richard's mouth twitches at the corners.

I won't allow him to fucking touch him.

Leaning further over the desk, he places the phone face up just ahead of me. "Tell me what you see."

I stare back in silence as I slowly take the phone, looking at the grainy camera feed. The familiar bungalow takes up the shot, a red dot pulsing in the upper corner of the screen.

Live.

The G-Wagon is pulled up on the pavement, not yet stored in the garage. Swallowing hard, I bite back tears as the camera angle lowers, tilting towards the kitchen window. Harry stands there oblivious as someone behind the camera zooms in on his silhouette.

"I have eyes on the target." A military-like voice comes through the phone. "Waiting for confirmation."

I feel the blood drain from my face.

"No," I say, my breath catching. "You're lying."

"I killed his brother. I buried his dad. His mother is deep in the ground. It's only a matter of time before I wipe out the family line—"

"NO!" I bolt up from the chair as urgency drives me forwards, slamming into the desk. The phone slips from my hand, and Richard snatches it, palm curling round the device.

My throat squeezes tight, threatening to close. That vile, inhuman grin screams of deceit. Maybe this was his plan all along. Maybe he thought I'd crumble under the pressure. But the undeniable fear gripping my heart like a vice threatens to pull me under.

"Will you do it?"

The question hammers at me. Gulping hard, hot tears tremble inside my eyelids. "Let me think about it."

Richard snarls, baring his teeth before bringing the speaker to his mouth. He gives the order. "Execute."

"NO!" I scream, reaching out and gripping desperately onto the front of his shirt. "That's not fair! THAT'S NOT FUCKING FAIR!"

He's unfazed by my torturous scream and the way I rip my nails over his skin. He nods towards Hudson like he expects me to be a prisoner once more, but I slip underneath his outstretched arms, already sprinting out the door before Richard can finish his sentence.

"If you don't come back here ..."

I can't hear him over my choking, beating heart. The ache in my chest blooms into something thick and nauseating. My Harley, shackled in chains, sits on the gravel beside the armoured truck they still haven't finished offloading from today's mission.

Tears blind me as I whip round in a desperate attempt to find a vehicle. B's mounting his bike by the headquarters' entrance, slipping on his helmet. I'm at his side in seconds, taking the keys from the ignition.

"I need this. Please."

"Uh ..." He turns his head suspiciously, hand still wrapped round the handlebars. "I'm not sure if—"

I push him from the bike. He lands on the gravel, catching himself on his palms as I throw my thigh over the seat and switch on the ignition. I kick off the stabiliser and rev the engine, passing him a final stare.

"I need to go. I'm sorry."

I pull at the gas, the wheels forming a cloud of dust against the gravel as I race through the iron gates onto the main road. Wind whips at my cheeks, tangling knots in my hair from my lack of a helmet. I press harder on the gas. Tears catch at the corners of my eyes as I swerve between traffic, ignoring the screeches of car horns.

Every awful thing I've ever done screams at me, ripping my heart open with guilt.

*This is your fault.*

*This is your fucking fault.*

I shake my head madly, almost losing my grip on the handlebars. In the distance, the sky pulses orange, dark smoke curling wildly, forcing me to push the bike to its limit. The engine wails as I tighten my fist harder.

When I reach the residential street, I pull to an abrupt stop, almost tripping over my feet as I race down the road. My lungs burn, boots slamming into the pavement as Harry's house comes into view through the clearing. Fire curls above the roof, smoke drifting from the smashed windows and clawing its way towards the sky.

Smoke stings my eyes as I slam my foot against the front door half off its hinges, kicking it the rest of the way. Coughing and stumbling in the dark, my heart drums hard as I try to shield my eyes against the dark air coated with heat and ash.

My shoes crunch glass as I step inside, the floorboards groaning beneath my feet.

I scream, "HARRY!"

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# NINETEEN

*Harry*

The house has been quiet all day, but I've come to learn stillness isn't peace; it's usually a warning.

I used to revel in the silence when I was a part of the Circle, basking in it after the heaviness drained both my body and my mind. Now the quiet is spoiled by my own demons – though I find them a necessary toxicity to remind myself what I'm fighting for every day.

Although sometimes the endless list overspills its allotted place in my brain. That's why I'm pathetically tapping a ballpoint pen against the crumpled paper.

1. Find out what the fuck is happening with Andy.
2. **Find the trafficking ring. Save the girls.**
3. Kill Richard and the fuckwit, Jamie Callahan.
4. ~~Find Gigi.~~

My jaw tenses as I force myself to cross it out, the pen making a tear in the paper.

One week. One fucking week since she came on my tongue only to waltz off with another man. Not just any man – her ex-boyfriend.

Does she realise what kind of fuckery that does to a man's brain? To *my* brain?

The egotistical part of me is torn between the comfort of having Jamie believe he can win her back while she'll always suffer a weakness for me and the blazing fear she might settle for someone else.

But she's mine. She'll always be *mine*. Yet with each day that passes, the terror closing in on my chest digs itself deeper.

Maybe she's being held against her will. Maybe she wants to be with him.

At what point do I allow her to be the independent woman she wants to be? And at what fucking point do I take what's rightfully mine?

*Fuck, I don't know.*

I spin the knife on my kitchen island, my eyes drilling into the weapon. Everything is quiet except for the rhythmic tick of the old clock and the swirl of the blade.

I toss the knife into the sink, rubbing my face with a hand that smells faintly of ink and metal.

What can I be missing?

I pull my palm from my face with a heavy exhale. Across the top of the mangled piece of paper, a small, artificial red light moves, spreading the length of the kitchen island. Confusion barely has a moment to settle in before something just ... cracks.

I throw myself across the floor as the windows burst open one by one, spitting shards of glass across the floorboards. I throw my arms above my head to protect myself from the raining debris.

*Well, it's about fucking time that asshole did something drastic—*

The thought is cut short as another load of debris flies haphazardly across the room.

I lift my head, smelling the thick stench of smoke before I'm able to twist my head over my shoulder to see the hallway engulfed in the orange light of a rapidly growing fire. Glass shreds my face as the kitchen lights die with a pop, the wiring melting. Darkness rushes in, smoke curling along the ceiling.

I rise to my feet, stumbling half-blind, but the second I stand, the floor begins to moan. Long, aching sounds of old timber surrendering to the heat.

I've never kept sentimental items in my house for this specific reason, knowing things can disappear in an instant. But there's one photograph of my mother hidden in the bottom of my drawer that has me stumbling down the hall towards my bedroom, splaying my palm against the wall through the darkness.

As I reach for the handle, the door cracks, bursting open in a fit of sparks. Chunks of plaster fall round me, just inches away, smashing into the floor. Embers rain down, scorching through my T-shirt until they sting my shoulders and my neck.

*Fuck.*

Lungs tightening with the inability to breathe, I sink to my knees in the hallway, coughing into my arm, the fire roaring louder until I taste blood. The smoke drags its fingers down my throat like it's desperate to pull me under.

The floor trembles further, shaking beneath me, the ceiling groaning simultaneously. It must be about to cave in. Something slams against the front door, the noise barely distinguishable through the burn of the timber.

But it comes again. Twice. Three times. Another crash hits the door, and then, after a sharp, metallic crack, the front door bursts inwards. Boots crunch against glass as someone steps inside.

“HARRY!”

My head snaps towards the voice.

Framed by firelight and darkness, Gigi appears through the fog. One hand raised to shield her face, she coughs until her throat turns raw.

Shock barrels through me. “Gigi?”

She turns her head to me quickly, and our eyes clash. A large piece of timber separates us, but I can see the panic in her wild eyes, quickly overcome with relief. She gasps, exhaling a sound close to a cry.

I shout over the debris falling round us, “Turns out you don’t hate me!”

“I did,” she pants through the thickening smoke. “Until I realised losing you would utterly destroy me.”

Relief pours out of me in a smile and a breathless laugh. Through the darkness she smiles back, tired and exhausted.

Something splits above our heads, tearing through the ceiling. A wooden beam loosens, the plaster falling quickly above where she stands.

I roar, “GIGI!”

Everything tumbles, blossoming in a thick puff of smoke that separates us both as it crashes into the floor. My hands shake as I move the timber, the embers burning my eyes.

“Gigi!” I shout again.

Nothing.

Panic pushes me forwards, persevering through the pain. Just so I can fucking find her.

She can’t die.

She *can’t*.

Yet as each second ticks by, concern has my heart surrendering. The more the house groans, the closer it is to falling apart, and the more I’m certain I won’t leave here alive if she isn’t by my side—

Fingers clasp round my wrist, gentle but alive.

I wrap my hand round her forearm, gripping her tightly. I tug her desperately against my chest. Ash marks her cheeks, a thin slice across her brow from which blood seeps over her skin, dripping close to her eye.

Drowsy and tearful, Gigi tilts her chin up, staring directly into my eyes. She whispers, “Harry—”

I cup her face, slamming my mouth against hers. Longing and desperation, all roped into a kiss that has me pouring every ounce of emotion into her. My tongue slips between her lips, and she finds me simultaneously. I thread my fingers through her hair, tangling them in the roots and tilting her head back, not leaving an inch of her mouth untouched.

Her grip is firm against my T-shirt, her soft fingertips scoring the fabric. I pull her close, feeling her heart slamming against her chest and tasting the smoke in her mouth.

Thankfully, she has the common sense to pull away, her breath mingling with mine.

The house groans like a final warning. Gigi grips my hand suddenly, and with her palm tight in mine, we dart underneath the falling debris, narrowly missing the wreckage that falls from the opening in the roof.

We barely make it out of the front door before an explosion rumbles from inside the house, throwing us out onto the driveway. We tumble, rolling onto the pavement with the stone at our backs and the dark sky blooming above our heads.

I heave air into my lungs, coughing hard into my shoulder as the thick air tries to claw its way down my throat. Wiping my bloodshot eyes against my

shoulder, I curse the burn.

Gigi's at my side in a blink, pulling at my arm to help me rise to my feet. Worry marring her every feature, she breathes, "We need to go."



A motel room on the edge of town: cheap, untraceable, and a safe haven. For now.

The door clicks shut behind us, flimsy and hollow, just like everything else in this place. It won't keep Richard out – not really – but it's the best we could manage with the time we have.

Gigi and I are both still heaving. My shirt is torn, singed in places, clinging to me with sweat. She stands in front of the window, backlit by the neon "VACANCY" sign outside, which casts a red light round her silhouette.

I can't stop looking at her.

She's here, shaken and alarmed, but breathing.

Ash streaks across her collarbone, a smudge of soot on her lips and dried blood at her temple. She's still trembling – whether from adrenaline or something else, I'm not sure. But her fists are clenched, jaw tight. She's trying to keep it together, and so am I.

Because all I want to do is touch her.

I want to hold her as if I'm anchoring myself to her. My hands curl at my sides, trying to find control, but it slips fast.

"Gigi."

Her voice is barely a rasp. "Are you okay?"

"No."

I cross the room in three strides.

She grabs my face as I approach, fingers smearing across my jaw. I kiss her like I've forgotten how to do anything else. Her mouth opens, desperate and messy as our teeth clash.

I move closer, cupping the other side of her neck to kiss her deeper. It takes her a moment, as though her mind is catching up with her, before she finally slips her fingers into my hair on either side of my head.

Dropping one of my hands to slip it round her back, I demand, "Up."

She bows into my touch easily, allowing me to take her weight. She wraps her legs round me with ease, squeezing the insides of my hips, her feet pressing into my spine.

I palm the underside of her thighs, desperate to have my hands on her, as I lead us to the bathroom. She mutters something inaudible into my mouth, but I push my tongue in further.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” she manages.

I grip the back of her head, tightening my hold in her hair to tug her backwards and away from my mouth. She pulls back with a gasp.

“Then I’ll have to make you beg.”

Gigi meets my mouth with eagerness again, but she struggles to keep the kiss close as I lower her onto the bathroom floor, turning on the shower. We’re a mess of tangled limbs and clashing teeth as we strip each other of our fire-damaged clothing. I take her bra in my hands, lacing it round her wrists and tying it to the gushing shower pipe.

The water hammers down onto her naked body, decorating her skin with droplets. They glisten against her breasts, the dips in her waist, and the soft skin of her stomach. As it makes contact, her back bows. I drop my head, pulling her erect nipple into my mouth and toying with it between my teeth. I hum against her, watching her through dark lashes, and she whimpers, bowing further into my touch.

She whines, “Please.”

I groan against her skin, not having enough patience to drag out her desperation when all I want is to feel every inch of her hugging my cock.

Without me having to ask, she wraps her legs round me, pulling me between her legs.

“Good girl.”

Fisting her flesh in my hand, I nudge my cock against her clit, earning a soft hiss from her that has me chewing on my bottom lip to hold back a groan at the sweet sound. I nudge into her, inch by inch, feeling her stretch to accommodate me.

My eyes roll, and I drop my head into the crook of her neck, biting down to control the moan that tumbles from my lips.

“H-Harry.”

Pushing myself in to the hilt, I slam my palm on the wall beside her head, picking up a rhythm quickly. She opens her legs wider, her mouth gaping on silent cries. I move one hand higher, cupping her ass and palming the flesh.

Her back sinks against the shower wall. Growling into her skin, my fingertip parts her back hole, and I slip a digit inside. She cries out, pushing back against my hand. My mouth covers hers on a scream, eager to swallow every sound.

“You like that?” I breathe.

She nods breathlessly.

I hold her up by pushing us against the wall, still fucking both holes with my cock and my finger. With her head tilted back, the hose pours warm water over her skin. My grip on her thigh slips, and I hike it round my hip instead, fucking her with a deeper thrust, pushing my finger in harmoniously.

I order, “Turn round.”

I slip my cock and my finger out of her as she moves, doing as she’s told. I press down on her lower back, and she leans forwards, spreading her legs, baring herself to me even with her wrists still restrained. I fist my cock in my hand, running the engorged tip up her slit and soaking myself with her arousal. I hesitate near the tight ring of muscle at her ass, pressing into it just slightly.

Then, fisting her hip, I push into her slowly.

“O-oh fuck.”

She hugs my cock tightly, making it near impossible to move. My chest constricts, and I slip my arm round her as I press into her fully. I drop my hand down to her clit, rubbing with friction and precision.

She pushes herself up on her tiptoes as I push into her deeper.

She begs, “Please. Please. Please.”

Her ass slaps against my hips with each of my thrusts forwards, her body near trembling as she throws her head back on my shoulder. My teeth find her ear, and I bite down, my eyes screwing shut as my balls start to tighten. I feel her entire body tense right before an orgasm rips through her.

“Christ, Gigi.”

My hips stutter as I come, spilling into her and almost bearing my whole weight down on her back. I throw my hand up, clasping the restraint round her wrists to stop myself from stumbling forwards. She’s still coming undone under my other hand.

Breathlessly, my lips stroke across her neck, moving across every droplet of water. My heart slams against her back as it works tirelessly to regulate.

She turns to me over her shoulder, fighting a smile as tiredness sweeps over her, water dripping from the ends of her long lashes.

“I’m going to pull out, okay?”

She nods, and I gently pull myself from her ass, careful not to hurt her. Gigi gasps at the loss of contact, righting herself, back straight, as I lean up and free her of the strap round her wrists.

I pull one of the towels from the rack, spreading it out for her as she carefully steps out of the shower, her body disappearing inside the white cotton. She tucks the towel underneath her armpits, stepping towards the bed and settling down on the mattress. Wrapping a towel low on my waist, I slip into the bed behind her, bringing my arm round her middle and pulling her close.

Returning my lips to her skin, I mumble against her, “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Voice quiet, she says, “I want you to tell me the rest of the story.”

I’m silent for long enough that Gigi turns towards me, her face just a few inches from mine on the pillow. Her hand cups my jaw, something sad hidden in her gaze.

“You promised ...”

“I kissed you once.”

Brought to silence, she blinks before her face turns a shade paler.

I clear my throat. “You didn’t remember it happening. You didn’t know who I was.”

“How wouldn’t I remember that?”

“I can tell you ... if you like.”

# TWENTY

*Harry*

## *Flashback*

Halloween night. A rare favourite, since I despise every other day of the year. The bloke beside me is getting dry-humped by some slutty Harley Quinn wearing a costume similar to a fucking bikini. I take a drag from my cigarette, disappearing into the silent, comfortable space of my mind as I sink further into the sofa.

This year, I hate today.

I want to be rid of this stupid fucking city. I'm still grieving the loss of my best friend five years later, and I might as well add Greg to the list with how often he forces me away. I've even relocated to my own home to give him the space he desires, a small bungalow in a quiet neighbourhood.

But what's the fucking point of anything anymore?

With my head resting against the back of the sofa, eyes boring into the ceiling, I take a heavy drag of the cigarette balanced between my teeth. The smoke spills into the air as I ponder the idea, debating whether life is worth living when there is nothing left to live for anymore.

Through the cloud of dissipating smoke, a presence from the hallway forces me to lower my chin. A small girl with long brown hair and eyes that are far too familiar for me to ever forget stumbles a few steps, heading for the door.

*Her.*

Jack's sister.

The cigarette tumbles from my mouth with the shock that flies through me. I've been rotting in grief, distancing her from my psychotic mind, but every reason I chose to stay away vanishes into oblivion at the sight. It's been nearly five years since I last saw that face. Beautiful, alluring, and ... drunk. *Very drunk*

Every instinct screams at me to run after her. I shake my head, not allowing myself to give in to my own selfishness no matter how much I ache to chase her down and make up for lost time. Yet the thought tastes stale and rancid as I watch her palm the wall, finding her balance.

I'm still debating what to do when an older guy starts trailing behind her. Suddenly decided, I propel myself from the sofa.

*Absolutely fucking not.*

The cigarette bounces off my lap, staining the carpet with a small, circular burn as I throw on my jacket and trail out the door. She doesn't even have the decency to call a taxi, tripping over her own two feet while stumbling down the street.

Half a decade of absence only to see her at a house party. *A fucking house party*, like we're pathetic teenagers. No wonder she's oblivious to the fact two men are following on her tail like predators hunting their evening meal.

I linger back several paces, hands pushed deep into my jacket pockets, as she swerves along the dirty pavements. She's dressed in a plain white dress that reaches her ankles, a set of angel wings floating from the back. Her heels cause her several missteps, and I'm surprised she doesn't dislocate her ankle from the amount her limbs twist.

Stiffness in my neck causes me to swirl my head, brushing off the ache that lingers between my shoulders. This is wrong – so fucking wrong – and too close for comfort. But I'm just watching her, keeping an eye on her until she's home. Making sure this cunt doesn't take advantage of her in a vulnerable state.

The man whistles, shouting something disgustingly fucking male to get her attention. But it goes unmissed by my ears as I stalk forwards, clamping my hand round his jacket and dragging him backwards.

"Is that any way to speak to a lady? She's not a dog," I spit, seething with anger. "Have some fucking respect."

The bloke laughs loudly, chucking his head back and assaulting my nostrils with the thick stench of beer. "Relax, dude. She's just a girl."

*Just a girl?*

“Just a girl?” I laugh wickedly, shaking my head in utter disbelief. Retrieving the dagger burning a hole in my jacket pocket, I bring it to the front of his throat, watching as his Adam’s apple bobs nervously against it.

But I’ve already split his skin. I’m already revelling in the way his voice breaks and cracks as I lower him against the pavement. Blood seeps quickly from the cut, obstructing my view of the gaping hole in his neck.

I growl, “Stop fucking crying.”

I dig my hand into the mess of his throat despite his pathetic attempts to clasp onto my wrist. I persevere through his strangled cry, my fingertips scraping across his vocal cords.

*Gotcha.*

The stubborn nodules slip through my fingers. I use my spare hand to grip the dagger, pressing it back into his throat as I cut blindly, until I feel them tether.

I clamp my palm round the strings and yank hard, ripping him of his ability to speak. Blood spurts faster from his neck, like a gushing tap. I tuck the remnants of his flesh into his front pocket, patting the cotton fabric keeping it concealed.

“Now you can hang them on the wall in your pathetic little house so you remember what happens when you treat a lady with disrespect.”

But when I look back at him, his eyes, once full of life, have rolled into the back of his head. His body has already dipped to a temperature near freezing.

I fucking killed him.

*What a shame.*

I pull myself to my feet, wiping my blood-soaked hands on the front of my black jeans. The repercussions are yet to catch up with me, although I don’t have an ounce of sympathy for ridding the world of an insolent man.

A cough, small and quiet, whips my attention sideways.

*She’s standing there, head slightly tilted, brows drawn together. “Are ... are you following me?”*

This is a dream.

Surely, this must be a fucking dream. Or a nightmare. I haven’t yet decided.

I don’t realise my mouth has dropped open until I see the cold air hovering in front of my lips. Despite having committed a gruesome murder for her, I initially freeze.

“No.”

*Christ, why do I sound so fucking bashful?*

*Pull yourself together, you fucking idiot. You just ripped out a man’s vocal cords because he whistled at her – the least you can do is not sound like a pathetic simp.*

“What ...?” She stumbles sideways, righting herself quickly. “What are you dressed as?”

Confusion has me peering down at my soaked fingertips. “A serial killer?”

She nods, although her eyes are glassy and distant with the effects of alcohol. They droop with the temptation to fall asleep.

“And what about you? Let me guess – an angel, given the wings.”

“N-not just any angel.” She hiccups, smiling widely. “I’m Juliet from Romeo and Juliet. The 1996 version.”

“Baz Luhrmann, right?”

She smiles knowingly and nods. “That one’s my favourite.”

A genuine smile tilts my mouth, and I make a mental note to store that piece of information away for later.

“If I’m an angel, you must be my knight.” She stands straighter, with a gushing smile.

I shift on my feet, making sure to block the corpse on the pavement behind me. “I’m not sure I deserve a title so honourable.”

A noticeable flush arrives on her cheeks, and she chews her lower lip, turning away. Only briefly.

“Could you walk me home?”

“Yes,” I answer far too quickly.

My eagerness has me keeping close to her as we walk, but I linger back a few steps deliberately, so I won’t give away that I know the stalkerish details of where she lives, where her room is within the house, and not to step into her brother’s room on the first floor.

Despite the scent of vodka oozing off her, she leads the way, which is a miracle since she can barely walk in a straight line. When we reach the driveway, she offers me her handbag, fumbling with the keys as she pushes them into the lock. As graceful and as quiet as she can allow it, she opens the front door, the wood groaning as she steps inside.

I linger on the doormat, inwardly cringing at the thought of one of her parents catching me.

This is where I'll part from her and say good night.

I can't afford for it to go further than this.

Before I've even finished the thought, she's clutching the banister and slipping off her shoes, trailing up the stairs, leaving the front door wide open and me holding the incredibly pink bag.

Hushed, I call out, "Hey!"

Her footsteps echo on the landing, leading the way to her room.

*For fuck's sake.*

Silently, with my heart in my throat, I close the door behind me and follow after her. I miss the creaks in the floorboards, slipping into the bathroom to quickly wash my hands. The blood runs down the drain, and I grimace as I turn off the tap, hearing the pipes groan.

Exiting the small lavatory, I linger outside her bedroom for a while before finding the confidence to step inside.

The lights are switched off, but there's a soft glow from her fairy lights. I place her handbag carefully down on the edge of the mattress.

Christ, I'm in her fucking room *while* she's in it. This is dangerous territory even for me. But thankfully, with the way she stumbles round on the soft carpet, knocking over a few items, I doubt she'll remember this tomorrow. Her clumsy footing sends her hip into the dresser, knocking off a perfume bottle. I dart forwards, catching it in my palm before it shatters.

"Thanks," she breathes. "If ... if my parents woke up—" She shakes her head, stopping the thought.

"I can leave."

*I should leave.*

"I don't want to be alone," she whispers.

I watch her longingly, feeling the weight of her expression as the words hit profoundly. I know exactly what they stand for.

*I'm lonely too.*

The intimacy in her gaze forces me to lower my head.

"You can sit down," she whispers, hiccupping shortly after.

I perch on the edge of her bed, purposely placing my feet on the floor. I don't trust myself to get more comfortable, especially with the way she's looking round the room for what I'm certain will be her pyjamas. And from the state she's in, I wouldn't put it past her to change in front of me.

After finding the silk clothing, she has the decency to turn her back away from me. I bow my head regardless, distracting myself by picking at a loose

thread on my jeans. Anything to get my mind off the fact she's undressing just a few short steps away.

"I'm ... I'm stuck."

*Holy fuck.*

This can't be happening.

I raise my head just a fraction to see her struggling with the zipper on the back of her dress, angel wings discarded on the floor. The lump in my throat grows quickly.

"Shall I—?" I cut myself off. "Are you sure—?"

"Stop being the gentleman and just help," she grunts in her struggle to move.

I step up from the bed, approaching her back and ignoring each dirty, rotten thought that yells at me to strip her of everything and appreciate every divine inch of her. My fingers tremble on the zip as I pull it down, feeling the material give way.

She holds the dress to her chest, concealing her front. I teeter on both feet to relieve the friction of my cock stiffening in my jeans. Turning to me fully, she hands out the cream silk cami.

My voice is surprisingly calm for such an intense moment. "Arms up."

Slowly, she drops the dress. In my peripheral, I can see the bareness of her chest, the light pink of her nipples, but I anchor my focus on the doe-brown eyes that are capable of ending a war. She's looking back just as intently, though there's a glassiness to her gaze from the drink that still hasn't worn off.

Christ, she won't remember any of this, while I'll spend a lifetime trying to get it out of my mind.

She lifts her arms above her head. I take my time, slowly pulling the top over her hands and down her arms. The material bunches at her breasts, and I pull at the hem, my knuckles brushing her pebbled nipples before it covers her.

I take a step back to distance myself. "I really should go ..." I say, turning my attention towards the door.

"W-wait." Her voice breaks the silence.

I turn to her slowly, craning my neck over my shoulder to look at her. She's fisting the material of her pyjama top, her bare feet moving over the soft carpet. "Could you just stay? Just for a little bit."

Maybe it's the vulnerability in her eyes, or maybe it's because I'm a fool who aches for her, but I nod slowly. "Just for a bit."

She stares for a moment too long before sheepishly dropping her chin. Carefully, she holds onto the bedside table for support before slipping underneath her duvet, making herself comfortable on the bed. She rests back against the headboard as I resume my position on the edge, keeping my distance.

"Can I ask something of you?" she asks. "I promise it's not like me to be so forward ..."

I watch as she struggles with finding the confidence.

"Since my brother died, I've been struggling to feel ... anything. Everything feels numb, and I need to feel again."

This girl will be the fucking death of me.

"What do you want from me?"

"A kiss."

My eyes run over her. She seems so small in the large bed, vulnerable in the way she holds the quilt.

"You don't know what you're asking." I shake my head. "You'll forget this happened—"

"I'd always remember you."

If it weren't for the way I saw her stumbling across the room mere minutes ago, I'd think she was genuine. Her voice turns quiet, and she pleads, "But even if I don't ... it's just an experiment."

Slowly, she comes closer, sitting on her knees with the duvet pulled into her lap. I still feel reluctant, though when she places her delicate hand to my jaw and turns me softly to face her, every bit of the man I am incinerates. I fear if she asked for anything, I'd give it to her.

Her eyes run over my face slowly, and I'm thankful the dim lighting and her drunken state will only give her a distorted image of this memory. Her attention slowly drops to my mouth. I cup the side of her neck, encouraging her closer. She lingers, the soft skin of her lips brushing against mine as she takes a hesitant, broken breath against my mouth.

"We don't have to—"

She slams her mouth against mine before I can object.

She moves her mouth with gentleness and desperation. I fist the side of her neck, struggling not to push myself too far with her. As she presses her chest against mine, I feel the swell of her breasts, the racing of her heart.

“Please,” she begs against my mouth, bringing her fingertips up to my hair.

My tortured whisper vibrates her lips. “Don’t push me to my limit.”

She threads through the strands. “*Please.*”

*Fuck it.*

I drop my hand to the dip in her waist, grabbing the small curve of her side and fisting the silk as I bring her impossibly closer. Yet it’s not close enough. I move my mouth against hers with urgency, tasting the vodka on her tongue, the strawberry lip gloss lingering on her lips, and just her. I bite down on her lower lip. She gasps, willingly letting me into her mouth, which I enter with urgency.

Her hands are tight in my hair. I don’t realise her intentions until gravity shifts and she lies on her back, encouraging me between her thighs. Whatever complaint was festering on my tongue evaporates as she breaks the kiss to pepper her mouth along my jawline to my neck, the tip of her tongue skating across the skin.

*Holy fuck.*

I grab her chin between my thumb and my forefinger, bringing her back desperately to my mouth to drain the sweet taste of her. She’s all I’ve ever craved, and everything I could ever want. I knew that before I stole a taste of her.

Her thighs wrap round my waist, her feet pushing into my back and pressing me harder against her. She grinds her hips upwards. I growl, sliding my hand underneath her top and squeezing her bare breast, thumb slipping over her nipple.

She mewls, her hand dropping down to my belt buckle.

“No,” I mumble against her mouth.

She kisses me harder, if only to distract me, as she continues her pursuit of pulling the belt through the loosest hole. It’s only when she slips her hand down the front of my jeans that I pin her hands above her head.

She separates our mouths with an audible gasp, struggling to catch her breath. Her lips are plump and wet, desperate to be kissed.

Her voice is strained, quick to defend. “I’d never forget you.”

“Trust me, I want to.” My hands flex on her wrists, desperate to ruin her. “You’re *killing* me here.”

Tears tremble inside her eyelids, and she blinks hard, wiping them away against her shoulder.

Throat burning, I promise, “If you remember this in the morning, then we’ll talk. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispers.

Slowly, I release her hands and sit back on my heels. Her chest shudders with breathlessness, her hair splayed across the pillow from where I tore my fingers through it.

“Can I at least have your name?”

I shake my head. “It’s a secret.”

“I’m good at keeping those.”

I softly laugh and climb from the mattress, retreating towards the door despite how aching I am to stay. My hand lingers on the doorknob, and I crunch my fist against it.

“If I don’t see you again,” she says softly, pulling my attention towards her, “then this was the realest thing I’ve felt in a long time.”

Her eyelashes flutter, and within just a few short minutes, she’s sleeping peacefully against the pillow, lips slightly parted and a steady rhythm moving her chest. I stare at her for a moment too long – far too long. But maybe I’m just memorising her, saving everything to memory in case life tries to deal us different cards.

I promise, “I’ll see you tomorrow, and this time I won’t let you go.”

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# TWENTY-ONE

*Gigi*

*Present day*

I was never chasing the Circle; I was always chasing him.

At a time when I was so desperate to just *feel* something, aching to fulfil some human emotion, I was completely oblivious to the fact I was chasing the feeling of *him*.

Harry.

I may not remember what happened that night, but a part of me always knew. He planted himself inside my brain, embedded himself so deeply I've been subconsciously pursuing him for years. Years I spent chasing the Circle, only to now realise I was only ever chasing him.

That was where our story began, but perhaps this is where it ends.

When will we be free from Richard? At what point will I take his threats seriously – when Harry's burnt corpse is buried six feet under?

The cigarette trembles between my fingers at the thought as I bring it to my mouth, fighting back the tears building behind my eyes. The metal step is cold and damp from the grey, overcast day, groaning beneath me as I shift forwards.

I've always hated cigarettes, but they're familiar. They remind me of Harry. And I'll anchor myself to that emotion while I'm still able to feel something.

At the thought of him, I glance over my shoulder towards the motel room, where he's still asleep, naked and sprawled across the sheets, shielded by

the thin, half-draped curtain.

I mutter on a broken breath, “Fuck.”

The sound of a car pulls my attention forwards, its tyres slipping into a small pothole at the motel entrance, sloshing water over the sides. The dark Audi R8 has no right being in a place like this. It’s too new. Too immaculate.

I remain steady despite my racing heart, taking a drag of the cigarette as I watch the vehicle pull to a stop in one of the parking spaces. The headlights shine bright through the grey day, spits of rain dotting the glass.

The wipers move over the front screen, obstructing my view of the driver.

The engine turns off, the lights disappearing alongside it, and slowly, the front door opens.

Hudson steps out, balancing his elbow on the roof of the car and keeping his head tucked down. Though he knows I’m watching. I make no effort to move despite my heart slamming against my ribcage, eyes set on him as I withdraw the cigarette from my lips. He finds the courage with a deep breath and steps back to close the driver’s door.

I straighten my back on his approach.

He strides closer, hands stuffed into his front pockets.

I stub the cigarette out on the step beside me. It hisses, the step wet from the rain. I focus my attention on it as black leather shoes land in front of me. Hudson moves a step to the side, sitting beside me on the metal step. Knees slightly parted, he leans forwards, resting his forearms on his thighs.

Our silence is accompanied by the buzzing of the steady flashing vacancy sign, which hums over the distant traffic noise.

“How mad are they?”

“Pretty mad.” He clears his throat and turns to me. “Was it worth it?”

A sad smile reaches my lips. “It was.”

A thought saunters in slowly, distracting me from the present. Is what I’m about to walk into any different from the happiness my mum forfeited for her children?

She loved her children more than anything, signing her life away to protect them. I now realise there’s only one person I feel that strongly for. And I see him everywhere.

I see him in the roses plotted in the flower bed.

I see him in the cigarette packet sitting on the floor.

I see him in the expensive designer suit Hudson’s wearing.

Everything is a reminder of him and all that he sacrificed for me.

There's a version of me I thought I'd be by now. She wasn't supposed to have fucked up as many times as she has. She wasn't supposed to have tripped and fallen at every hurdle in her desperate attempt to find herself. She was supposed to have it all figured out. She was supposed to have a life that made sense.

But she was young and foolish, distracted by shaping herself into the woman she thought she should be.

Now she carries the weight of every choice she thought would lead somewhere. She lies in the carnage of what she thought she wanted, having suffered mistakes she can't undo.

After losing herself to insanity, she ached for redemption. But history doesn't grant second chances; it gives you the opportunity to do better.

And this is me doing better.

I love Harry. I always will. Secrets, lies, and all.

Mum sacrificed everything for her children to give them life.

And I'll do the same for him.

Hudson clears his throat. "Come on." He rises to his feet. "It's time to go."

I blink hard and rub my eyes, bringing myself fully back to the present. On shaky legs, I pull myself up and turn in the direction of the motel room. My limbs protest, making the movement slow.

Hudson shifts in front of me, blocking my path.

I assure him, "I'll only need a minute."

I take a step to the side, but he shifts the same way, diverting his focus down to his shoes.

"What are you—?" I cut myself off. "I'm just going to say goodbye,"

"It will only make things worse."

My face drains of colour, the realisation threatening to pull me under.

"Just let me say goodbye to him." I grab his arm. "*Please.*"

There's a fraction of a smile, but it's sad and pinched, as if he equally hates the order. I shake my head frantically, but the protest falls short on my tongue. I know I have to leave.

I have to go.

I have to do what's best for him.

Hudson places his hand on my lower back, encouraging me down the steps. "Come on."

Every step feels alien as we walk towards Hudson's parked car. The lights flash, signalling the doors are unlocked, but I linger at the passenger door, turning my attention back to the motel and the window on the first floor, distorted through the tears blurring my eyes.

Exhaling a sharp breath, I drop my head and climb into the leather seat.

Hudson gets in beside me, starting the engine a moment later. There's a restless energy to his movements as we drive out of the car park, narrowly missing the pothole.

The quiet is weighted and heavy, like an anchor trying to drown me.

He shifts in his seat. "I won't tell them where I found you—" Hudson cuts himself short, glancing at his phone as it lights up in the centre console. His lips press into a thin line as he turns his attention back to the road, relaxing back in his seat.

I turn towards the window. "They already know, don't they?"

His silence is answer enough.

The car pulls up outside the iron gates, lingering for just a moment before they open with a heavy groan. Hudson presses the gas, and the gravel crunches beneath the tyres as he pulls into the driveway.

The courtyard is sparse with it still being early morning, only a handful of cars parked outside the Circle headquarters, with recruits yet to arrive for the heists in store for today. Our car pulls up beside the armoured truck, yet to be prepped.

I feel the weight of Hudson's stare as the car pulls to a stop, desperate to say something but choosing to say nothing at all. Rather than dwell in the silence, I exit the car, starting the walk to Richard's office.

While I've done this walk time and time again, my intentions are as clear as they ever were. My legs are too shaky to be considered confident, and I hesitantly clear my throat as we reach the office door.

I rap my knuckle against it, my hand dropping to the door handle.

"Wait." Hudson sighs. "Gigi—"

I push the door, leaving it wide open as I step inside. Richard and Jamie are in similar positions round the desk as if I never left yesterday. My future husband lounges back against the wood, arms crossed and smirking, while Richard rises to his feet from behind the desk, lifting his brow.

I barely recognise the sound of my own voice. "I'll do it."

Richard smiles wide, clapping his hands together. "Very well. I'll have the paperwork put in place."

Hudson slips into the room behind me, resting back against the wall. Richard rounds his desk, nearing the door, but Jamie stands firm as if he has nowhere to go.

“The wedding won’t happen straight away, of course. You’ll be expected to attend public appearances, interviews, the lot. I’ll have the itinerary sent over to you.” Richard pauses in the doorway. “Oh, and Gigi? If your display isn’t believable, or for one moment someone suspects otherwise, this ordeal is over. And Harry will suffer the consequences.”

With the pit of my stomach churning, I nod and drop my chin.

He orders, “Come on, Hudson.”

I wait for something, anything, but there’s only a heavy silence – one that forces me to lift my head just as quickly as I lowered it. Richard’s brows draw together in annoyance, and he gestures impatiently to the door.

“Anderson,” he barks sternly, dropping his last name.

Hudson’s attention passes between me and Jamie. He’s wearing an expression I’d have once thought was regret. He lingers for a moment as if fighting the will to stay before shifting closer to the door.

He passes me a final stare before Richard slams the door closed, sealing us inside. My fingernails press deeply into the inside of my palms, cutting skin. I raise my head, fighting the instinct to *run*.

Jamie strides towards me. My gaze whips to the desk, frantically searching for a weapon, but his hand is already tangled in my hair, wrenching it backwards before I’m able to defend myself.

A letter opener sits to the side. I reach desperately for it, but Jamie’s grip turns solid, shoving my shoulder down so I drop to my knees. He tangles my roots between his fingers with a strength that forces my head back, and in this moment, I can’t help but think how the possessive grip feels so different to Harry’s last night.

“I might’ve put up with this shit as your partner, but as your future husband ...” Jamie shakes his fist, making my chin buckle. “I don’t expect such disrespect.”

My scalp screams for freedom, but I stare up at him blankly, refusing to share the pain he aches for. With his hand still tangled in my hair, he starts to undo his belt buckle.

Jamie pulls the belt loose, undoing the fly of his jeans. I keep my eyes sternly on his face.

“Pull it out,” he tells me.

I remain rigid, which only encourages him to pull harder.

It isn't the sting that screams at me to listen to his demand; it's the image of Harry's house burning, the imminent threat to his life. I shakily reach my head towards the front of his boxers.

Jamie spreads his legs just slightly. "Now suck."

I bring my face forwards, keeping my gaze trained on his cruel eyes and his hideous expression. Despite trying to ooze defiance, my palms are quivering, and my heart sprints hard against my chest.

A tear slips from the corner of my eye as I draw nearer, parting my lips. He tangles my hair tighter round his wrist, excitement getting the better of him as he slaps his hips forwards.

"Oh fuck," he whines. His eyes roll backwards, his chin to the ceiling as his cock slips over my tongue. His expression morphs into a smug, content smile. "Now put more effort into it."

I clamp my jaw and bite down. Hard.

Bloods spurts in my mouth, flesh splitting underneath my teeth. With a guttural roar, Jamie slips out of me quickly. His throat shakes on a piercing scream as he looks down at himself and the mess I've made.

I turn my head to the side, spitting a mixture of saliva and blood onto the floorboards. Blood smears across my face as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. I double over, coughing hard as vomit rises quickly. An awful sound claws its way up my throat, a mixture of a sob and a scream. I slap my hand over my mouth as if that'll fix it. As if I can silence the collapse.

"Was that ..." – I pant, withdrawing my palm – "enough effort for you?"

The last thing I see is the wrath behind Jamie's advance before he slams my face into the corner of the wooden desk. My jaw hits the surface with such power it throws my head back. My skull collides with the floor a second before everything turns black.

## TWENTY-TWO

*Harry*

### *Flashback*

I press my palms against the sink, my knuckles white as I stare into my reflection. The porcelain groans beneath my grip, my jaw clenching so hard it aches.

*Breathe.*

*It's just her.*

Although this is far deeper than watching her from the shadows. I never intended for her to know who I was, but now I've seen the potential of what we could be, I can't comprehend the idea of anything else.

But what if she doesn't remember last night?

What if it was merely a drunken mistake and she doesn't remember a thing?

Dread sweeps over me at the thought, and I shake my head to push it away. If I dwell on the idea too much, I fear what will come of it.

Besides, she *promised*.

*"I'd never forget you,"* she said.

I push myself off the sink, and head to the front door, collecting my keys thrown on the side as I exit. The engine rumbles as I start my car, and a few seconds later, I'm driving to her house.

I planned to see her first thing this morning, unable to think about anything else, but Richard pulled me on a heist last-minute – a high-stakes assassination of an important politician with a hefty price tag. No one says

no to the Boss, but I would have been the first if I weren't so certain I could sneak off this evening. The other recruits are basking in the aftermath in Knightsbridge, drowning in expensive champagne, but I'm choosing to find my euphoria elsewhere.

With her.

My phone buzzes frantically, and I slip it out of my jeans pocket, switching it onto silent before pushing it back in. I pull the car round the end of the street, the familiar house only a few yards away.

I step out of the car, shutting the door behind me and using the fresh air to bring myself into focus.

I'm chewing the inside of my cheek as I walk closer, dreaming up the possible scenarios in my head. A beautiful nightmare.

Questions drill into me.

Am I too late?

Am I too early?

What if I missed the mark completely and dreamt this whole thing?

I've killed for her, appreciated her silence when she didn't know I was watching, yet each pathetic question slams into me with each sudden thud against my ribs.

I lift my eyes from the dark stone pavement when I'm only a few steps away. As I approach the end of the driveway, I spot a silhouette just beyond the parked cars, leaning against the stone pillar as if they belong there.

At first, it's just a tall shape in the dark, but as I step closer, the shadows slide off his face.

Stiff. Suited. Familiar.

Richard.

I stop dead.

His smile is calculated, standing outside the Thomas family home like he's waiting for me. But I'm standing outside *her* house. Outside Jack's home, a former recruit. He's been gone for nearly five years now – there's no reason for Richard to be here.

I feel the confusion written across my face. The air shifts, and Richard's mouth twitches into something humorous yet terrifying.

"What are you doing here?"

He tilts his head. "I should be asking you that."

Brows pulled in close, I turn my attention to her bedroom window, turning back to my boss just as fast. The need to keep her hidden remains

strong, but I'm so deep in unknown territory I can't do anything other than press my lips into a thin line.

Richard says nothing, just stares at me with that calculating expression he wears when someone's made a mistake and doesn't know it yet. But she's not part of the Circle; the codex doesn't apply to her. To us.

She's nobody, in the grand scheme of things, but *everything* to me.

"I'm here to see—"

"I know." He pauses momentarily, letting the silence sink in. "She doesn't remember you, Harry."

*What?*

The words don't land all at once. They drop in pieces, like bricks on my chest. I blink, shake my head, run my hands through my hair wildly, trying to make the world fall back into place. The version of her that knows I exist.

"You're lying," I say, because I *need* him to be.

"I told myself it couldn't be you," Richard goes on. "Not the same Harry who works for me. Not the one I trained, promoted, vouched for, waltzing into my daughter's room in the middle of the night while she was under the influence."

"But she—" I stop myself short. "Daughter? No." I start to shake my head madly. "No. No. No. What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Richard says flatly, as if it doesn't carry any weight at all, "she's my daughter."

I stumble back a step.

I can feel something rising in me, hot and thick. I trip over my own feet, barely making it to the hedge before I double over and heave violently, my whole body seizing with the movement. The ground beneath my feet feels unsteady, and I drop to the dirt, forced to my knees.

"That's it," he croons. "Let it out."

His voice only makes the vomit spiral up my throat faster. The bitter taste of truth burns. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand when I'm finally able to take a breath.

"No," I whisper. "That's not— She never—"

"You wouldn't have known because she doesn't," he interrupts coldly. "She won't know – not until I decide she will."

"You're wrong," I rasp, but the words lack conviction.

“I wish I were,” Richard sighs. “She’s of no importance to me yet. Though now Jack’s gone ...”

*Jack too?*

But I see it now. The similarities between them. How Richard took him under his wing. A clear stand-out favourite.

*Oh, Christ.*

I turn, the pain in my throat barely registering before I vomit again.

Laughter tumbles out of Richard. “You’re not meant for her.”

*And someone else is?*

Somehow, I manage to find the strength to rise back to my feet. He watches me with that shit-eating grin, enjoying every twisted moment of my agony.

Yet it quickly crashes as I demand, “You have to tell her the truth. You can’t let her live this lie.”

He laughs, short and clipped, the first sign I’ve ever seen from him that he’s lost that composed mask. He grips his jaw before quickly withdrawing his palm to point his finger at me.

“Don’t forget everything I’ve ever done for you—”

“I don’t give a fuck about that,” I spit. “If you don’t tell her, I will.”

“I’ll make you pay back every fucking penny.” Richard’s hand trembles between us, the anger rolling off him, making his body shake. “The house. Greg’s entire track record. Disposing of your father. You will *forever* be indebted to me.”

“Then so be it.”

“She doesn’t remember you! Do you really think she’ll believe the words of a nothing stranger?”

I wince painfully.

*A stranger.*

That’s all I am to her.

Laughter echoes in the silence again, drawing my attention back to Richard. He’s smirking, a sense of relief in the way he chuckles, as if his words were so profound they twisted my common sense.

Perhaps they did.

“I’ll let you think about it,” he muses, “and see whether witnessing the pain of her discovering the truth makes you feel better than maintaining the lie.”

My body remains still as Richard ducks his head with a nod goodbye. Resting his hands in his front pockets, he strides down the length of the driveway and onto the pavement. His steps are slow and casual until he's barely a blip in the distance, the darkness surrounding him.

Slowly, I turn my head over my shoulder, finally laying eyes on the bedroom lit softly behind cream curtains.

Somewhere inside, she moves. Breathes. Lives.

Without me.

Maybe in our reality I'll always be forced to love her from a distance. A reality where she'll never be mine, only ever someone else's.

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## TWENTY-THREE

*Gigi*

*Present day*

*Forgive me, Harry.*

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## PART 2

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*"All are punished."*  
– William Shakespeare

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# TWENTY-FOUR

*Gigi*

*Four months later*

The spotlight softens, turning golden instead of white. The floor beneath me becomes smooth, polished wood. The smoke turns into something sweet and delicate, and Pixies' pink velvet curtains drop, concealing the stage from prying eyes.

And then I see him.

Harry.

He steps out from the far end of the stage, dressed in black trousers and a crisp shirt, collar open and sleeves rolled up to his elbows like he used to dress. His emerald-green eyes lock onto mine, drawing me closer to him.

He stretches out his hand, that familiar smile etched over his mouth.

"Dance with me," he says.

I take his hand, not questioning it.

We move together in time with the music, and I forget the crowd, the lights, the club. I forget my bruises, my exhaustion, my debt. I forget everything except him.

His eyes are full of everything I haven't felt in so long. The music wraps round us, and we dance, far from the performance we used to put on.

I press my body closer to his as we move slowly. "You came back."

He murmurs against my hair, "I never left."

He twirls me, once, twice, and I laugh as he pulls me back into his chest, almost tripping over my bare feet. I can't remember the last time I sounded

like this. Like someone who still has a heart to give.

Tears springing to my eyes, I whisper in disbelief, “You’re really here.”

“Of course I’m here,” he says softly. “Where else would I be?”

His eyes search mine with the kind of look you give someone you’ve missed so much it physically hurts. My head falls to his shoulder, and I simply breathe him in.

His hand cradles the side of my face, fingers stroking the strands of my hair. I can’t say whether we’re swaying, moving, or staying still – all I know is that he’s holding me, and I’m holding him.

I look up to his face, and trauma settles in his eyes. Panic barrels through me.

“Harry—?”

“But you’re his.”

I shake my head, lips trembling. “What I did, I did for us.”

But he doesn’t answer.

His thumb brushes the curve of my waist, and as I look round, I recognise the familiarity of his home. The sofa and the television set in the modest living room, a record player spinning lazily on the wooden coffee table.

But it’s not real. None of it is. Except for the promise I made – the one that keeps Harry safe. The one that keeps me standing here instead of screaming and setting the whole damn place on fire.

I know because his house is reduced to ash and unrecognisable remains, crumbled at the end of a driveway in a quiet cul-de-sac. The reality of us lies in the rubble in Surrey.

And that’s when I notice it.

His scent is wrong. Sharper. The way he holds me is different, and the hand surrounding my waist certainly isn’t his.

No.

The fantasy crumbles, giving way to the sticky floor, men’s greedy stares, and the thick, heavy smoke of Pixies’ stage. The lights flare, and everything reappears, crashing round me with brutal clarity.

My head snaps up, and I see Hudson.

His fingers hesitate on the strap of my dress. I’m meant to be encouraging the straps off my shoulders, but after slipping too far into my subconscious, nothing makes sense.

With his hand hovering on my forearm, he gently tugs me forwards, moving me into position. The dress falls. I’m supposed to be stepping out of

the fabric like the routine says.

I drop my head, staring at the dress pooling at my feet.

“Gigi,” Hudson says quietly, trying to bring me back.

I force a smile, snapping myself back into focus to finish the dance.

The music ends, the slow rhythm slithering down my spine. An applause rings when the lights drop, but I barely hear it, desperate to compose myself.

A few moments later, I’m back in my dressing room, ripping off the ratty blonde wig and chucking it against the dresser. I drop down into the velvet chair, slipping off my fishnets as Hudson steps inside, quietly shutting the door behind him.

“Gigi?”

I keep my head down, slipping my feet out of the thin fabric. “Yes?”

He’s quiet for long enough that I’m forced to turn towards him. He hesitates, looking as if something is broken inside.

Not pity.

Not guilt.

Something quieter. Like regret.

“You weren’t with me,” he says under his breath, not accusing, just ... knowing.

Hudson doesn’t need confirmation, because he’s seen it before. He’s witnessed firsthand the times I’ve slipped into a reality where I’m not promised to another man, nor am I forced to strip in front of an audience multiple times a day.

He watches closely, as if giving me the opportunity to deny it. I don’t.

I’m a stranger to myself – someone who smiles when told and dances when her bones want to shatter. But I persevere for Harry. The threat to his life is a blinding reminder of why I tolerate this pain every day.

Having lost myself again to another thought, I snap my head sideways as the en-suite bathroom door swings open. Jamie strolls out smirking, a woman with black hair clutching onto his elbow.

The prick’s belt is undone, fly zipped down.

Any other wife-to-be would be mortified, but the more he finds his fix elsewhere, the greater the chance I’ll be left alone.

The pair turn towards me, surprised but far from guilty.

“Nice of you to join us,” I say.

The woman at his side smiles, too tight to be kind.

She whispers something to Jamie before slipping past Hudson and exiting the changing room. Echoes of guests from the main floor slip through the crack in the door before it closes again.

Jamie asks breathlessly, “You’re both finished already?”

Hudson gestures to Jamie’s belt, and despite being caught red-handed, he grins as he readjusts his jeans. Though it does little to conceal his unbuttoned shirt and the nail marks tracked over his chest.

“How was the performance?”

I duck my head at his question, busying myself by slipping my dressing gown from my bag and wrapping it round my shoulders. Under the weight of Hudson’s stare, I tie the material with a knot at the waist, purposely making myself appear busy.

I half-expect him to say I wasn’t present or that I didn’t play the role I was supposed to.

I wouldn’t blame him.

“Fine.” He clears his throat. “Standing ovation as usual.”

I finally lift my head, my expression soft and silently thankful. I only have a moment to spot his weak smile in return before Jamie demands my attention, his eyes narrowed and accusatory.

“Blimey, you look miserable,” he spits. “You’d better perk up before tomorrow.”

I nod stiffly. “Of course.”

Jamie pauses midway through fastening his shirt buttons. His hand flexes as though he’s holding himself back. “Hudson.” He finishes with his shirt. “Give me and Gigi a moment alone, please.”

Hudson hesitates, undecided if that’s the right thing to do.

“It’s okay,” I say. “You can go.”

He lingers in the doorway, staring me down with an expression I’ve never been able to fully grasp. As expected, he sighs and follows the command, slowly taking his time to exit the room. The door closes behind him with a soft click.

Jamie casually fixes his cufflinks. “Do you know what tomorrow is?”

“Our engagement party.”

“That’s right.” He comes closer, stopping a footstep away. He ducks his head, forcing me to meet his gaze as his whiskey-laced breath fills my nose. “So why do you look so fucking miserable?”

I run my hands over my face to force the exhaustion away. “I’m just tired, Jamie. I’ve been working every night—”

He catches my wrist, applying a pressure that would have once forced me to wilt. But I learned quickly he thrives on acts of violence.

He sternly reminds me, “It’s our engagement party.”

“I. Know.”

“I want my fucking money.” He bends back my wrist, forcing the joint to scream with pain. “So tell me, what aren’t you going to do?”

“Look tired.”

“You’re going to look the part.”

He bends it back further, and further still, until my entire arm is screeching for redemption. I’ve given him the answer he wanted, but he smirks wider with each passing second, eating up my reaction as the agony forces me to blink back tears.

Finally releasing his grip, he steps back.

My chest loosens with the release, and I fist my skin, circling my hand to encourage blood flow.

“Now we’ve got that sorted.” He opens the door to the dressing room.  
“Let’s go home.”

I half-expect Hudson to be lingering in the hallway, but there are only a few girls in outfits not too dissimilar to mine. They duck their heads, keeping to themselves as they scurry past. I take my bag, resting it over my arm as Jamie and I exit the room.

The hallway smells of cheap perfume, cigarette ash, and stale vodka, all ingrained into the carpets. He escorts us through the crowded seating area as if purposely showing me off, his arm slung round my shoulders.

We pass the velvet fabric that decorates the back walls, the sounds of laughter quieting behind us as we near the exit. The darkness outside contrasts the pink strobe lights, and I blink hard to adjust my vision.

Jamie unlocks his Porsche and climbs into the driver’s seat. He revs the gas impatiently as I get in the passenger side. The car pulls away from Pixies before I’m able to fully clip my seatbelt round me, the tyres scraping against the road with the erratic movement.

The streets of London pass us by, the city rumbling with life. I listen to every sound – the beeping of pedestrian crossings, the heavy bass of clubs not too different from the one we just exited, and the rowdy shouts of late-night drinkers.

The nightlife turns quieter as we drive into the more affluent part of town, nearing our home in Hampstead.

*Home.*

A funny word since it feels far from it.

But to play the part, you also must live it. And Richard and Jamie thought it would only be appropriate to purchase the most elegant townhouse in the entire neighbourhood, boasting six bedrooms and decorated with the finest modern appliances, every room interior-designed to within an inch of its life. It's something of a haven for me, since Jamie prefers for us to sleep in separate rooms – a demand I'm more than happy to allow.

Yet some nights, it doesn't work out that way.

He parks the Porsche in the designated spot out front of the house.  
“You’ll stay in my room tonight.”

*Fuck.*

I mask the disgust settling in the pit of my stomach and offer that same forced smile he always analyses too intently. He doesn't question it this time.

We trail up the steps, letting ourselves into the home that suddenly feels far colder knowing I won't be on my own tonight. Jamie trails down the hallway to shower, and I bask in the silence while I can. But his bedroom is like a demonic ghost whispering my name, pulling me towards it.

My hand hesitates on the banister. I balance my weight against it, pulling myself closer to the room. I settle on the edge of the bed, wiping my face free of the glitter eyeshadow and red lipstick.

Condensation slips under the door leading to the en suite as I pull on my pyjamas. I climb under the sheets, the fabric feeling sharp and scratchy as I curl my body under its weight. I'm facing the wall by the time Jamie finally exits the bathroom.

I close my eyes, forcing my chest into a steady rhythm, pretending I'm asleep.

The mattress dips behind me as he climbs in, his fingertips curling into my side as he brings me closer to his front. I fight a grimace as he breathes into my ear, whispering something foul as his hand drops beneath my shorts.

I've learnt the hard way that thoughts are sacred, so again, as part of the devastating routine, I just imagine I'm elsewhere.

I imagine I'm with someone else.

I imagine I'm with *him*.

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## TWENTY-FIVE

### *Harry*

Victor Cortez, a pathetic excuse of a man with a questionable browsing history, is getting on my last fucking nerve.

His eyes start to close, the heaviness of them pulling him into sleep. With the impatient shake of my head, I drop my hand to the armrest of his chair, allowing it to take my weight as I slap my palm across his cheek. He rears back, pulling himself from the brink of unconsciousness.

“You’re boring me now, Victor.” I lean in closer, my face only inches from the gaping wound on his temple. I hit him harder, stopping his eyes from rolling into the back of his head. “Eyes here.”

He lets out a cry – a pathetic, wimpy one – that would make me snicker in a less serious scenario. But we’re talking about the safety of women. Women I’m working myself to the bone to find. It’s been weeks since I’ve found a crumb of useful information that could potentially lead somewhere.

“Where. Are. They?”

“I don’t know!” he cries.

I tsk at his pathetic answer and pull back, turning to the white plastic table pushed against the dated floral wallpaper. “I saw Liam Neeson do this once.” I take the steel rods, spinning them between my fingers as I turn back round. “I’ve always wanted to try it out.”

Victor shakes his head madly on my approach, but I’ve already swung both arms down and impaled his thighs with the metal. Despite the blunt edges, my desperation to hurt him makes the attack seamless.

I twist the steel into his knees, feeling the resistance of his kneecaps. The ease to simply pop them off is tempting given my short temper. His skull collides with the chair, his head whipping back on a scream.

I fist his hair, forcing his head down. “WHERE IS SHE?”

Blood spurts from his mouth with his next cry, pouring down his chin. His head rolls forwards, and I would truly think I’ve lost him, if not for his quiet mumble.

“She?”

My brows draw together, and I take a step back. “*She?*”

“You … y-you said ‘she’.”

“Nope. Definitely don’t recall saying that.”

“Y-you did.”

I charge forwards again with a speed that surprises Victor and me, pushing into his personal space. “*They*. Where are they, Victor?”

A cry tumbles out of him as he forces his face away, his entire body trembling as he denies withholding any information. Truth be told, I believe him. All I’m going off is the browsing history of a businessman who simply “looked funny”, having snatched him on his way out of his office in Canary Wharf.

I’m clutching at straws, but whether I believe him or not isn’t the point here.

I take the electrical cables from the table and clip them to the steel rods, if only to give myself a burst of emotion after months of feeling *nothing*.

“NO!” he bellows.

“I haven’t even switched the cables on yet, Victor. No need for all the screaming.”

As if he purposely wants to piss me off, he lets out a bloodcurdling cry that forces his whole body to lose colour dramatically. He thrashes against the restraint on his wrists, working himself into such a frenzy that even from a few steps away I can see his heart slamming against his chest.

“Christ,” I curse. “That’s pretty fucked-up.”

The organ thumps faster and harder, the skin round his pounding heart tightening with each of his thrashes.

Fucking hell. Victor is going to bring on a heart attack.

The psychopath in me screams, *Do it!*

Instead I keep my mouth closed, silently watching the show.

But the performance doesn't last long. His entire body convulses, eyes straining in their sockets, then – nothing. The organ stops completely, and he becomes limp against the chair, his chin dropping against his chest.

*Well, fuck.*

Right before we got to the fun part.

I debate whether to turn on the cables just for that extra excitement, but that would forfeit every precaution I've put in place to slip under the radar. Something as simple as hiking up an electricity bill could draw attention to my shitty apartment: a stale, tiny old thing above an off-liscence in the depths of Surrey.

The interior is alight with gas lanterns, only switched on when necessary, and when anything other than that is required, I rely on the generator. Never worth risking more than ten minutes at a time. All necessary measures to stay hidden from Richard's prying eyes.

I leave Victor's deceased body on the chair and walk the short distance to the living room. As I fall back exhausted on the sofa, a puff of dust spins through the air, noticeable in the streak of sunlight peeking through the curtains. An old musty smell follows.

And, as always, my eyes zero in on nothing, and my thoughts drift to Gigi.

Did I really scream for her whereabouts?

I bang my fist against my temple, trying to divert my attention to anything *but* her. Yet like every attempt I've made in recent months to think about anything else, it's fruitless.

It's been exactly 125 days since she disappeared.

Close to eighteen weeks of hunting ruthlessly for her.

And over thirty thousand hours of enduring the damage to my sanity.

Did she not realise the pain of her leaving without a trace wouldn't be good for my head, even if she felt it was good for her heart?

The devil on my shoulder awakens with the brutal fear that perhaps I do know where Gigi is – more importantly, *who* she's with. But I fight the terrifying reality, refusing to torture myself further despite four months of no contact. I'm simply left with the memory of her in a dark motel room.

I refuse to settle until she's safe with me ... yet at what point will I learn to willingly accept the reality she's probably with *him*?

Never. Simple fucking answer.

A knock on the front door pulls my mind from spiralling. I catch the pattern of the knock and listen out for it a second time to ensure I heard it correctly. I pull myself off the sofa and check through the peephole.

I open the door to Poppy. She's wrapped in a long beige coat, her red hair tied back, makeup slightly heavier on her face. She drops her umbrella by the door and shrugs off her coat, hanging it up. She lifts her head as I close the door.

"Blimey, you look like shit."

I gesture to the other side of the room, securing the lock. "Victor is in the back room."

"Did you manage to find anything?"

"Absolutely nothing."

She shrugs. "We always assumed that anyway."

I take a beer from the fridge and return to my space on the sofa, lounging into the cheap material and resting my arm over the cushions. "What are you doing here anyway?"

She rakes her gaze over the apartment. "Just making sure you're behaving yourself."

"Behaving myself? Why wouldn't I be behaving my—?" I halt the bottle an inch from my mouth, looking her over. She's dressed far too nicely. Heels. Lipstick. Dress shimmering with sequins. "Where are you going?"

She drops her bag on the table, carefully avoiding my gaze. "Just a thing."

"A *thing*?" I focus on her outfit once again. "No, no, no. We're not doing that."

Her head snaps back to me fast as I bring myself to my feet, placing the beer on the floor.

"It's just a dinner. With friends."

I narrow my eyes. "You don't have friends."

"Well, that's harsh."

"Poppy," I say sternly.

There's something brittle in her voice. "I told you. Dinner."

"Is it her?" Desperation clinging to every word, I press, "Is it about Gigi? Did you hear something?"

She looks me over, no doubt seeing the glimmer of hope I'm clutching onto. I've asked her constantly, close to every minute Gigi's been gone, whether she knows anything. But it's always the same. "*Nothing*," she tells

me again and again. Though now, with her skittish behaviour and the way sympathy flickers in her eyes, I figure it's just a tactic for me to turn elsewhere.

"Poppy?" I repeat.

She sighs heavily. "It's been months, Harry. Maybe it's time—"

"Don't you dare." I struggle to rein in my temper. "Don't say it's time to let her go. *You know something.*"

"I don't," she says too quickly.

"Fucking tell me." I slam my hand down on the coffee table, the ashtray rattling against the rotted wood. She doesn't flinch and instead folds her arms over her chest.

"Wherever you're going, she's going to be there, isn't she?" I ask slowly, emphasising every word. "That's why you want to know if I'm behaving myself."

Her features are set stern, but she says nothing.

That's answer enough.

"I'm going," I tell her.

She shakes her head. "They won't let you in."

"It wasn't a question," I clarify, common sense eradicated by hope. "I'll find a way."

"You won't like what it's for—"

"Don't care."

There's a glimpse of something sad in her features. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

## TWENTY-SIX

*Gigi*

The breath is gone from my chest by the time I've pulled myself from Pixies' stage after another performance. I slip off the wig, wiping it over my forehead to collect the build-up of sweat on my skin.

As I reach my dresser, I brace my hands against it, focusing on regaining air into my lungs.

*I need a minute.*

Just a minute to catch my breath

Hudson asks gently, "Gigi?"

"Give me a second," I snap before turning my voice softer. "Please."

*A second at least.*

My heart rate slows as I take a moment to pull myself together through the exhaustion. While my body aches for more time, I don't want to risk pressing further with Hudson's watchful gaze. Can't risk letting them see me weak.

I step back, righting my balance and pretending the sweat hugging the back of my neck isn't accompanied by stars at the edges of my vision. Hudson watches every movement carefully.

"You don't have to pretend with me."

*Well, I do,* is what I want to say. *Otherwise you'll tell them.*

Instead I avoid eye contact and say, "I'm going to shower."

I slip into the bathroom before he can question it and press my forehead against the closed door, taking that extra moment of relief. Just for the

second I promised myself before stepping away.

I pretend the hot water from the showerhead doesn't ache against my sore skin, nor do my roots scream with resistance as I brush the strands.

*Play the part, I remind myself. You chose this.*

I slip out of the shower, wrapping the towel round my body and turning towards the ivory dress hanging on the back of the bathroom door: a silk halterneck gown by a prestigious British designer, hand-picked for today's event. The notorious engagement party dress.

I didn't have a say in it, of course, or in any part of the planning, for that matter. The only thing I know from fittings is that it hugs my waist a little too tight and shows more side-boob than necessary.

I snatch it from the hanger, refusing to think about it further.

The silk slithers over my skin as I step into it, my knees threatening to buckle under the weight of the fabric. I attempt to secure it round the back of my neck, only to struggle with the intricate fastening. Holding the pieces against my chest to conceal myself, I step out of the bathroom as a harsh knock bangs against the dressing-room door. Barely a moment passes before Jamie saunters in, his features set rigid.

“What’s taking so long?”

Hudson starts, “We only just finished the performance—”

“You’re not even dressed yet!” Jamie barks at me.

“I can’t fasten my dress.”

“For fuck’s sake, I’ll do it.”

His response is too quick to be kind.

I watch him carefully, cautious as he steps up to my back. He takes the fabric balanced round the sides of my neck, fiddling with the pieces. He hesitates long enough that I start to turn towards him.

“Jamie—?”

Strong fingers pull tight on the silk, closing off my windpipe. It restrains my throat, cutting off my ability to breathe.

I wrap my fingers round the fabric, trying to pull it away, as I gasp for air.

My own calmness doesn't surprise me. I know Jamie wouldn't kill me before our marriage binds him to his fortune, and perhaps the idea of death doesn't seem that terrifying after what I've suffered the past few months.

He pivots us to face Hudson, and my eyes lock onto his concerned expression.

Jamie drawls, “I think this version suits her better – don’t you think?”

The material groans as it cuts into my neck.  
I thrash against him. “*Stop*—”  
My lungs tire for air, and I scan the ground through my darkening vision, preparing myself for the inevitable fall when I lose consciousness.

Jamie pulls tighter.

*Oh fuck.*

I brace for the impact, stiffening my joints ...

Hudson’s voice cuts through. “Don’t.”

Jamie’s head whips towards him, the sudden movement loosening his grip just slightly, allowing me to inhale a desperate breath. Panic flashes over Hudson’s face before he stands taller. At his full height, he towers above Jamie at least by a few inches.

“If the engagement is meant to be believable, you don’t want her to turn up with bruises. People will ask questions.”

A moment of pause.

“Ah,” Jamie muses. “You’re right.”

He finally lets go, and all at once, the air comes rushing into my lungs. I fight the immediate reaction to clutch my throat, knowing he’ll get a kick out of the pain. I busy myself with grabbing the pearl earrings from the side table and slipping them into my ears, despite how much I want to stab the pieces of jewellery into his fucking eye sockets.

“Here.”

I turn back to him. He’s preoccupied with something on his phone as he slips his hand into his pocket. He pulls out a wooden box, presenting it in the palm of his hand without looking up.

I stare at it, frozen.

Jamie tilts up his chin, raising his brow. “Take it.”

I step forwards, taking the box into my hand.

My hesitation forces him to groan, “Open it then.”

I press my thumbs against the box, popping it open. The diamond shines bright, twinkling, in the low light of the dressing room. I don’t know much about diamonds, but I’m not a fool. The white rock is huge and would have cost a fortune. It’s a classic design, with a single stone in the shape of a pear.

Would he know if I were to place it on the wrong finger?

Probably.

I slip it onto my ring finger. The silence in the room forces me to offer a tight smile.

“It’s beautiful,” I mutter.

“Cost me a quarter of a million.”

I roll my eyes as he turns away. *Would you like me to tell you that's impressive?*

Jamie turns on me fast, and my pupils flare as I realise I said that out loud.

He storms closer, stopping only a foot away, hand flexing at his side as if he’s tempted to use it. “Do I need to remind you why you’re here?”

“No.”

“Then be fucking grateful.”

“I am grateful – really.”

But his brows draw together as if seeing straight through the lie. Fear pricks at the back of my neck as he steps closer still, his expression unforgiving.

“This is the life you want.” He drops his voice lower, yet the threat hits just as heavy. “You’d better act like it.”



My heels echo against the marble as I move through the crowd, graceful and composed. The way I’m expected to be. Every hair in place. Every smile measured.

No matter how much I ache to.

Everything is so rehearsed, so fake, and so quintessentially British. The brush of kisses on my cheek with people I barely know. Playing into the plot of the upcoming marriage, worthy of magazine front covers, a love story with a London socialite.

The ballroom in Claridge’s, a luxury hotel in the heart of Mayfair, is swarming with guests. Reporters follow me round like vultures, desperate for interviews or a candid shot of me revelling in the excitement of the engagement party. But I’m constantly on my feet, moving through the crowd in an attempt to look busy, desperate not to be caught by a single individual.

I'm pulled to a stop when someone places a manicured hand on my arm.  
“Gigi, you’re glowing.”

I smile in thanks, searching my brain for any knowledge of who this woman is. I come up empty. Her teeth are perfectly white, contrasting the grey streaks of hair that catch in the light as she turns her attention to the man drawing closer.

“Isn’t he just dashing?”

Jamie saunters over, his smile smug like he owns the ground beneath him. Expression tight, I muse, “Isn’t he just?”

Approaching my side, he slides his arm round my waist. “My future wife is as gorgeous as ever.”

He’s in his element here – sharp suit, smooth voice, charming enough to make the world forget what he really is when the cameras are gone.

The woman coos softly, like a proud grandma.

People call out, “Jamie, Gigi – over here!”

We’re swarmed quickly by a sea of reporters, bringing their cameras close. I keep smiling, letting him kiss my cheek for the flashing lights. Their blinding flash overpowers the glow of the rest of the room, the low background barely distinguishable over the shutter of the camera lenses.

There’s a smell of lavender and champagne in the air. It’s the kind of party where everything looks like a dream.

Except I’m wide-awake, and so is the nightmare.

Rare times like this I ache for the girl who lost her sanity to bite back and revel in her inability to care, since now I feel like a shell of who I used to be.

I hate it. I *hate* how I slip into self-pity when I’m not the one who matters here. It isn’t my life on the line, and it wasn’t my house that burned down due to someone else’s decision.

I hate it ... because I’m not a woman worthy of sympathy after everything I’ve done.

It doesn’t matter that I feel like I’m dying, because Harry is out there breathing.

His name is a knot in my chest that won’t come undone no matter how many flutes of champagne I force down.

“Keep smiling, darling,” Jamie murmurs. “You wouldn’t want anything unfortunate to happen.”

The cameras flash a second faster as his lips brush my ear, his hand moving to the small of my back. My skin flinches under his touch, but I don't move. I steer my attention elsewhere, but the word "engaged" screams at me, "Jamie + Gigi" plastered across the bottom. It's in everything I see, everywhere I look, from the bunting across the wall, to the three-tier cake tucked away in the corner, to the embroidered napkins.

My heartbeat quickens in my tightening chest, and I dart my hand out as a waiter walks past. I cling onto a glass of champagne from their tray, downing it quickly – faster when Jamie's grip presses in lower.

Something heavy settles on the back of my neck, a weighted gaze calling for my attention. I turn my head over my shoulder, pulled towards the bar, but all I see is a server and an array of expensive drinks.

A camera's bright flash forces my attention forwards.

I drop my voice low. "I'm just going to grab another drink."

I'm already heading towards the flutes of champagne before Jamie can protest. As I make my way over, I steer my attention back towards him to make sure I'm not being followed. But of course, he oozes charisma, one hand resting leisurely in his front pocket as he chats with the cameramen.

*Bastard.*

A glass is already at my lips before I've managed to sit on a barstool. Strangers' questioning gazes as I rush my drink forces me to tilt my head away.

Hudson appears alongside me, resting his elbow against the worktop. "You're doing well."

I snatch the drink gripped between his fingertips. "I'm glad to know I passed your test."

A rumble of laughter draws my eyes to the corner of the room, where Jamie now stands laughing with a group of politicians Richard hand-picked, none of whom I recognise.

But that's to be expected, since this is as big of a display as any. There are only a few familiar faces in the crowd, a mixture of recruits from the Circle and Richard's elder friends, but other than that, complete strangers—

Hot breath fans the back of my neck. The hairs on my skin stand on end, the effect strong enough that I rise to my feet.

A deep voice asks, "Would you like another drink?"

My stomach twists, and I turn round slowly.

His voice is so low, so familiar – but no, it can't be.

Still, something about the broadness of his shoulder claws at my memory.

The bartender keeps his eyes down as he wipes a glass that doesn't need cleaning. A fitted white shirt clings to his torso, emphasising his large frame, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Hair so black it looks like midnight.

A fleck of red on his neck that looks suspiciously like blood.

My attention darts back to his face. Everyone here has been vetted and approved, but this man—

“Something the matter, Miss Thomas?” he drawls without looking up.

I shake my head, trying to push myself out of the trance. My eyes are still trained on his face as I reach for a glass. He reaches out at the same time, knocking his knuckle against the stem, causing the drink to slip before I can properly grasp it.

A cold splash hit my chest, the white silk turning slightly sheer and clinging to my skin with the gold liquid. I force my head up, glued to the bartender's unforgiving expression.

I don't give a toss about the dress, but gasps quickly rise round me from party guests. I feel their wide eyes and watchful stares, as if they're questioning why I'm not making a scene.

“Oh my God,” I say, purposely loud. “I need to get myself changed.”

Napkin in hand, he reaches forwards instinctively, stopping just shy of touching me. “I would say I'm sorry,” – his eyes finally rise to meet mine – “but that's not the dress I ever pictured you in.”

Everything in me collapses.

*Harry.*

I can't move.

Can't speak.

Can't do anything other than stare at him while my heart bleeds out in the middle of a room full of strangers.

He backs away subtly before turning without a word. No one seems to recognise him, let alone know he's disappeared, as he slips behind the velvet curtain.

My hands are still shaking, my pulse all wrong, as I watch him leave.

I instinctively step forwards to follow him, but a hand wraps round my bicep.

*Oh, fuck off.*

“This isn't a good idea,” Hudson warns.

“Will you tell?”

He visibly swallows, eyes darting over my shoulder. “It’s my job—”  
“Then go on your break.”

I pull my arm free and pass through the crowd, ignoring those calling my name. Hudson’s voice is easily distinguishable above the raised voices, the ring on my finger weighing heavier as I chase after the very man I shouldn’t be.

There’s no sign of Harry when I reach the hallway. Unable to risk calling his name, I turn my head down the corridor, only to come up empty.

*Fuck.*

I hesitate before slipping into the woman’s bathroom, needing a moment to compose myself. The stalls are empty as I enter. A gilded mirror sits above a marble sink, a flustered bride-to-be staring at me through the reflection.

My chest is soaked.

The fabric clings too tightly, revealing too much.

My pulse quickens, my heart racing.

The door cracks behind me.

“Princess.”

I lift my head, meeting Harry’s dark eyes in the mirror.

“Are you fucking marrying him?”

# TWENTY-SEVEN

*Harry*

## *Flashback*

*“I’ll let you think about it,” Richard had said, “and see whether witnessing the pain of her discovering the truth makes you feel better than maintaining the lie.”*

Well, I’ve been fucking thinking about it. For months.

I’ve thought about it, tortured myself for so long about it, that it’s now fucking spring.

And I’m going to tell her, consequences be damned.

*“Do you really think she’ll believe the words of a nothing stranger?”*

But even if that were true, I’ll be able to witness firsthand whether she remembers me – remembers *us*. Remembers what we had that night.

There’s no toying with nerves tonight as I walk up the familiar driveway leading to the brick house. No cars. No signs of life from the inside other than the light from her bedroom window.

I glance up. Through the narrow gap in the curtains I see her. Back turned, she brushes her hair.

She walks forwards, disappearing from my line of sight.

From being here enough times, I know the side gate is never locked. I slide through the narrow gap, careful not to let the gate scrape the brick. Gravel crunches underneath my feet as I make my way round the side of the house.

As I near the concrete patio, I slip off my shoes, not risking the police potentially discovering the make, model, and size in their attempt to track me down. I slip my hand underneath the doormat and retrieve the key, using it to slip through the back door.

I creep through the hallway until I reach the staircase.

At the top of the stairs, the door to Jack's room is just as he left it.

Closed.

Untouched.

*She* hasn't gone in there for five years. Maria hasn't either. No one has. I know because I've asked around. Casually.

The floorboards creak under my weight. I freeze and wait – but there are no footsteps. No one's breath but my own. If she's eager enough to discover the truth, then she'll find me here. Waiting.

I slip into Jack's room, deliberately leaving the door ajar.

The room smells faintly stale, a fine layer of dust on everything, owing to the fact no one has dared step in here since he was alive. Everything is as he left it – the screwed-up sheets, the dirty laundry shoved in the corner, every part of him written all over the room.

Posters curl slightly at the edges with age. A stack of old books that'll never be read sits propped in the corner. It's the kind of room that looks lived in but isn't.

I stand there letting the grief bleed out of me silently.

I miss my best friend.

Worse, I envy him. Jack always had *her* without even trying.

I'm going to tell her about everything. Richard. The truth about her brother. That night she melted into me like she didn't belong anywhere else

---

I hear the sound of her footsteps. Slow and careful, stopping just outside. Her shadow stretches into the room under the hallway light.

She doesn't speak. She doesn't ask who's inside.

She hesitates, as if common sense is telling her to flee.

And still, she doesn't run.

I hear the hitch of her breath. She's on the cusp of breaking her silence, but then her fingers curl round the doorknob, twisting it slightly.

*That's it.*

*Come closer.*

It's at the front of my mind, the memory of her saying our kiss was the realest thing she'd ever felt. How her face lit up when she said Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* was her favourite. The way she panicked with the worry her parents might wake up. How her face is ingrained in my memory even though it shouldn't be.

She pushes open the door, her eyes finding me instantly.

"You were mine, if only for a night," I want to say. "I remember everything you told me."

I want to tell her everything – but I don't.

Our gazes lock, and all the words I rehearsed turn to ash.

Because in her stare, I see her searching. And not finding.

None of what I planned matters.

Because now, she's looking at me like I'm a stranger.

Yet her eyes don't widen. She doesn't scream. She doesn't even blink.

And I know now I can't say a word.

Can't break her heart. Can't give her the answers she seeks. Can't ruin her perception of everything she thinks she knows. Can't tell her there was once an us.

I'm not hurting anyone now – not hurting *her*.

I'm just seeing her one last time. Just for one more minute.

She looks at me with a sense of familiarity I don't even think she's aware of. I watch the thought form in her: a flicker of recognition, a twinge of curiosity, fear, or maybe memory. It lives in her eyes. But neither of us move or speak.

She stands there framed in shadow like something from a fever dream. And maybe I'm the same to her, familiar in a way that hurts to question.

As she steps fully into the room ... I step back.

She stands there in the moonlight dressed in an oversized T-shirt and socks. Her smooth hair tumbles down her shoulders, freshly brushed.

We stare at each other, her in the light, me in the darkness. For a moment, I don't think either of us breathe.

Yet there's something ... unspoken between us.

Like we already said everything once.

Her eyes trail over me as if she's trying to place me in a life she doesn't recall.

She deserves a normal life, and perhaps I'll regret for the rest of mine that I didn't tell her all the answers she deserves to know.

She doesn't stop me, but she watches me go.

I reach the bedroom window, my fingers curling round the frame. I turn back to look at her.

She watches me, eyes full of questions I don't answer. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Then she tilts her head, and I see it. A flicker of intrigue beneath all that confusion.

Her gaze follows me into the dark as I leave through the window.

And still, neither of us says a word.

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## TWENTY-EIGHT

*Harry*

*Present day*

“Princess. Are you fucking marrying him?”  
Gigi freezes, her face pale.

“Tell me this is some kind of joke. Tell me this is a huge misunderstanding.” Tone nearing lethal, I demand, “Fucking *tell me* you’re not wearing a ring I didn’t give you … because that’s sure as hell what it looks like.”

She turns round slowly, as though the minutes are yet to catch up with her. Her head drops to her ring finger before she quickly hides her hand behind her back. But the fucking diamond winks at me through the mirror’s reflection.

“Harry—”

“Don’t,” I snap, voice tight. “Don’t say my name like that.”

Jamie.

Jamie fucking Callahan.

What kind of fuckery is this?

“It’s been 125 days, Gigi. I counted every single one. And you’ve been planning to get *married* this whole time? Planning to get married to *him*?”

Her voice turns quieter. “It’s not like that.”

I stride towards her, erasing the distance between us.

“Then tell me what it’s like.” My hands drop to her hips. I fist the material of her dress to emphasise my torment, careful not to touch her.

“Because from where I’m standing, you’re trying to kill me, but you’re meant to be my lifeline.”

Her spine stiffens, lips parting, but she says nothing.

“What happened?” I whisper. “What changed?”

I’ve vowed to be at her side, forgive her through everything, be her biggest supporter even when she doesn’t deserve it. But *this* ...

I can’t accept this.

Something flickers in her eyes. It vanishes just as quickly.

“This isn’t the place,” Gigi says, glancing at the door. “You need to go. Now. Before someone sees you.”

I don’t move.

“You shouldn’t be here, Harry.” Her voice hitches. “Go. Leave.”

She goes to step past. I move into her path, refusing to release my hands from her sides. “Just tell me.” My voice near breaking point, I ask, “Why him? Why not me?”

She stares at me, eyes pleading with a desperation she can’t voice.

“I don’t want you here,” she says. “I want you to go home.”

“No. No. You know what? Fuck this.”

I push my luck, cupping her cheek and pressing my forehead against her temple. Our mouths are so close we’re breathing the same air. I drop my gaze to her lips.

“Kiss me. I’ll beg on my knees if that’s what you want.”

Her gaze moves to my mouth as if she’s contemplating it.

“Just once,” I tell her. “Please, just fucking kiss me.”

And for a painful second, I convince myself she will. That she’ll risk her marriage to another man just to appease me.

She closes her eyes, her shoulders sinking.

A growl vibrates my chest. “Why won’t you just speak to me?”

She flinches as if a bullet impaled her.

“Harry, this isn’t—”

“Real?” I cut in. “Then take off the ring.”

Her attention drops to her hand.

“Take it off, Gigi. Right now. Walk out of here with me.”

I follow her gaze, though the ring is like a gun pointing straight at me as she brushes her thumb over the band.

“I can’t.”

“Bullshit,” I snap.

Something creaks behind me. Gigi's eyes drift over my shoulder for only a moment before darting back. I don't care if someone walks in. I'm so engrossed in her, so tormented with this fucked-up nightmare, that Greg could have risen from the dead and I still wouldn't turn round.

"No. This – this isn't you. Look me in the eye and tell me you love him."

She looks back over my shoulder again.

I grip her chin between my thumb and my forefinger, tilting her head back towards me, encouraging her to face me properly.

"Say. It."

With a distant look in her eyes, her gaze runs over my face.

She blinks once, twice, then breathes in through her nose, that perfectly controlled mask slipping into a place.

And then, softly: "I love him."

A scoff tumbles from my throat, because if I give in to the anger and ache in my chest, I'll soon bleed over these spotless tiled floors.

No matter how many times I've convinced myself otherwise, even through the times she didn't know I existed, reality has always managed to get in the way.

I was only ever made to love her from a distance, as someone else's.

The thought makes me withdraw a step, suddenly feeling far too close to her.

Gripping my jaw tightly, I nod stiffly. "You're marrying him." I don't ask it. I say it out loud, like maybe speaking it will make it seem more real.

"I am."

A beat of silence passes, but Gigi's expression doesn't falter. It hardens.

"Thanks for keeping her company for me." My jaw pulses as Jamie appears from behind me. His arm curls round Gigi, and a snarl pulls at my mouth as he brings her into his side. "Nice get-up."

Reluctantly, I drop my head to my chest. The white shirt and the black waistcoat of Claridge's newly qualified bartender who should have seen me coming.

I wipe the single droplet of blood off my collar.

Jamie stares at me in the waiting silence.

Is this when I'm meant to return the compliment?

I run my eyes over him, but there's nothing remotely nice about the pompous prick besides the woman at his side. The woman he doesn't deserve.

“Nice fiancée.”

He rolls his eyes, stepping sideways with his arm still wrapped round her in an attempt to bypass me. “Let’s go—”

I step in front of them. “Wait.”

Jamie watches me reluctantly. “Back off, Harry.”

“You should be thanking me.” I smile, then tilt my head, studying him. “If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even know what she looks like when she begs—”

He seethes, “If you touch her again—”

“Oh, I intend to.”

I laugh, stepping into his space.

“Just know when she cries out to God, she’s praying for me.”

Jamie lunges forwards as if he’s going to hit me. Gigi steps between us, one hand pressed against Jamie’s chest, the other against mine. She’s trembling.

I stare at her finally, a part of me wanting to grab her and shake her simultaneously. The traitor has chosen someone else.

“You’ve been mine since the first time I laid eyes on you. A ring doesn’t erase that.”

“Stop it,” she whispers.

“Say you don’t think about me when he’s touching you. Say you don’t dream about my hands instead of his. Lie to me—”

“*Stop.*” Her voice breaks. “For God’s sake, Harry, I don’t want you here!”

I scoff, bitter and selfish, with temptation to squeeze her throat, if only to strangle some sense into her. Not to hurt her – never to hurt her – but enough to emphasise the depths of her betrayal.

I step back. My gaze doesn’t leave hers.

“Go ahead,” I tell her. “Marry him. Lie to him for the rest of your life. But it doesn’t change the fact you’ll always be fucking *mine*.”

Jamie looks like he wants to murder me. Let him try.

He takes a step round me. I dart my hand out, curling it around his bicep. He halts his feet, and I drop my voice low, deadly.

“Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but I swear … I’ll fucking kill you.”

He pulls back to look at me fully.

I smile. Not friendly.

“Come on, Gigi.”

I tilt my head down as they both walk out, the creak of the bathroom door echoing as it seals shut. The sound shudders through me.

*Oh fuck.*

I shake my head, tearing my hands over my face. I turn to the sink, my fingers shaking on the tap as I pour cold water into my palms, splashing it over my face.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

I wipe my face against my shoulder, a pathetic attempt to dry it, before slipping out of the bathroom. Prepared to leave, I turn down the hallway.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?” Jamie’s voice rings out. “I’ll only keep this brief.”

I draw to a stop.

Murmurs echo behind the curtain before the crowd finally lowers their voices to a hush. Their quiet steers me towards the main ballroom. I pull back the curtain, stepping through the crowd until I see him standing on the terrace, behind the open glass doors. Richard stands on the sidelines, his smile wicked as he joins in with the toast.

My pulse rages at the sight of him, but I’m blindsided by hatred as Jamie raises his glass.

“I want to thank you all for being here this evening,” he says, voice smooth. “Here’s to my future wife. To Gigi.”

*I’m going to be fucking sick.*

His arm is round her waist like he has the right to touch her. I can’t look at her face – not with the knowledge that love for me is now elsewhere.

I take in her dress properly under the light in a way I didn’t before, the pale silk material indicating she’s already halfway to becoming someone else’s bride.

His eyes drift down to meet hers.

“From the second I met you, I knew this was our only possible ending. We’ve had our moments,” he adds, “but what matters is that we found our way here. Together.”

A soft murmur of appreciation runs through the guests, while my jaw remains tight.

“Till death do us part.” His fingers slide into her hair, his other hand anchored to her waist, fingers splayed wide. He leans in—

I can’t look any longer.

I turn in the opposite direction of the crowd as they bear bright smiles, echoing “awws”. Poppy stands directly in front of me, forcing me still. Her expression is as devastating as mine, a harsh contrast to the happiness vibrating round us.

The echo of the crowd is drowned out by her sad whisper. “I tried to tell you ...”

“I wish you tried harder.”

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## TWENTY-NINE

*Harry*

### *Flashback*

The pain of her not remembering us doesn't hit me until my feet land on the concrete below her bedroom window. Doesn't bleed until I walk into the hands of Richard's men. It doesn't matter that I didn't tell her; the risk of approaching her was enough. Yet the pain hurts nowhere near as the realisation that I must forget her. That I must move on with a life she'll never be a part of.

The stench of burnt flesh still clings to my memory. His men held me down, one on each arm, as the cold metal of the clamps bit into my temples. I could hear this awful sound over the current. My own, raw voice tearing out of my throat.

They want me to forget her.

They burned her out of me or tried to.

But the wound just makes space for her to settle in deeper.

I wake from consciousness with the skin around my temples split, seared back on the edges, and blood in my mouth.

*She doesn't remember you, Harry.*

Knowing it's the cause of her lost memory, I drink to forget.

She did it, so I'll do the same.

I drink to numb the thought of her. To prolong the numbness in my head. To accept the debt I now owe my boss for simply *seeing* her.

I feel the wound throb under the club lights.

With each drink at the heist after-party, my blood becomes thinner. A sharp flash of pain rockets through my skin. I press a hand against it, but the blood's already trickling down my face. The drink and blood loss makes my head swirl and when I trip and smash my head against the edge of the bar, I reopen the wound further.

Andy whispers near my ear, "You're fucking embarrassing yourself."

"Don't care," I mutter.

I try to pull myself to my feet, only to stumble again.

He catches my arm and encourages it round his shoulders. I don't protest this time, allowing him to lead us out of the bar and towards his parked car outside. I begrudgingly take the water he offers me, swiping the blood away with the back of my hand.

"Shit," Andy curses behind the wheel, passing me a sidelong glance. "I'll take you to Medical."

I wave my hand dismissively. "Drop me off at Greg's."

The red liquid trickles down my forehead, dripping faster down the side of my temple each time I try to wipe it away.

I take another hefty drift of water and a mint from the console of Andy's car, trying to pull myself together. Yet nothing does well for the fogginess in my brain. I need air.

The world tilts sideways, but perhaps that's the effect of his piss-awful driving.

I slam my hand against the dashboard. "Slow down."

He laughs, the sound grating on me to the point I unbuckle my seatbelt at the next red light and climb out, taking the duffle bag stuffed in his footwell.

"Oi!" he bellows. "Where the fuck are you going?"

I wave my hand again. "I'll just walk."

Despite the long walk and the brush of rain, the cold helps clear my head. Though I'm just as reeling by the time I walk up to the tattered porch of my family home, traipsing through the overgrown grass.

The front door is locked, but the rotting wood is that fucked that any significant push has it barrelling open. It smacks the inside wall, bouncing back quickly as I push it open and step inside. I stride towards the kitchen table, chucking down Andy's duffel bag.

I spit the thought under my breath. "Fucking *her*. Fucking alcohol. Fucking Richard."

I wipe the blood trickling from the open wound on my shoulder, searching for the first-aid kit in Andy's bag. We always stash an emergency pack in our luggage. It's got to be in here somewhere.

But typical – when I need it most, I can't fucking find it.

I grumble, "Where the fuck is it?"

I'll have to resort to the one I stash under the kitchen counter in case of emergencies.

I turn, but a gasp pulls my attention sideways. The sound is feminine, coming from a figure standing only a couple of metres away. My burnt mind has whoever's standing in the kitchen appear as nothing more than a cloudy silhouette.

I squint. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Who am I?" the girl scoffs. "Who are you? Do you even know where you are right now?"

I recognise the voice instantly – but no. It can't be.

*Am I hallucinating right now?*

I blink until I'm able to focus my vision and see her fully. It's her as I've always known her. Strikingly beautiful, with brunette hair, yet this time it's slightly messy, tumbling down her back. Her piercing eyes lock onto mine.

She's really here.

She came back.

And she sees me.

The sight of her so close has me torn between a disbelieving laugh and a smile worthy of aching my cheeks, but I keep my gaze stern, controlled.

I'm not dreaming. This is real.

She remembers. She fucking *remembers*.

I distract my spiralling thoughts by answering her question, peering round the house with a nod. But I can't help but to be drawn to her, my drunken, eager feet leading me closer until I'm pinning her against the cabinet, her body enclosed in my arms.

My heart thumps wildly in my chest.

"Care to explain what you're doing in *my* house, princess?"

She raises her brows quickly, to the point they almost get lost in her hairline. Perhaps I'm more delirious than I realise.

"Your house?"

I nod, the corner of my mouth twitching further. *What isn't she understanding?* I don't care. She came back – that's all that matters.

“You should be nicer to me.” The sight of her mouth draws me in closer.  
“I could evict you for trespassing.”

She shoves at my chest. “Get off me.”

Feistier than I remember.

I run my tongue over my teeth. Despite her shove, I stay still – anything to be close to her. As her stern expression zeros in on my face, I subtly bring the pad of my thumb nearer and stroke it over her skin. Just to feel her and know it’s not my mind playing tricks on me.

“What’s going on in here?”

I don’t have to turn my head to know Greg’s standing upstairs, perched at the top of the landing.

From her diverted attention, she’s none the wiser to my touch on her skin. The way I run my thumb over her hip where it peeks out underneath her top. Her skin is soft, and I touch her delicately. Fuck, she’s—

“Greg,” she starts to protest.

*Fucking Greg?*

The confusion sobers me quickly.

She’s here to see *me* – what the fuck is going on?

The more I think about how another’s man’s name just came from her mouth, the more I feel myself starting to spiral. Mixed with the lasting effects of tonight’s drink, it’s only an opportunity for further disaster this evening.

To distract myself, I cut her off. “Don’t know where you happen to keep your first-aid kit?”

As she turns her attention elsewhere, Greg’s eyes squint into a scowl.  
“Under the sink.”

“You know this man?” She raises her voice.

I push myself off the cabinet and take reluctant steps backwards, opening the kitchen cupboards in search of some gauze. I catch movement to my left and watch as she hurries towards the bottom of the stairs, where Greg has descended. A cold shiver barrels through me. I try aimlessly to direct my attention into searching for the medical equipment.

Why the fuck would she seek *his* comfort?

I’m half-distracted, barely noticing that Greg has stepped into the kitchen.

“Harry, this is Gigi. Gigi, this is my brother, Harry.”

Where the fuck do I recognise that name from?

*Gigi.*

I think it over again. *Gigi*.

I swear Greg has mentioned her name before ...

*“I’m going out to see Gigi.”*

*“Gigi?”*

*“Yeah, my girlfriend. I told you about her.”*

The memory hits me quickly, and I suddenly can’t hear anything else.

I can’t hear *anything*. Nothing other than the memory of Greg saying “my girlfriend”.

I’m going to be fucking sick.

My vision flashes with strobes of darkness. I’m suddenly catching the kitchen cabinet to steady myself. I swear the room is spinning.

Painful silence floods my hearing, but I think I may have shouted, “What!” in a moment of weakness.

She – Gigi – starts throwing questions at Greg, her back turned to me. I pass a sidelong glance towards her. The girl I crave with everything ... promised to another. Promised to my fucking brother.

How didn’t I know? How didn’t I fucking realise my brother and I were pining over the same girl? All I had to do was ask her name. *Her name*.

“Gigi ...” I whisper, though it feels strange on my tongue. The name of the girl Greg spoke about. The woman he’s claimed as *his*.

I thought the worst day of my life was the one where Dad left or the day my best friend fucking died. No. *This*—this is it. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, this is the worst day of my existence.

I somehow find the confidence to pull myself to my feet and put the first-aid kit on the dirty countertop. Sobriety suddenly hits me like a ton of fucking bricks, bitterness and rage drowning me instead.

“Why would you never tell me that?” Gigi asks.

A scoff slips past my mouth, and I shake my head.

I feel her attention on the side of my face, but I keep my eyes on the gauze. Looking at her with even the slightest glance, knowing what I know now, it will destroy me. Drain me of everything, until I’m nothing. Nothing, because I was only ever meant to be hers, and she was only ever meant to be mine.

“Come on – please.” Greg’s voice is quiet, yet it’s profound enough that it tears my insides to fucking shreds. “Let’s just head upstairs.”

But perhaps I crave the torture ... because I watch Gigi reluctantly sigh before trailing up the stairs behind him. Everything in me is mentally

screaming for her to stop. *Come back*, I want to yell. *Don't go up there with him, baby.*

I can feel myself losing her with each step she takes towards his room. I've fisted the rubbing alcohol so hard the contents is spilling over my hands, the cracked glass from my grip imprinted into my palms.

I'm shaking.

*Stop – STOP.*

*Fucking stop, PLEASE!*

By some miracle, she lingers at the top of the stairs. I hear the creak of floorboards on the landing as Greg walks to his room, oblivious.

Gigi tightens her palm on the banister, dropping her head to her feet as though she's questioning why they've stopped working. Upon the moment of reflection, she raises her chin just slightly. We make eye contact through the open stairwell.

Strands of her dark hair cushion her face, but her eyes shine bright through the opening despite the darkness in the early hours of the morning. They're just as devastating as the first moment I saw her.

Does she feel the energy between us; the heavy weight in this gaze? I just about notice it – the rise and fall of her chest and a look of breathlessness.

Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps she might just remember—

“Gigi!” Greg calls. “You coming, or what?”

I blink hard, bringing myself back to the reality where my brother has just called the girl of my dreams up to his fucking bedroom.

Gigi tucks her chin to her chest, shaking her head as if pushing away a wandering thought. With a final glance in my direction, she disappears upstairs. Greg's bedroom door closing is equivalent to a heavy boulder threatening to pull me down.

The door clicks shut, and I lean my weight against the countertop, fistng it so hard I hear it groan in my palms. It's the only thing holding me together. The only thing stopping me from screaming and charging upstairs.

I convinced myself she deserved better; that I wasn't hurting anyone by seeing her a final time. I was done with her – if only for a moment. I was going to leave her alone. I *planned* to do that ... until she crossed the threshold into his room.

I realise now it doesn't matter that she's with my brother. It matters because it's *not me*.

Christ, it was my life's mission to only ever admire her from a distance.  
Yet as soon as I tasted her, I was prepared for disaster.

Though she might not know the devastation she's put me through, the traitor deserves to feel misery like my own.

*I promise you, Gigi, you'll pay for this.*

I'll make her life miserable just like she made mine.

She'll never discover why I can't afford to feel anything other than hatred for her. And if she does, it means I've done the one thing I vow to never do.

I've fallen in love with her.

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# THIRTY

*Harry*

*Present day*

*Dear past self,  
You failed.*

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# THIRTY-ONE

*Gigi*

*I'm falling I'm falling I'm falling—*

This is wrong and fucking cruel.

I'm nothing except lost without Harry, so why does the decision I made to save his life feel so dishonourable?

“Just tell me,” he said. “Why him? Why not me?”

*It's always been you.*

Even now.

Even after all this time.

But he can't see the truth, so instead he sees the woman who's bashed him time and time again selfishly choosing another man, purposely shredding his heart in the process.

Jamie's voice slides over the words: “Till death do us part.”

His grip is like a vice as he leans in, the threat lingering in the air. Unable to give in to the torment with Harry watching out there somewhere, I turn my head at the last second.

A chorus of “awws” echoes through the crowd. Unbeknown to them, Jamie's lips are stiffly moving to my cheek, accessorised with a dangerous flare in his eyes. Rather than voice the threat, he laughs coldly, in a way that makes it clear I'll regret doing that.

A flash of movement in the crowd pulls me towards Harry as he walks away. I only catch a glimpse of him before he disappears behind the curtain.

His safety is what I've fought to have for months, yet I'm dying on the inside knowing he believes the lies I continue to play into. The devastation in his eyes when I claimed to love Jamie hits me with force again. The pain that coursed through him ignites a memory in me I'm powerless to ignore.

I wince at the image and turn my voice shallow. "Will you excuse me?"

Jamie stares long and hard, but I wasn't asking permission.

Before he can protest, I disappear into the sea of people, blending into the crowd so I can easily rush down the hallway. I hurry my steps, my chest racing with my pathetic attempt to hold myself together.

Claridge's boasts nearly 270 rooms, and I stumble into one of their luxury suites full of confetti and rose petals with my heart in my mouth and my palm bracing my lips in case I vomit.

It feels like a sick sense of *déjà vu* as I start ripping at my dress, attempting to free myself of the material that's too restricting against my skin. I tug desperately at the pieces round my neck, crying out with rage as they struggle to come undone.

My heart beats so intensely I can barely keep myself together, the walls closing in round me so quickly I struggle to catch my breath.

*I'm spiralling I'm spiralling—*

I trip over my feet and fall to the carpet, catching myself on my hands.

With a trembling palm, I clutch my chest, scratching my nails against the delicate material.

I can't do anything; can't think of anything other than how I want to die. But I can't. I won't.

Not when I've promised to live for him.

Yet all I know is that I'd take this awful feeling ten times over to save Harry one ounce of pain for the utter torment I've put him through. *Again.*

I deserve this.

This is my fault. It's always *my fucking* fault.

That internal voice chimes in: *You were always awful to him.*

My jaw quivers, my whole body starting to shake, as I succumb to shock.

Through the pounding in my ears, the crackle of a fire brings my attention higher. With tears swarming my lashes, I spot the brewing orange flames from the coal fire. It triggers the memory of one of my biggest regrets, the visual flashing in front of me.

Was Harry self-harming as some sort of temporary relief from the pain buried deep within him?

Did the pain give him peace? Satisfaction?

The intrigue alone is enough for me to drag myself across the carpeted floor until I'm pulling the hot poker out of the rack. My shaky hands have the equipment clattering in front of the fire, ringing against the marble tiles. With a more stable grip, I wrap my hand round the handle, pushing the end into the fire to redden the metal as the memory takes over with such toxicity I can't see anything in front of me other than the past.

That night on paper may seem no different from any other in our journey, yet it contains such self-hatred that it will be forever etched into my brain.



*As I move closer to the bed, Harry steps in front of me, forcing me to tilt up my chin.*

*“You’re a bitch,” he says.*

*My fingertips toy with the hem of his T-shirt. “I know.”*

*With agonising slowness, he unbuttons his shirt. We don’t have time on our side, which leaves me impatient to have my eyes on him.*

*Through the tension, I debate saying something tacky to draw a cheap smile out of him. A rare tug of his mouth that I’ll privately cherish. The fabric slips from his shoulders, and my mouth parts, prepared to tell him to hurry up—*

*What ... what is that?*

*The distant look in his eyes is enough of a warning that I shouldn’t lower my head to look at the discolouration on his chest. But I give in to the curiosity, slowly trailing my gaze lower.*

*Everything turns unbelievably cold.*

*Hot poker burns. Dozens of them.*

*A sob gets trapped in my throat. I’m silent as I sweep my eyes over him, tears brewing so deeply behind my lashes that my vision blurs. I keep my chin lowered, away from his prying gaze, as I count every single one.*

*No. No. No.*

*Harry, what have you done?*

*I caused that.*

*My hands start to shake at my sides with the need to hold him, comfort him, and apologise for my wrongdoings.*

*I brought this man to such low depths that he tortured himself.*

*I did this to him.*

*I'm the cause of all his suffering.*

*I'm so far deep in this mess I've created, stumbling so far into the darkness, that I can't afford for him to see the level of my own self-hatred.*

*The pain in my chest is sharp, and it makes clearing my throat difficult.*

*I manage to scratch out the words: "A waste of pretty skin. Such a shame."*



I clutch the poker and press it straight to my chest, right over my heart.

A sob claws its way out of me as molten heat marks my skin. I ache to pull back from the torture, but I refuse to shy away from the decisions that will forever mark me.

The memory hits me with force again, the reminder of the pain behind Harry's green eyes far more hurtful than the raw heat burning my skin.

The stench of melting skin swirls in the air. Despite the urge to let go of the steel, I wrap my spare hand round it so tightly I don't know how to do anything other than prolong the torture. Don't know how to do anything other than continue inflicting pain.

My head spins, the pain becoming too much to bear. The steel rod slips from my fingertips as dizziness overcomes me, and I fall back against the carpeted floor.

I lazily tilt my head sideways as I notice movement. Someone steps through the suite door, long legs and black-suited trousers coming closer. Panicked steps lead them to me before they crouch down at my side.

Their fearful voice sounds faraway. "Gigi!"

My eyes flutter closed as my subconscious slips away from me, until I'm left with nothing but utter heartache.



The lingering antiseptic smell of a hospital clings to the back of my throat, the dull hum of machinery filtering in before my eyes open, taking in my surroundings.

A machine echoes a steady beep at my side – the only sign I haven’t slipped beneath the surface completely. I turn my head slowly from the blue privacy curtain towards the empty chair beside the bed.

I’m in Medical, back at the Circle headquarters again.

The room is cold and quiet, the midnight darkness slipping through the crack in the blinds. I listen out for movement. No nurses, no hum of distant voices, no footsteps in the hallway – none of the usual urgency that comes with an organised crime group.

I sit up, the effort tearing through my muscles. Pain is the first thing I feel. A raw, sharp ache blooming on the left side of my chest.

I peer down at white sheets and the hospital gown that replaced my silk dress.

How long have I been out for?

I look round, eager to know how long it’s been, only to find nothing. But I can tell from the foul taste in my mouth and the greasy strands I run my fingers through that it’s been at least a couple of days.

My fingertip wraps round the front of my gown, and I pull it back to find bandages. I move my legs over the edge of the bed and slip off the sheets. My bare feet hit the floor with a soft thud. I drift out of the room, the metal IV pole trailing behind me. I pull it from my arm with a wince, letting the wires swing loose.

The hallways are dim at this time of night, the ceiling lights flickering to life with each of my steps. I turn the corner, barely noticing someone on the floor just beyond the nurse’s station. They’re tucked against the wall, sitting low, legs pulled in close.

I step nearer, recognising Andy.

Or ... what’s left of him.

He’s dressed in a hospital gown, head tilted down, hair messier than I’ve ever seen it, stubble shadowing his jaw. A shadow of the man he once was.

His arms are wrapped round his knees like a boy trying to disappear into himself.

I walk slowly towards him. “Andy?”

His head snaps up.

The change in him is immediate.

His entire body jerks upright like he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t. Eyes wide, he looks at me with such terror I think he might actually bolt.

I whisper, “Can I sit?”

He says nothing, though I notice the way he hides his trembling hands by rubbing them together. He’s silent for long enough that I slump down against the wall opposite him. My bandages tug with the movement, my breath shuddering in my lungs. I rest my head back, watching as his eyes dart everywhere but at me.

His eyes are red-rimmed, his mouth set in a line so tight it might snap. Purple shadows bloom across his jaw, along the edge of his throat. His lip is split, knuckles too.

*Did someone—?*

He catches my stare and tilts his head away, pushing his hands underneath his armpits to cover it. I stop my prying. Not because I don’t want to know, but because he looks ... terrified.

We sit like this for a while. I don’t speak. Neither does he.

I pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms round them.

Whether it’s his presence or the silence surrounding us, this is the first time I’ve felt safe enough to whisper the confession eating away at me. It’s just us two, me and a man I once knew so well, in the emptiness of this cold, dark hallway.

I juggle the idea, tripping over broken breaths with the fear of voicing it out loud. The confession could be about anyone, but he would know.

Finally, I whisper, “I miss him.”

Andy freezes before suddenly rising to his feet, standing up so fast he nearly stumbles. Panic reaching him quickly, he retreats a step. He slams against the wall, one arm wrapping instinctively round his ribs.

“I’m sorry,” I rush out with a pant. “I won’t say anything, okay? I’ll just be quiet.”

His eyes are wide with fear.

“Just stay,” I beg. “Please.”

He stops, his shoulders tensing. For a moment, I think he'll still turn and flee. His throat moves as if he's trying to swallow something sharp.

Then, after a long pause, he nods.

Slowly, he sinks back down to the floor across from me, head bowed, arms wrapped round his knees.

So I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes.

We don't speak again.

In the hallway, we simply sit.

Two people broken, both hurting, both basking in the silence of things possibly too complicated to understand.

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## THIRTY-TWO

*Gigi*

The night I was discharged from Medical, I wiped my mascara-stained eyes, disposed of the hospital gown, readjusted the ring on my finger, and got back to work. Underwent the heists. Approved the wedding plans. Agreed to the engagement interviews. Played the part.

This is life now, and I can't revel in self-pity anymore.

I built this cage.

It's a busy morning as recruits prepare for today's schedule: a few low-level jewellery stores dotted round the city. I lean against the wall outside Richard's office, returning nods as people pass by.

I check the watch on my wrist, waiting for Jamie to emerge from inside. We're on our final engagement interview, scheduled with a national tabloid in Leicester Square. I'm a fool for thinking he might act with the slightest urgency given their popularity.

As the remaining figures leave the hall, I inhale a staggered breath, staring at the ceiling as I fight the demons attempting to creep through. After witnessing Harry's heartbreak firsthand, I half-expected to see Jack tainting my dreams with reminders of my failures. But I've heard nothing, only silence. I'm not sure if that's worse nowadays.

I'm persevering as best as I can, but I can't be that convincing, as a quiet whisper draws my head up.

Poppy stands a metre away, her expression vacant. "What have they done to you?"

I frown, dropping my gaze to my white two-piece suit. There are gaps in the fabric that weren't there a few weeks ago, emphasising my especially pale skin.

If she's perceiving me as weak, she's far from wrong. I may not be able to get out from under Jamie's hand, but I'd die before allowing someone else to belittle me. I've faced worse than Poppy. I'm *facing* worse than her every day.

Calmly, I take steps closer until we're an arm's length apart. She stares me down.

I grab her by the neck, whip her round, and slam her against the wall. A gasp echoes from a few people behind me, but I shove her deeper into it.

The darkness lies within me after all.

I bring my head closer. "Since when do you care about my well-being?"

Her voice turns distant. "Since I realised what they're capable of."

I hear what she says, the emphasis on her words and the opportunity to confess, but I always veer on the side of caution with Poppy. Her relationship with Richard is one I choose not to delve too deeply into. I still haven't forgotten her murder attempt during my initiation training.

"They haven't broken me," I say assertively, trying to believe the lie.

I swear I see a flicker of sympathy in her smile.

"He'd make them pay ..." she mutters. "All you have to do is ask."

I release her, her words striking my body stiff. She slowly turns, unfazed by my outburst.

Maybe she's saying what I want to hear. Maybe she really has grown closer with Harry throughout my dance with darkness. Maybe, just maybe, she's toying with me to give her the upper hand against Richard.

Despite everything, I'm desperate to pry. Ask how he is, what he's up to, how he responded to my betrayal of accepting forever with someone else.

*Fuck, just to hear he's okay.*

She would know, wouldn't she?

I wrap my hand round the handle, trying to grip reality. Richard's office door swings open. I have just enough time to right my feet before I stagger into Jamie's chest.

He glares, his expression screwed tight. "What's with the rush?"

I turn my head over my shoulder. Poppy has disappeared. It's as if she was never there. Not a speck of misplaced dust. I turn back to Jamie to find his brow raised impatiently.

“The chauffeur is waiting outside,” I say.

He raises his brow higher.

“The engagement interview.”

He hikes it further still.

“The one in Leicester Square.”

He nods stiffly, his feet already moving towards the exit. His impatient strides force me to rush to his side.

“The last one, right?”

I pant breathlessly as I catch up. “Yes.”

“And the reporter’s name?”

“Allen, I think. I only spoke with their assistant.”

Jamie nods thoughtfully, though I don’t suppose he gives a toss about any of the information. It’s likely a tactic to ensure I’m still invested in this lie – any excuse to remind me of my failure in the position of his future wife.

We climb into the back of the Mercedes. The driver, a balding middle-aged man, puts up the privacy screen at Jamie’s gruelling request.

The journey takes longer than expected despite us swerving through rush-hour traffic. Even with Jamie barking for the driver to put his foot down, we arrive no less than forty-five minutes late.

The driver pulls the car into a free bay by the entrance. I step out, grinding my teeth as I get to my feet, ignoring the pulsing of my spine from heavy hands underneath my clothes.

Jamie’s phone rings. He slips it from his pocket, eyes tracing the screen. “I have to take this.”

“How long will you be?”

He glares sharply, and my muscles ache at the thought of what punishment that slip-up will later entail.

As Jamie mutters into his phone, I enter the building alone. Though that’s probably the wrong decision. *This level of publicity was all your fucking idea*, I’d kill to remind him.

Pushing open large glass doors, I step into the hallway decked out with framed prints of the tabloid’s front cover, from coverage of the royal family to exclusive interviews with Hollywood actors. Jamie’s obnoxious enough to assume he’s also worthy of this coverage.

“Gigi Thomas.” A woman with tied-back black hair offers me her palm. “We spoke on the phone.”

I shake her hand. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“You have an interview with our senior reporter about your engagement.” Her gaze drifts over my shoulder. “Will your fiancé be joining us?”

I hesitate. “I’m not sure.”

She smiles apologetically, as if I should be saddened that Jamie might not attend, but each minute not by his side is a blessing nowadays.

She escorts me into an interview room, gesturing for me to sit down in an empty chair opposite the desk. I accept an offer for a coffee as I settle into the plastic seat.

“I’ll tell Miss Allen you’re here.”

The woman leaves the door slightly cracked as she slips outside, the coffee machine groaning to life. The shadow of someone at her side stretches into the room.

“... don’t think he’s coming,” she whispers. “Poor girl.”

“Fucking men,” another woman retorts. “Imbeciles, the lot of ‘em.”

I snicker.

As I sit in the silence of the empty office, the sound now limited to the spurts of water filling the coffee cup, I turn my attention back to the door.

What was the name of the reporter again? Miss Allen, the woman said ...

My face turns pale.

*No. It can’t be.*

I only know one person with that name who’s the type to call men *imbeciles*. I hadn’t even thought of making the connection until now. A senior reporter at a prestigious company.

Shock keeps me still as the door swings open, giving way to blonde hair and a bright yellow co-ord that would only be worn by someone with her confidence.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.” An iPad in her hand, Mia keeps her head down, running her eyes over the screen. “I shouldn’t bother you too long. I’ll just press you for the juicy gossip and hopefully be out of your hair within the hour.”

At the sight of my former best friend, my mouth gapes, but no words follow.

“Would that be okay, Miss Thomas ...?” Mia’s eyes halt on the screen. Her head darts up, and she watches me with such puzzlement I can’t decipher an ounce of her reaction. “No.” Her voice trails off. “I’m here to interview the future Mrs ...”

She double-checks her iPad screen, returning her gaze to me quickly.

I still can't tell whether she's filled with disgust, elation, or sympathy.

I sit quietly as I watch confusion rise to the surface. There's only silence between us, written by bad decisions between childhood best friends. We were once inseparable, but in this moment, we may as well be strangers. It's no fault but my own.

Can she sense the regret sitting behind my silence?

The door swings open, the coffee I ordered placed in front of me. I offer a gentle thanks to the assistant as she exits the room. Mia watches my every move, her eyes narrowing as I take a sip from the coffee cup.

She states, "You're hurt."

I snap my focus to where the white suit has gaped at the front of my chest. The sight of the poker scar alongside a path of dark purple skin has me panicked, tugging the fabric back into place.

I meet her concerned gaze. "Mia—"

"She's just in here," a voice says from the hall.

Jamie appears in the doorway, and for perhaps the first time since I've known him I'm thankful for his presence, having narrowly avoided explaining the suspicious markings. I know without a doubt Mia would press me for answers. And despite everything that's happened, I don't know if I could lie to her.

I think I'm in the clear, but I watch as her features quickly rewrite themselves, eyes darting between me and Jamie as he sits beside me.

Her gaze drifts towards the door as if she's preparing to alert someone.

No. No. No.

She continues searching before turning her attention back to me as Jamie adjusts the front of his shirt. I plead with my eyes for her silence.

Her brow furrows deeper.

I subtly shake my head. "Please." My mouth moves silently round the words. "Don't."

Her eyes hold mine, and I see the unspoken question there. She suspects something bad. But she doesn't say a thing – not with Jamie sitting beside me.

He finally shifts his attention from his shirt, leaning back to stretch his arm over the back of my chair. I breathe steadily, trying not to flinch. Mia pauses as if forgetting where she is for a moment.

Then, as if sense comes racing back to her, she clears her throat. "So." She displays a cheerful smile with impressive speed. "Where were we?"

Mia asks about our wedding plans, the ring, the venue, the honeymoon, the party favours, but also the nice questions that would make for a killer story. She plays the part perfectly, and I find myself admiring her. She's a natural, pressing for details an audience would love to read. If she suspects any of the stories are fabricated, she gives nothing away.

Her eagerness even catches Jamie off-guard, but he answers each question swiftly. If I didn't know the truth behind his lies, perhaps I'd fall for the character he's performing too.

Mia doesn't pry about her suspicions, her professionalism remaining intact. But the silence hangs there.

True to her word, the whole ordeal lasts less than an hour, the interview recorded through her iPad.

"So, what's next for the two of you?" she asks, voice polite but strained.

Jamie launches into some sickly rehearsed answer about "making a difference". I barely hear it, watching the way Mia bites the inside of her cheek, the subtle twitch in her left brow. She's angry or afraid – I'm not sure which.

I smile gently at her, and I swear she starts to return the expression.

"That must be everything." Jamie rises, his chair screeching against the floor. "Come on – it's getting late."

"Wait." Mia's smile falters. "Would I be able to have a few minutes alone with the future bride?"

I feel him tense beside me. "Why?"

"Why?" She gawks at him. "Because I'd fucking like to."

I'd never dare to speak to Jamie that way, but as he draws his head back, shock written across his features, I bite back a smile.

"There are some things only meant to be told from woman to woman." Jamie's scepticism makes Mia sigh. "Details of the dress, *periods*—"

He grimaces. "Fine."

Perhaps I'd like to rekindle, apologise for the mistakes I made, but with the way Mia's gaze returns to Jamie's grip on my arm, the sickness returns with force. She thinks by getting me alone I'll confess.

Jamie closes the door as he exits, his shadow lingering in the hallway. Mia and I wait for the moment he leaves. But it never comes.

I look at her then. She might be the only person who could pull the truth from me if she really pressed. Or maybe I'm so desperate to confess the lie that I don't trust myself around her.

She gestures to the door. “Does he always wait outside doors like that?”

“No,” I lie.

We stare at each other.

I can feel her eyes searching, questioning. Her lips part as if she might say something, but then she glances at Jamie’s silhouette, closing her mouth.

“Thank you for today, Mia.” I force a swallow. “You really deserve everything you’ve achieved. Your parents must be proud.”

She takes my hand as I try to step away. My limbs tremble, and I pull myself free, crossing my arms to disguise the jittery movement. She grapples for her iPad, opening a blank note. Her fingers fly across the screen.

“Your mum must be really happy about the engagement,” she says aloud.

“Yeah,” I mutter, with a wince. “She would have been.”

Confusion hits her first, then, slowly, realisation sets in.

“Oh, Gigi ...” Her face drains of colour. “I ... I didn’t know.”

I shake my head, refusing to talk about it.

Mia hesitates before gesturing down, turning the iPad screen my way.

*Are you okay?*

She looks at me, eyes steady, not accusing, just ... *seeing* me, and that alone makes something inside me ache. Tears come dangerously close to the surface – not enough to overspill, but they hang on the edge.

I smile. “Of course.”

She withdraws the iPad, erasing the message. She types on the keyboard again.

Breaking the quiet, she says, “I’m happy you got your happily ever after.”

She turns the screen to me again.

*Does Harry know?*

I blink hard, glancing towards the door, where Jamie’s shadow still lingers.

*What’s she asking me? Whether he knows about the engagement?*

I pause. My lips twitch like they might speak on their own. I silently mouth, “He does.”

“I always knew you’d get married,” Mia says, her fingers moving again.

She pauses, gesturing down one last time.

*But perhaps to a different man.*

The ache is instant. A slow outpouring of sadness that begins in my throat and spreads through my chest.

“If you need anything … anything at all …” – she looks me directly in the eyes, keeping her voice low – “I’m only a call away.”

I want to tell her it’s too late. That I made choices I can’t undo.

“I don’t deserve that,” I murmur.

Mia doesn’t argue. She doesn’t press. She looks at me for a long time, eyes searching for a glimmer of the person she once knew.

“I’m so sorry about what happened with Andy,” I confess. “What I did to you – what I did to him. You both didn’t deserve that.”

“Wait …” She *really* looks at me now. “You’re not the one making him act this way?”

“What?” I sputter. “No, of course not—”

Jamie strides in. “It’s time to go. Richard’s waiting.” He’s at my side in an instant, hand pressed to my lower back to escort me out. “Thank you, Mia.”

Her silence follows me out the door. As we near the exit, she calls out.

“Gigi?” Mia’s voice softens. “Let’s catch up soon, okay?”

Jamie’s stare presses into the side of my face as I turn my head over my shoulder. “Let’s go,” he says sternly.

I keep my eyes trained on Mia until Jamie steers us round the corner. Then the effect of not seeing her has me bowing my head, my heart heavy in my chest.

I’m grateful she didn’t press me further.

Because if she had, I would have told her everything.

## THIRTY-THREE

*Gigi*

The journey back to the Circle headquarters is filled with painful silence. Jamie shifts in his seat in the back of the car, jaw rigid and shoulders tense, knees spread so I'm forced to tuck mine in tight.

The chauffeur drives through the iron gates, struggling to manoeuvre between all the activity. An abundance of recruits and staff are wandering the patio.

The male driver pulls onto the gravel. "I'll just pull up here, if that's all right."

"That's fine," I tell him.

Jamie throws a wad of cash into the front seat. He exits first, taking my arm to pull me out. Leading us through the entrance, he strides down the hall.

I tug my elbow back. "Slow down."

He speeds up.

Jamie tosses over his shoulder, "What was she saying to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

He bucks his chin towards the open door of Richard's office. "Get in."

The hallways are busy, conversation echoing off the large ceiling. Those we pass by bear us little attention as I step into the empty room. Jamie closes the door and twists the lock.

"What did you say to her?"

"Who?"

“That fucking journalist!”

“I said *nothing!*”

“You were speaking to her for a while.”

“She’s just an old friend.”

He seethes, “Don’t fucking lie to me.”

Jamie steps forwards at such a speed that I’m forced to retreat. I back up until I reach the desk, the backs of my thighs meeting the obstruction. I tilt my head away, feeling flecks of spit on my cheek.

“Did you say I’ll kill your precious boyfriend?”

I grit out, “I didn’t say—”

But he won’t let me finish the sentence.

Jamie fists my hair, knocking me off my feet and flinging me sideways. My face hits the corner of the wooden desk. I manage to catch myself on trembling hands before my body collapses to the carpet. Stars touch my vision, distorting the sight of him crouching down, drawing his head closer.

“You’re a fucking liar!”

My fingers touch the side of my temple.

I draw back my hand, spotting the droplets of scarlet.

There are hundreds of people at the headquarters today, and I’m *bleeding*.

*Fuck. If they see—*

“No, no, no,” I panic, shaking my head.

If they see and suspect anything, this whole façade will be for nothing.

“Jamie—”

“You’re worried about bleeding?” he roars in my face. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Listen to me!” I hiss. “I’m telling you that nothing—”

He rears his head back before spitting in my face. The anger has me physically shaking, but with no weapons at my disposal, Jamie’s strength completely overpowers mine. I’m no match for him.

I wipe the saliva away with the back of my hand.

He retreats several steps, starting to pace. I use the moment of him rambling under his breath to rise to my feet.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“I’m not fighting with you.”

As I reach the exit, I hear the hurry of his footsteps. I quicken my pace, reaching for the doorknob, but his legs are longer, his determination more

desperate. The blow comes to my upper back, stealing the ground beneath my feet.

“I saw the way she was looking at you!” He presses his loafer on my temple. “Do you think I’m a fucking idiot?”

I try to rise, but he pushes harder with each second.

*Oh fuck.*

My skull screeches.

He presses down with such intense pressure that I can’t help but submit to the pain.

Then he retreats his foot quickly, leaving me only a second to inhale a staggered breath before he kicks me. A strangled sound erupts from my mouth as blood floods my tongue.

He draws back his shoe and brings it forwards quickly, stopping it mere inches from my face. Laughter bellows from his chest, anger swarming him as I cower, tucking my chin to my chest.

“Get yourself cleaned up.” He tsks. “You’re a mess.”

I squint against the harsh light from the open doorway as he leaves, panic drowning me with the echo of activity from the hallway.

I need to get up. Now. But my body is shaking so intensely that every attempt is futile.

*Pull yourself together, Gigi.*

A whimper slips through my busted lips as I’m finally able to pull my head from the floor. A presence fills the entryway, daylight shining behind the figure and enveloping the room in shadow.

Hudson rushes over, crouching down beside me, his face masked with a cool composure I wish I had the ability to replicate right now. Yet there’s a slight crack in his façade, discomfort in the twitch of his eye.

He asks, “Are you okay?”

My immediate response is to laugh, although the feeling is disingenuous.

*“Help me up.”*

He takes my arm, helping me to my feet. As I rise, he palms the back of his neck. He says *nothing*. Although the look in his eyes can be counted as sympathy, I can barely look at him.

I cover my face, rushing out of the room. I scurry past recruits, ignoring their glances as I hurry towards the bathroom at the end of the hall. I enter, rushing to the mirror.

Seeing my reflection up close, the pain blossoms into a piercing ache. I survey the damage, running my tongue over my split lip. The swelling of my eye has it almost closed shut, the skin round it grazed, a bruise already starting to form.

*Fuck. This is bad.*

The door opens, the buzz of conversation outside slipping through the crack, in stark contrast to the immediate silence of whoever just entered.

I spin towards the intruder.

Poppy stands at the entrance, a backpack slung loosely over her shoulder. But as shock engulfs her, the strap slips off her arm and onto the tiled floor with a *thump*. Eyes wild, she goes from utter stillness to her mouth slowly gaping.

The door closes behind her, the sound forcing her to clear her throat.

“Gigi.” Her voice wavers. “Your .... your face—”

“Help me,” I plead, shocking myself with my own desperation. I rush towards her, taking the backpack and prying it open. “Do you have makeup in here?”

She breathes out, “Was it Jamie?”

I ignore her, reaching further into her bag. I dig through the contents desperately, passing her phone, her purse, and sets of keys. She steps closer, just inches away as she assesses my eye.

“Fucking hell, Gigi. Does he do this often?”

“Just leave it,” I tell her.

“Leave it?” She trips over her words before composing herself. “Blimey, we’ve killed people, but this is just *wrong!* Is he beating you?”

“No.”

“Does he blackmail you? Is that why you’re with him?”

The bottom of her bag gives way to nothing more than a lip liner and an empty tube of mascara.

*FUCK.*

“Poppy, *the makeup*. Where is it?”

“Is he threatening you to be with him?”

*For fuck’s sake.*

I ignore her, unzipping the inside pockets in the hope I’ll find a concealer or a smidge of foundation, just *anything* to help me out of this mess.

“Gigi!” Poppy shouts, grabbing my wrists. “Just tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell. It was *my* fault.” The words tumble out, my self-hatred spilling to the surface. “Nothing I didn’t deserve.”

“Bullshit,” she snaps. “What’s happening?”

“I told you.” My restraint starts to slip, my chest suffocating with my slamming heart. “*Nothing.*”

“It’s fucking something!”

“Poppy,” I beg, my voice shaking, turning my face away to hide the mess. “Please, stop.”

“Then what is—?”

“STOP!”

“Tell me!”

I break.

“HARRY!” I scream, the confession stealing the air from my lungs. “He’s threatening Harry.”

Silence swarms the room.

The beat of my heart pounds so intensely that even if she were speaking, I’d hear nothing other than the deafening *thump thump thump*.

Poppy’s shaky hand reaches her mouth. “Oh fuck.”

I tear my face away.

“Gigi, your wedding could happen any day—”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” I pant breathlessly. “It changes nothing.”

“So you’re just going to go ahead with it?”

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“When Harry finds out about this—”

No. No. No.

Fear forces me to shake my head madly. “Poppy, you can’t tell anyone.”

“Are you serious? He – we can do something to fix this.”

I spit out, “Yeah, like what?”

“Anything! Jamie can’t get away with this.”

“Well, when Harry’s house gets burned down, you learn to take threats pretty seriously.” I drop onto the chair beside the sink, defeated. Tears threaten to creep through, but I blink them away, my face contorting with the discomfort of baring feelings I’ve kept hidden for so long.

Poppy says softly, “It’s not your fault.”

I hum dismissively. “Mmm.”

“Gigi,” she says, sterner, drawing my head up. “It’s not your fault.”

I nod, if only to get her to stop talking, shifting awkwardly in my seat.

“Listen to me—”

“Poppy, stop it. Please.”

“It’s not—”

“IT IS!” I screech, the words sucking the air out of me. “It *is* my fault! You want to know how I know?” My words tremble as I struggle to catch my breath. “Because witnessing his pain was far worse than anything I’ve suffered these past few months. I beat myself up about it daily. *I’m* the reason his house burnt down. *I’m* the one who lost my sanity due to my own selfishness. *I’m* the reason his brother died. And *I’ll* be the one to get him killed.

“You think that you hate me? You think Harry hates me? No one hates me more than I hate myself – I fucking promise you that.” I laugh, my voice shaking. “I only stopped inflicting more pain on myself because I’m too weak to deal with the physical pain from Jamie *every day*.”

I drop my head into my hands.

My voice comes out hoarse, barely above a whisper. “It’s all my fault.”

Silence passes over the room until a gentle palm rests on my shoulder. I withdraw my hands, turning to where Poppy’s now crouched at my side. She doesn’t laugh or walk away like I expected.

“No, Gigi,” she breathes. “It’s not.”

Her words sink in slowly, and I feel myself crumbling. I shake my head, tears blinding me despite my efforts to hold them back.

“It’s okay,” she whispers.

The cries start to choke me, sobs racking my insides. Poppy pulls me into her arms before I can protest, wrapping me in a hug that feels surprisingly gentle, her body stable against my trembling one. I stiffen at first, unused to any touch that isn’t meant to hurt. She doesn’t let go.

“It’s okay,” she whispers. “It’s not your fault.”

Her words hit like a wave, breaking through the wall I’ve built round myself. I collapse against her, my body shaking as sobs fall from my throat. The pain in my face fades, overshadowed by the rawness in my chest.

# THIRTY-FOUR

*Gigi*

Jamie's rage wasn't limited to the Circle headquarters. I also saw the limit of his anger after we arrived home. I'm now sitting in the changing room at Pixies, fresh bruising covering healed ones.

Thankfully, Pixies' stage lighting is low enough for no one to see.

Jamie really thought our engagement interview would be worthy of front covers, but strangely, Mia never aired the article. There's no evidence of our conversation anywhere to be found.

My private dressing room is occupied by Jamie and God knows who else. He barked at me to leave, forcing me to get ready elsewhere. I sit at a dressing table in the communal changing room, though only a few women linger now, ready to leave for the night.

I press my hands against the surface, sucking in a sharp breath as I rise. Every movement sends fresh waves of pain through my sides. The room spins a little. I let the darkness swallow me for a moment as I lower myself back down. The sound of glasses clinking and the mutter of guests vibrates through the floor. They're all waiting for me.

Those selfish minutes I used to ache for are a rarity nowadays, and I fear if I were given the opportunity, I'd sleep for eternity.

A few minutes' rest, I vow this time. Five at a push.

I awake with a start as the changing-room door opens.

I peer up from my folded arms, meeting Poppy's eye through the vanity mirror as she seals the door shut quickly. Her breath hitches as her gaze

rakes over me, landing on the scar on my chest and the marks I haven't yet concealed with makeup.

"Gigi, you have to get out there." She tugs me under my armpits – an attempt that has my knees buckling. "He'll kill you."

I sink back into the scuffed velvet armchair. "Let him."

She bites her lip, glancing at the door as if she's half-expecting Jamie to burst in any second. Her words come out urgently. "If you don't get on that stage, he's going to lose it."

I shrug.

She whispers furiously, "Your life is not the only one on the line here."

Her words hit profoundly, reminding me why I'm tethered to this nightmare. My stomach twists, bile rising as I imagine Harry's body going limp, his green eyes turning dull if I don't play my part.

I *need* to get on that stage.

Poppy's still ranting, her voice a distant buzz, as I return to the present.

A knock on the door makes her pause.

"Gigi," Hudson calls from outside. "It's me. Is everything okay?"

Poppy stares at me in question. I force a nod. Hudson's seen me at my weakest – this is no different.

She storms towards the door, throwing it open. Anger barrels through her, evident in the way her hands flex round the handle. Hudson's eyes drift over her shoulder, finding my reflection in the mirror.

"Jesus," he breathes.

"Yeah, *Jesus*," she spits, ushering him away. "Go do something!"

His eyes widen. "Like what?"

"Anything! Trust me, you won't like what I have planned for that cunt."

Hudson's gaze darts between Poppy and me. As he shifts to step round her, she moves the same way, blocking his path. Her hands are like a barrier, pressing the wall with one hand and the edge of the door with the other.

Poppy draws her attention past Hudson as someone approaches. I expect it to be Jamie, ready to act on his anger.

"We're a bit busy here."

"Her fiancé is asking for her." A dancer shifts uncomfortably. "He's pretty mad."

"Shit," Poppy mutters. "She's just getting ready. Try to stall him."

“I told him she fell asleep at the dressing table. He’s already on his way up.”

“What the hell would make you do that?”

Hudson slips past her in distraction, coming to my side. Unlike Poppy, his eyes are zeroed in on the floor, as if he can’t bear to look anywhere else. He fumbles with his collar, mouth moving to speak, but nothing comes out.

The woman retorts, “It’s her *husband*!”

“Fuck,” Poppy curses. “Just get out of here.”

I have to get up.

I white-knuckle the edge of the table and rise to my feet on unstable legs. They give out a moment later. Hudson grabs my hips, stabilising me.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fucking fine – tell her she’s not fine!” Poppy throws her hands towards me. “We need to do something.”

I attempt another step, only to be guided back to my seat.

Hudson crouches at my side, his hand gentle on my shoulder, careful not to press too hard. “Gigi?” He lets a moment of silence pass. “What shall we do?”

“I can do it,” I tell him. “I just need a few minutes.”

“We don’t have a few minutes!” Poppy rushes out.

Echoes from the hallway have her whipping her head back towards the closed door. Hudson passes me a bottle of water, but my hands are shaking as I bring it to my lips. Water trickles down my chin despite how hard I try to stay still.

Poppy’s suddenly at my other side, shaking her head. “We’ll just tell him she’s sick.”

“He won’t believe you,” Hudson says, voice low.

I watch him through a half-lidded expression, though he’s not able to face me properly.

A harsh knock echoes on the door.

“Gigi?” Jamie knocks again. “Open up.”

Poppy and Hudson’s gazes meet, the silent debate of whether they should open the door or not. But as the third knock comes through harsher, I watch the way their shoulders jostle in a slight flinch.

“Open it,” I tell them.

Someone exhales a heavy breath.

Hudson takes slow steps towards the door. I fist the bottle of water, the plastic crunching in my grasp as the lock flips. For a painful, breathless moment, none of us move.

Poppy stands behind me, a reassuring hand on my shoulder as if she won't let Jamie lay a hand on me, though her strength would never match his. Hudson stands in the corner, his frame rigid. They both watch Jamie cautiously, tracking his every breath.

But he's calm – eerily so. His frame fills the doorway, his lips curving into a faint smile. His tie is askew, his hair in disarray. The air thickens with his presence as he steps into the room.

His eyes sweep over us. "All enjoying ourselves up here, are we?"

Poppy's hand quakes on my shoulder, her eyes darting to Hudson for a split second, then back.

"Those bruises look nasty." Jamie's dark eyes find mine, his head angled sideways. "You fall and slip again, darling? You've got a habit of doing that."

I watch him silently, my nostrils flaring. Poppy remains close, her silence a form of protection. Hudson remains in the corner, his watchful stare never leaving Jamie.

"Get on that stage, Gigi," Jamie demands, voice still quiet. "I won't ask you again."

As his eyes meet mine, I see it: the silent promise of pain. The threat hangs in the air, unspoken but crystal clear. His eyes don't leave mine as he speaks again slowly.

"Poppy, be a dear and help her cover up those nasty marks. We wouldn't want anyone mistaking her clumsiness for anything else, now, would we?"

His smile widens just a fraction.

As he turns to leave, she strides ahead, fists clenching at her sides. I reach forwards, tangling my fingers into her T-shirt and pulling her back. She could push ahead if she truly wanted to, but she draws to a stop, watching him leave.

Jamie leaves with quiet grace that's more terrifying than any outburst, the door closing behind him. The bass from the club pulses below our feet, each *thump* like a ticking time bomb now he's left.

Poppy starts. "Gigi—"

"You heard what he said." I cut her off. "We wouldn't want anyone getting the wrong impression."

She nods stiffly, lowering herself down, knees pressing into the grimy carpet as she starts rifling through my makeup bag. I tilt up my head at the sound of shuffling, watching as Hudson closes the door, leaving without a word.



It's been an entire week since Jamie walked into the Pixies changing room, and I'm still on edge. Seven whole days of him acting like nothing happened; like I didn't screw up and need him to put me back in check.

I expected him to lose it. To scream in my face, and the usual shit that follows.

He's been acting like a saint, all smiles and calm voices. It's the first time in months I can *breathe* without my limbs screeching. But I know him better than that.

This calm act ... it's a set-up. I'm just waiting for the shoe to drop.

Every look has me on edge. Each time, I find myself holding my breath, wondering if this is the moment he'll finally snap.

Something's about to happen, but I don't know what.

Has he set up cameras in the house, waiting for me to break?

Is he anticipating I'll break the terms of the engagement?

Or worse, is he planning something I haven't even thought of yet?

The feeling is unnerving, especially since the air tonight is suffocating, like it's pressing down on my chest. Like a warning that I need to get out of here before I'm roped into something deeper – but there is no escape, only reality.

I pass by Jamie in the living room with a pile of laundry in my arms. He doesn't watch me pass, sprawled out on the sofa with the TV blaring some action movie. It's as mundane of an evening as any. That's what makes it so peculiar.

I slip into my walk-in wardrobe. All the jackets have been hung perfectly by colour, dresses lined up without a wrinkle, shoes in a neat row underneath them. It's like a showroom, thanks to the cleaner we pay a fortune for.

As I slip past the wardrobe, a basket tips over, spilling its contents onto the floor in a heap. *Shit.* I kneel to pick up the mess, placing the laundry pile aside, clothes now everywhere. I return the items to their basket – and stop.

My fingers touch the soft garments with high price tags that once gave me comfort at such a dark time. *Burberry. Gucci. Prada.* Each as disgustingly expensive as the last. I shake my head, pushing the memories away as I stuff them back into the basket.

An outfit makes me pause.

I cautiously pick up the wine-red ballgown, threading my fingertips through the delicate silk. Fragments of memory flood back. Blood. Gunshots. Harry. The blood splatter has been cleaned, erased as if it were never there, but I know it once was. I *know* part of his DNA is written in the confines of this dress.

My phone sits beside my bent knees, and for a fleeting moment, as I sit in the closet hidden from the reality outside, I wonder whether he'd answer if I called.

*Fuck.*

*It doesn't matter,* I remind myself, *because you experienced temporary with him at the expense of forever with someone else.*

I swallow the lump in my throat, bringing my face down to the fabric and letting out a scream into the garment. It shakes my shoulders. I scrunch the fabric between my fists, desperate to tear it apart.

As I stretch the stitching, something drops into my lap. A small, rectangular object, not much bigger than the palm of my hand.

A hard drive.

I pick it up, brushing off lint and dust as I rack my brain, trying to place it.

*Oh.* This is the reason Harry almost met death that night. We were on a heist to retrieve the hard drive from Paolo Ricci, having infiltrated his party in West London. Something about it holding information against Richard—

*Oh my God.*

My hands shake against the small object.

I'd been working with Paolo, desperate to get my hands on the drive, knowing it potentially held crucial information about Richard. He was desperate we retrieved it, knowing it could be damning to his reputation.

*Holy fuck.*

What if this is it? What if this holds the key to my salvation?

What if I could use his secrets as leverage to escape the marriage binding me to Jamie? What if the trafficking ring can be stopped and the girls can be saved?

*What if this hard drive is the end to this madness?*

There's an old laptop stored in one of the drawers in the living room. Hope gets the better of me, and I'm suddenly scrambling to my feet. I throw the door open, rushing to exit.

I hit a hard wall, stumbling back into the closet.

I'm staring straight at the centre of Jamie's chest.

*Oh fuck.*

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

I dart my hand behind my back, closing my fist.

"What were you doing?" he asks.

His brows are stern, just like when his temper is about to unleash. Fear has me suddenly unable to speak, my mouth moving over nothing.

He presses again. "What are you doing, Gigi?"

"Nothing."

Jamie hesitates, tracking my every movement. I squeeze the hard drive until it bites my palm, sealing it from his prying gaze.

"My room tonight."

Surprise slams through me, widening my eyes.

It's not up for debate.

I force a numb nod. "Okay."

He nods too, a casual exchange. "Okay."

Jamie returns to the living room. I follow a second later, sitting on the end of the sofa. I feel his gaze following me as I settle down. I hold my breath until he finally returns his attention to the TV screen.

My pocket burns as I slip the hard drive into place.

This could be my chance to rewrite my future, but I have to play it smart, otherwise I'll lose everything. *Again.*



I lie beside Jamie, my body rigid under the sheet, every muscle tense as I listen to his ragged breathing. It's late. The clock on the nightstand glows

2:17 a.m.

I've been lying here for hours now, staring at the ceiling while he snores beside me.

His breaths deepen, his heavy arm draped over my waist, and I know he's out cold.

Slowly, I start to inch away, sliding my body towards the edge of the bed. The mattress creaks softly under me, and I freeze, my heart slamming against my ribs.

The sound dies away.

I lift my arm from under his, swinging my legs over the side. My feet meet the wooden floorboards as I stand, and his breath hitches. I stop dead. He stretches, his hand resting on the empty spot on the mattress. His breathing evens, and relief washes over me. I pull open the drawer of the bedside table, taking the hard drive into my palm.

I tiptoe out of the room, exiting into the hall.

In the living room, I pull the laptop out from its allotted space, perching on the end of the sofa. I flip the lid, and the screen lights up with a soft hum. My fingers quiver against the hard drive as I plug it into the USB port.

I dart my eyes towards the hallway every few seconds, half-expecting Jamie's silhouette to appear. I return my focus to the laptop, my foot bouncing impatiently on the floor.

The hard drive's icon pops up on the screen, a little folder waiting to be opened. I take a shaky breath and double-click on it, my heart pounding.

The laptop groans as the files start to load, and I gnaw at my bottom lip.

"Come on," I whisper impatiently, darting another look over my shoulder.

I don't know what I'm expecting. Something concrete, maybe. Photos, emails, legitimate proof of his wrongdoings – anything that will give me a chance of getting out of here.

My heart drops.

Lines of code scroll down the page, further and further, strings of letters and numbers that give away absolutely nothing.

"No," I breathe, clutching the screen.

Tears sting my eyes, hot and angry. The code stares back at me, blinking mockingly, an impenetrable wall of text I can't make sense of. It may as well be useless.

But I can't give up. Not now I've tasted a glimmer of hope that potentially sits at the end of all of this.

*Think, Gigi.*

*Fucking think.*

Whizz Tech Dan, nicknamed the IT wizard for a reason. He's learned everything about coding – it'd take him next to no time to reveal the answers underneath—

No. Too risky. He works closely with Richard.

My eyes flick back to the hallway.

There's no sound, but still, I hold my breath.

And then, out of nowhere, it hits me.

*Wait.*

I take my phone, scrolling through my contacts, hesitating over Mia's name. She always bragged she "knew a guy". It was her thing – digging up dirt on people, having access to records no one else had.

She said if I needed anything, then to call her. And now here I am, at breaking point, prepared to call in the favour I shouldn't be owed.

What if she doesn't want to get involved? What if she takes back the sympathy she offered after she remembers the awful things I did?

Desperation wins, and I hit dial, anxiously pressing the phone to my ear, my heart pounding like a drum.

It rings once ... twice ... I hold my breath.

The line connects with a groggy, "Hello?"

"Mia," I breathe. "I'm sorry to wake you. I don't have a lot of time."

There's a pause, the sound of sheets ruffling, and a muffled curse.

"Gigi?" she asks, sounding half-awake. "What is it?"

"I need your help." My words tumble out in a frantic whisper as I clutch the phone. "Are you still in touch with your guy – the one who used to help with our Mystery Monday and finding Jack?"

Another beat of silence, then she clears her throat, sounding a bit more alert.

"Fuck," she mutters, taking a second to think. "It's been a while, but I still have his number."

My vision blurs with unshed tears, my hands shaking so badly I almost drop the phone.

"I-I have a hard drive that needs decoding. I hate to ask this favour of you, but I really need your help." I close my eyes tight. "Please. I'm desperate."

There's a rustle on her end like she's sitting up in bed. "Yeah, I'll do it," she says, clearing her throat. "Are you able to get it to me?"

I press my hand over my mouth, holding back the relief clawing up my throat.

"I'll find a way." I nod, mentally drafting scenarios where I can slip away for a few hours. "Mia, thank you."

"It's okay," she says, letting out a yawn. "If that's everything—"

"Wait." I grimace as I look at the time again. "The interview for the engagement – you never posted it. Why?"

There's a brief pause. I can almost hear her choosing her words.

"Oh, that old thing?" she says dismissively. "The whole thing got wiped – some error with the system. I guess not all stories are meant to be told."

My chest tightens with a mixture of gratitude and something else. She isn't spelling it out, but the implication is as clear as day. Mia buried the story to protect me.

At least one good thing came out of all this. One less person to blast my living hell across the papers.

"I guess so," I say quietly, my voice barely even.

We hang up, my hands still trembling as I sit in the silence for a moment longer, letting the feeling of hope sink into my bones.

# THIRTY-FIVE

*Harry*

I stand on the bank of the Thames, fog curling round my boots. The river, an endless black pool, lies just a few metres below.

The body slumps at my feet, wide eyes staring up at me still. I grip the man under the arms, feeling the blood soaking through my shirt. I curse, heaving him towards the edge. There's a muffled thud as he hits the surface and sinks, dragged down by the chains I wrapped round his ankles.

I wipe my hands on my jacket, the metallic tang of blood lingering in my nose, mixing with the rotten stench of the river.

Some drunk bastard passes, and I duck my head, feigning ignorance until he leaves. London's alive round me even at this hour, the late-night stragglers leaving the pub down the street.

I slip into the shadow of a nearby building, heading for my car in the side alley. The engine hums to life, and I peel out, headlights cutting through the mist as I head towards Surrey and the shithole apartment I call home.

The drive is a blur of lights as I charge down the motorway.

By the time I've parked a few streets from the flat, the sky's starting to lighten with the first hints of morning, turning the world a muted purple. I traipse up the stairs, letting myself inside. The TV's dim light casts a sickly glow over the room, making everything more suffocating than it already is.

I lean against the kitchen counter, taking a minute to just fucking *breathe*.

I grab the knife from the surface, numb as I play with it between my fingertips, drilling my focus into the empty chair across the room. The ropes

are still hanging from the sides from where the man was restrained to the worn wicker.

Another fucking dead end. That makes a total of six now, possibly seven. Christ. I need a fucking cigarette.

Throwing the knife to the side with a clatter, I grab a cigarette from the packet on the counter, crossing my elbows over the ledge of the open window. I flick the lighter, taking a deep inhale. Outside, the streets are quiet, save for the occasional car or a distant siren wailing.

Leaving town's been on my mind for weeks. I could pack up a bag right now, hit the road and start fresh somewhere new. Maybe catch a flight to the States and never look back, or bolt for the coast – catch a ferry to some small European town where no one asks questions. I'd become a mechanic, embrace my roots.

It's fucking tempting, and probably smart.

There's nothing tying me to this place anymore. Information about the trafficking ring has come to a grinding halt, and I'm at a loose end. For all we know, it's finished, though my gut thinks otherwise.

I exhale slowly, the smoke dissolving into the air, and for a moment everything feels still as the familiar buzz hits my lungs. The debate churns in me.

My phone rings in my pocket, jolting me from my thoughts. I freeze initially before pulling it out, glancing at the screen.

Unknown number.

Smoke curls up, stinging my eyes. I take another drag to buy myself some time, the ringtone slicing through the quiet morning. The cigarette burns down to the filter, and I discard it in the ashtray.

I answer the call. "Hello?"

"Harold," a chipper voice says. "How's things?"

I blink. "Who the fuck is this?"

"Mia." She pauses at my silence and sighs. "Mia Allen."

*Oh shit.* Her voice hasn't changed, still smooth, confident, and straight to the point. What can she possibly want?

"Gigi's friend. Well ... more of a *former* friend." Her voice trails off. "But we used to be best friends. Cut contact after she became a bit of a fucking bitch—"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember."

*Gigi.* Her name impales my chest like a hot knife, shattering the numbness I've been clinging to.

"I need a favour," she says.

*Fucking reporters.*

"Mia, if you're here to rub the engagement in my face and give me some feel-good story about her big happily ever after, then, respectfully, you can fuck off—"

"I knew you'd help."

I let out a steady breath, unleashing my hold on the window. I didn't mean to snap, but Mia's too raw, too close to her.

Besides, I'm not about to lose my temper. That'd be a hell of a story.

She hesitates, and I hear background noise on her end – traffic, people chattering. My eyes scan the street below out of habit: cars pulling out, a jogger running down the pavement.

Mia drawls, "Down, down ... further, *further* – there you go."

I skip over a woman with blonde hair and dart my eyes back. Mia. Standing across the street, leaning against a lamppost, staring boldly at me.

I've worked tirelessly to keep this apartment private, yet this twenty-something-year-old with bright hair and an even brighter suit has managed to track me down.

She waves.

*What the actual fuck?*

"For fuck's sake." My voice drops to a hiss. "How did you find this place?"

She lifts her shoulders and shrugs. "I have a guy."

"What guy?"

"You'll find out soon." I feel her eyes boring into me even from this distance. "Now, that favour."

"I'm pretty busy nowadays."

"It'll be worth your while."

"Doubt it." I brush her off, turning back into the apartment. "Now, if you and *your guy* could kindly back off, that'd be greatly appreciated."

I pull the phone away, ready to end the call.

Mia's voice comes through quickly. "I might have some dirt on your boss."

I stop mid-stride.

"Richard, is it?"

I circle back towards the window, my brows drawn.

Did she just say Richard?

No, surely not.

I grip the phone. “Say that again.”

“Rich-ard,” she says mockingly.

I return to the window and narrow my eyes at her. She’s still in the same spot, propped against the lamp as if she owns the entire street.

“I’m listening.”

She tilts her head, mouth curling up at the corners. “Are you going to let me in?”

I peer round the apartment. The wallpaper curling at the edges, the cracks in the ceiling, the flecks of dried stains on the wall. It’s a huge risk allowing her in here.

I run a tense hand through my hair, making a split-second decision. “Second floor, apartment two. I’ll buzz you up.”

I hang up, throwing the phone aside.

I strip off my clothes in the bathroom, shoving them into a bin bag to be burnt later. The mirror shows me what I already know: blood splatter on my face, dark circles under my eyes. I rub myself raw with the scalding tap water, watching the pink-tinged liquid swirl down the drain.

A knock on the door has me quickly throwing on a pair of dark sweats and a T-shirt. The bloody ropes and abandoned chair catch my eye as I step into the living room. *For fuck’s sake.* I grab a sheet, chucking it over the top, not having enough time to disguise it properly.

The second knock comes again. “Any time today, Harold.”

I begrudgingly unleash the deadbolt and surrounding locks, opening the door. The wood groans as it catches against the rotting floorboard. Mia smiles as if she’s already won. Seeing her up close makes me squint, the purple she wears way too bright for the dull flat.

She pushes off from the doorframe. “Blimey, they said it’d be a shithole.”

I expect her to retreat, but instead she wanders further in, her shoes scuffing the floor as she takes it all in. She runs a hand along the back of the sagging sofa and mutters under her breath, “It’s perfect.”

*Perfect?* I narrow my eyes.

Her tone is casual, almost admiring, as if she’s appraising a penthouse. I take a few steps into the kitchen, leaning against the countertop, which is stacked with a few empty beer cans.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mia turns to face me, her expression unflinching and making me itch. “I’m holding a meeting,” she says simply, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I’m going to have a couple people over, if that’s all right with you.”

“Are you out of your mind?” I snap. “You’re not using my safe house for a social gathering.”

“I prefer ‘mother’s meeting’.”

“No. No,” I say again, sterner. “Absolutely not.”

I don’t like this one bit.

I’ve never enjoyed surprises, especially when they involve dragging more people into my mess, but Mia’s got that look – the one that says she’s already made up her mind and I’m just along for the ride.

“What’s in it for you?” I ask. “What are you getting out of information on Richard?”

She meets my glare, as calm as ever, but I see a flicker in her eyes like she’s weighing up how much to tell me.

A voice says out of nowhere, “Information on Richard?”

I whip my head towards the front door, practically giving myself fucking whiplash. Poppy stands in the doorway, her eyes sparkling with intrigue.

Mia stands a tad straighter, repositioning her posture at the sight of company, eyeing her with suspicion. Poppy tilts her head, the two of them sizing each other up silently.

Finally, she steps forwards, putting out her hand. “Name’s Poppy.”

Although initially reserved, the two shake hands. “I’m Mia.”

“So what’s all this about then?” Poppy turns her head between the two of us. “I’m always down for trying to put an end to that cunt.”

*For fuck’s sake.* There are more pressing matters at hand. Like how this fucking reporter has managed to find out where I live. Shouldn’t we be caring more about that?

I glare at Poppy, and she raises her brow in return. Like I’d deny an opportunity to put the man six feet under. I’d put a bullet in Richard myself given the chance.

My anger doesn’t vanish but twists into something sharper, more focused.

“I’m not saying I’m agreeing.” I hesitate. “But how would this pan out?”

“The guy, the contact I mentioned, he has something on your boss, but it’s encrypted, and it’ll take him a while to get access to it. A couple hours,

if we're lucky." Mia's straight to the point, her eyes never straying from Poppy or me. "This place is ideal, because no one will look twice. It's brilliant."

I scoff. She's got to be joking. Popping out of thin air like some—"Who's the guy?" Poppy asks.

Mia doesn't miss a beat. "He's asked to remain anonymous until the time comes."

Quiet fills the room, and I grow tense, scrubbing a hand over my jaw, scratching at the few days' worth of stubble. How can Poppy be entertaining the idea? She's suffered losses like I've had to endure, witnessed the effort it's taken to keep this place quiet. *Nothing* is worth risking that.

"Why have you come to Harry, of all people?"

*Good fucking question.*

"What else do you expect me to do with the information? Hey—" She holds up her hands. "He's your boss, not mine. But I've heard whatever they'll find is pretty detrimental."

"Pretty detrimental?" I ask. "So you don't even know what it is?"

She shifts on her feet.

I press further. "Where'd you get this *information*?"

There it is again, that look of defiance, like she's holding something back. I don't fucking like it.

"I'll think about it," I say.

"Harry," Poppy hisses.

I shrug. "I said I'll think about it."

Mia blinks once, slowly. "I wouldn't have come here unless it mattered."

I lean against the counter, folding my arms. "Unless there's something you're not telling me?"

She hesitates, then finally, she breathes, "No."

"That settles it then."

Mia stands her ground, shifting between both feet as if waiting for me to change my mind. I won't.

Poppy still pins me down with that "Are you serious?" glare, but I refuse to let up. Not when both of these women look like they're ready to tear their nails over my face if I don't comply.

"Give us a minute," she tells Mia.

The door closes with a click behind her.

Poppy whirls round to face me, arguing, “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

I throw my hands towards the door. “You expect me to believe what she’s saying?”

“It could be our last shot, Harry. You said yourself we’ve reached a dead end.”

“And what if it isn’t? What then?”

“She said she has something on Richard.”

“She says a lot of things, if you haven’t noticed.” I scoff. “Besides, I trust myself better than I trust her.”

Poppy’s nostrils flare, fists clenched at her sides. “What are you so afraid of?”

I stare at her silently, trying to restrain the anger barrelling through me.

“Harry,” she sighs, a reluctant desperation in her voice as if she never wanted to press this far. “She’s not Gigi.”

“Poppy,” I grit out, rounding on her fast. “*Don’t*.”

“If you’re worried, she’ll—”

My voice is sharp. “I said *don’t*.”

She continues, though it looks like it hurts. “I’m sorry about your reservations towards her, but you’re not the only one who matters here.”

“Yeah, like who? Like Gigi?” I force the words out through clenched teeth. “She’s marrying the fucking enemy! Don’t use her name against me. I can’t talk about her. Not when—” My throat closes, my voice cracking more than I mean for it to. I swallow it down hard. “Not when she chose someone else.”

Poppy doesn’t move, but she holds my gaze. Her face shifts, a quiet pull at the corners of her mouth like she’s trying not to let the sadness through.

“I might not believe Mia.” Her voice softens. “But I think she’s the only hope we have.”

A tense pause fills the room, her words hitting me hard in the silence.

Before I allow myself a minute to change my mind, I sigh, “Let her in.”

## THIRTY-SIX

*Harry*

Poppy paces the room nervously. She's muttering under her breath, kicking at a loose floorboard that hides a stash of cash and ammo. If we had to have this meeting, it was going to be by my rules. I just needed a couple days and a few added measures in place first.

I sit at the edge of the sofa, spine rigid, hands clasped tight, eyes on the front door.

"What if they don't show?" she asks.

"Mia said they'll be here." I clear my throat. "They'll come."

Poppy doesn't respond, the realisation settling in that we're relying on this anonymous source far more than words can admit.

Then there's a knock against the front door.

Poppy stops her pacing. I take the gun between my hands, drawing it in front of me as I approach the door. I turn to her – a last-ditch attempt to back out – but she nods, encouraging me forwards.

"Harold?" Mia's voice comes through the door. "I know you're in there."

I groan, wrenching it open. She leans casually against the doorframe, grinning widely. Her head drops to the gun in my hand, and she pats my shoulder mockingly.

"Always one to bring the drama, girly pop."

I'm already regretting this.

I lift my hand to fist my temple, but I stop mid-air as Andy appears from behind her, head down, clearly dragged here against his will. His face is a

mess, bruises blooming purple and yellow, one eye half-swollen shut. My stomach drops, my silence forcing him to lift his chin.

He shakes his head no, backtracking a few steps.

“You’re not leaving.” Mia reaches out, gripping his shirt. “Not on my watch.”

She pulls him inside, guiding him towards the sofa, and sets him down cautiously, as if he’s an injured animal.

*What the fuck?*

Mia shrugs like she doesn’t know what’s up with him. “He doesn’t like this Richard guy either.”

Andy actually *flinches* at the name, fistng the end of the sofa so tightly his knuckles turn white.

The sight of him is so terrifying I can’t help but stare. He ducks his head, cowering into himself as if it hurts to be in my vicinity.

I barely notice the person approaching the door, walking straight past me. I whirl round, watching as Whizz Tech Dan steps in as if I’m nothing but a stranger to him. He sits down without a word, setting his laptop up on the kitchen counter, pulling out drives, cords, and black-market devices as though he’s just walked back into an old routine.

I’m brought to silence, trying to wrap my head round what’s happening. Dan peers over the glasses perched on his nose.

“She offered me money,” he says. “I like money.”

I don’t move. “You’re the contact.”

Mia’s head turns between us. “You guys know each other?”

Dan’s eyes drop to his laptop. “We used to work together.”

“You and I *still* work together! I can’t believe this,” Poppy says, the last part muttered under her breath. “You never mentioned anything.”

“I work with a lot of people.”

I feel my jaw clench. “You could’ve said something.”

He shrugs.

I growl, “If I knew money would’ve given me the upper hand against Richard, this could have ended a long time ago.”

A fucking bribe – that’s all it took it for Dan to find me and rat me out. Yet somehow Richard has heaps of cash, and I’m still breathing.

He says nothing, the apartment filling with the sound of his computer groaning and the clack of his keyboard as he enters his password.

“That’s everyone, right?” Poppy’s voice cuts through the tension. “Then let’s get to work.”

I shake my head out of the angry daze. *Fuck it. Let’s get on with this then.* Dan plugs a hard drive into his laptop. “This might take a while.”



I lean against the chipped counter, arms crossed, trying not to look at the clock. The gun sits tucked in the back of my waistband. Dan is hunched over the coffee table, sweat beading on his forehead as lines of code scroll up the screen. The letters and symbols keep coming, an endless stream that seems to regenerate itself. We’ve been going at this for at least two hours now.

Poppy cracked open a window not long ago, but all that’s allowed in is the sound of traffic.

Mia sighs tiredly. “Is there not just an undo button you can press?”

He snorts, “Why didn’t I think about that?”

“How much longer?” Poppy asks.

“Maybe an hour.”

*Another hour?*

I thought I’d be least pleased about this, but Andy looks like a ghost who’s barely holding it together. I knew something was off about him, but it isn’t until now, with him only a metre in front of me, that I see his every movement. The way he jumps at every little sound, his eyes darting round the room as if he’s expecting someone to kick down the door at any second.

He’s clutching a half-empty beer like it’s the only thing keeping him from falling apart. Every time someone moves, he flinches, his hands shaking so bad I see it from across the room.

He shakily places his beer aside, rising to his feet, voice barely audible. “Bathroom?”

I gesture to the end of the hallway, and he traipses down the hall.

Poppy hisses, “What’s up with him?”

“I thought you’d know.” Mia turns to me. “I tricked him into coming here. I couldn’t even mention your name. I thought you were hurting him.”

“You thought *I* was the one hurting him?” My eyes widen. “Why’d you say that?”

She shifts uncomfortably. “There are certain things he refuses to talk about, and you’re one of them ...”

I’m *one of them?* I feel sick.

I’ve been rotting here for months, while he’s been suffering and Mia’s been attempting to pick up the pieces. I could’ve supported him if I’d known. Made it my sole purpose to find out what’s bothering him so badly.

Mia’s voice drifts off. She shakes her head.

I watch her carefully, the way she stares down the hall waiting for Andy to appear. A thought comes to fruition, and I ask, “Mia, where did Dan get this *information* on Richard?”

She hesitates, but she doesn’t falter. “They’ll be here soon.”

“*They?* Are we expecting someone else?”

A knock echoes on the door.

*Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.*

Poppy gets to her feet, checking through the peephole. My hand twitches on the gun instinctively. She glances towards me briefly before opening the door.

“Sorry,” a voice says from the doorway. “It took a while to get away.”

Gigi steps into the room, and I freeze. Her rain-sodden hair frames her face as she hesitates near the entryway.

We stare at each other.

I want to hate her for everything she’s done. Christ, I want to. But here she is. And I’m struggling to breathe.

She doesn’t say a word, just stands there breathing hard. Words pile up in my throat, but nothing comes out. No breath, no thought, not even anger.

Then I laugh bitterly. “Get out,” I say.

Poppy steps between us. “Wait – she’s soaked. Let her in.”

“I don’t care if she’s on fire,” I say. “She’s not coming in.”

Gigi looks like she wants to say something back. Something ugly, maybe honest, but she bites it down. She steps closer, ignoring the others.

“I’m not here to rat you out.”

“Right,” I scoff. “You just happen to pop by when we’re building a case against your father—”

“Sorry, sorry.” Mia’s voice cuts through. “Your *WHAT?*”

“You expect me to believe he and your fiancé just gave you the night off?” I snap.

Tense silence swallows the room.

Mia shuffles to stand in my peripheral, composing herself. “I invited her.”

*This night can't get any worse.*

“We need her, Harry.”

I lift my head. I can’t look anywhere else – not when Gigi is standing only a few feet away and I don’t know whether I want to scream or just fucking hold her. I can’t have her around. Not when we’re this close.

Andy walks out the bathroom, his chin lowered. He sits on the edge of the sofa, tiredly swiping his hand down his face.

Mia presses on. “Gigi’s the one who—”

Andy draws his head back then, something suddenly snapping in him. It’s like a switch flips. His entire body jolts, eyes bulging as wide as saucers. He scrambles back against the cushions, knocking over the beer on the side table. He’s breathing fast, shallow gasps, sounding like he’s about to hyperventilate.

“Get away!” His voice cracks, high-pitched and desperate. “Get the fuck away from me!”

My head whips towards him and back again, noticing the way his eyes drill into Gigi. They’re wild and bloodshot as if he’s trapped in a nightmare. His breath comes in sharp gasps like he’s one step from passing out.

Perched on the arm of the chair, Poppy’s hand flies to her mouth as she whispers, “Oh my God.” Even Dan looks up from his laptop, his fingers freezing mid-type.

“See?” Mia leaps to her feet. “I told you he’s been acting strange. I’ve been trying to help him—”

“Not her!” Andy shakes his head violently. “He’s gonna know! He’s gonna fucking know!”

Sweat beads on his forehead, mixing with the dried blood from a cut above his eyebrow. For a second, I think he’s going to bolt for the door.

“Andy …” Poppy edges closer, her face pale. “What’s going on?”

I set the gun down and move forwards, kneeling beside him, my hand on his shoulder. “Whatever’s got you like this, it’s not getting in here. *Breathe.*”

Muttering incoherently under his breath, his fingers claw the sofa cushions. “He’s coming.”

“Who’s coming?” I press.

“Richard … and— And— Oh fuck. He’ll find out …”

Gigi stands there, frozen for a beat, her expression shifting from surprise to concern. She moves forwards slowly, crouching down on Andy’s other side, leaving just enough distance in case he swings at her.

“What did they do to you?” she asks, an undercurrent of worry in her voice. “You can talk to me.”

He raises his head. His good eye fixes on Gigi, tears welling up and spilling over.

She nods encouragingly.

Andy clears his throat. His voice sounds like it’s been dragged over gravel. “He’s after you and Harry.”

The room goes dead silent as if all the air’s been sucked out. Gigi and I exchange a silent look.

“Kept asking if you were together, whether Harry’s fucking you, if you have any contact with him. It started when you joined the Circle – b-but I didn’t tell them anything. I swear!”

“What did they do to you?” I ask.

He’s trembling so bad the sofa shakes under him, his fingers digging into the fabric as if it’s the only thing anchoring him.

“They t-tied me up. Beat me. Broke my ribs.” He claws for breath with each confession. “Forced me to overdose a-again and *again*. Then he’d make me withdraw. I didn’t say *anything*, but he didn’t care.”

Gigi’s face pales, staring at Andy like she’s piecing it all together.

“He said he’d kill me if I didn’t spill. I-I just … I wanted—”

Cries pour from his throat, rocking his body. Gigi’s turns to me with teary eyes, pleading.

“I’m not letting Richard get to you again. You stay here as long as you need. No one knows about this place other than us.”

His red-rimmed eyes meet mine.

“You have my *word*.”

He stares at me for nearly a minute before he nods, his body sagging with a mixture of relief and exhaustion.

Poppy reaches out to squeeze Andy’s hand. “We’re all in this together now.”

“No one’s laying a finger on you,” I promise.

Mia suggests, “Maybe you should lie down?”

She's the first to his side, softening her grip on his arm. "Get some rest. We'll handle the rest out here."

I rise to my feet, helping guide Andy up with steady hands. Despite everything, he still trembles at my touch. Mia leads him down the hall where the bedroom awaits. His body sags with each step.

The room falls into a silence thick with rage. My fists clench so hard they turn numb, a fire building in my chest. I want to rip Richard apart, feel his blood on my hands— No. I *will* rip Richard apart, slowly, tortuously, so he feels every inch of abuse.

I growl under my breath, "I'm gonna fucking kill him."

If he even thinks about laying a hand on anyone else, I'll fucking *rampage*.

This ends now.

Gigi presses her palms to her face, taking a much-needed moment of relief, then retracts her hands as if thinking better of it.

Our eyes meet.

She looks ... different. I look at her hand, the ring specifically, and how it swivels on her finger with the slightest movement. Christ, how much weight has she lost? Or was Jamie incapable of choosing a ring that fit her well?

Both thoughts make me even more murderous than I was a moment ago.

I should yell. I should demand the truth and drag it out of her piece by piece.

Mia appears back in the hallway, her eyes glassed over. She storms towards the kitchen counter, slamming her hands against it. Her voice is lethal. "How do we get rid of this prick Richard?"

She's right. For Andy's sake, and for all the sadistic things Richard is capable of, we *need* this to work out.

"What are we going to do when Dan cracks the encryption?" Poppy asks. "Does anyone know what we're expecting? Names? Images? Recordings?"

"It could be anything," Gigi says. "But it's got to be pretty bad for Richard to send us on a heist to retrieve it."

I blink. "Wait."

The hard drive from Paolo Ricci's heist – the one where I took a bullet. *Are you fucking kidding me right now?* That's *what this is all about*? I look to Dan's laptop to be sure, and lo and behold, the rectangular black object stares back at me.

“You went to Mia?” I ask. “I could’ve helped.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but you should have told me,” I scoff, oblivious to how bitter I sound when the anger is so intense. “But of course, you’re engaged to the enemy. It makes a lot of sense.”

Her nostrils flare. “I want Richard gone. That hasn’t changed.”

“That’s not a proper answer.”

“It’s the one I’m giving you.”

She’s still impossible. Still herself.

“Rah,” Dan mutters.

We turn to him slowly. He lifts his head momentarily but then returns to the computer screen.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Mia says, “but can we go back to you saying that Richard is your *father*? ”

Gigi sighs as if she doesn’t want to revisit the topic. But, fortunately for Mia, we’ve got plenty of time. The sweat on Dan’s brow is still building.

I lean back into the sofa, picking up parts of the conversation – Jack’s involvement with Richard, Maria signing her life away. She must be nearing the part now where I—

Mia glares at me, narrowing her eyes.

*Ah, there it is.*

Though Gigi doesn’t stop there. The mention of Greg turns Mia’s glare sympathetic. I turn my head away, and just like that, the room shifts.

We get back to business, Dan’s fingers flying across the keyboard. We watch in uneasy silence, the air still thick with suspense.

“Almost there,” he mutters.

Mia stands to the side of Dan, arms crossed, her eyes not straying from the screen. Poppy steps to his other side, and Gigi remains seated, head ducked down, hands clasped together.

Dan hammers in a final sequence, and the laptop beeps sharply. He leans back, stretching his arms above his head.

Mia and Poppy’s expressions morph simultaneously, their brows drawn tight.

“What the fuck is that?” Poppy asks. “Are those coordinates?”

Dan sighs irritably, clicking a few buttons. “Nothing Google Maps can’t handle.”

The screen blares brightly as he pastes them in.

That dreaded silence comes back with a vengeance, then Poppy gawks.  
“Paris?”

Mia insists, “You must have it wrong.”

“Wrong?” He scoffs, offended. “I can assure you it’s not wrong.”

I shake my head. “Richard has no ties to Paris.”

“Could he be expanding—? Oh!” Mia perks up. “Maybe he’s got a soft spot for croissants. That’s where you could have got it from.”

Gigi glares at her, saying nothing.

The room erupts in a chaotic mess of voices, everyone talking over each other, throwing out theories. I’m trying to wrap my head around it, my mind racing through everything I know about Richard. It doesn’t click.

Gigi’s face is a mask of confusion. Then I catch her expression shift, like she’s pieced something together. Out of nowhere, it hits like a flash of memory so vivid it knocks the air from her lungs.

“What is it?” I ask.

She swallows. “Nothing.”

Mia’s voice softens gently. “Wait … That’s where your mum …”

When Gigi feels the weight of the room staring at her, she sighs. “My mum went all the time – it was her thing. She’d always say there’s no better time than spring in Paris. She’d say it *a lot*, actually.”

Mia gestures towards me. “Like when this bastard broke in.”

I nod dismissively. “Cheers.”

Gigi ignores us both. “Maybe I should go handle it myself. What if she was trying to tell me something? Maybe it’s a sign.”

It’s a possibility, for sure. But going all that way in the hope of spotting a *sign*? I doubt it. I don’t dare crush her spirits.

“I could go with you,” Poppy pipes up. “You need to have someone there with you. Richard won’t be happy about you going alone, and he thinks I’m still on his side.”

Gigi nods.

“I’m going,” I say without thinking.

She freezes for a beat, her expression shifting from surprise to fear.

“Wait – this could be a good idea,” Mia says. Finally, we agree on something. “He brings the muscle.”

I smirk. “She’s not wrong.”

Gigi opens her mouth, thinks better of it, and shuts it.

“There is one pretty major problem with your plan ...” Poppy drawls. “And it starts with the person who put that ring on her finger.”

“Who – Jamie?” I say his name dismissively despite how much it makes me want to rinse my mouth out with *Dettol*. “He shouldn’t be concerned.”

Poppy raises her brow sceptically. “Really?”

“I feel nothing towards him,” I confess. “Nothing other than a deep, bone-carving hatred.”

Dan snorts under his breath.

“You, Poppy, and Gigi will go,” Mia says. “It’s currently April, and if we’re relying on this spring theory, there’s no reason you can’t go ... well ... now.”

As the conversation buzzes round us, I sweep my eyes over the room. Poppy’s demanding more time to conduct a plan. Mia’s saying, for Andy’s sake, we need to go soon. Dan says nothing – his work here is done. And Gigi ... her attention is elsewhere, as if her mind has drifted to a memory, perhaps one of her mum, the confusion about Paris deepening into something personal.

Was Maria keeping secrets from her daughter?

Her chin lifts just a fraction, her gaze intense but silent. Paris will be the first time in a long time we’ve been in close proximity.

I tilt my head, trying to read through her fruitless attempt at trying to remain calm. Then I order, “Everybody out.”

The room hesitates.

“I’m sorry if you all thought that was a question.”

Mia leaves first, saying she needs to get supplies for Andy. Dan follows, muttering about how he isn’t paid enough for this. Poppy doesn’t look back, just nods at Gigi on her way out.

Gigi doesn’t watch them leave. Doesn’t look at me either. She stays in her seat, perfectly still.

And just like that, it’s just the two of us.

After a minute, she asks, “Why are you coming?”

“Maybe I always suspected something.”

“You suspected something?” She blinks at me. “Yet you never said anything.”

“Communication isn’t our strong suit. Wouldn’t you agree, princess?”

She shakes her head. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?” I run my tongue along the inside of my cheek. “You used to beg me to call you worse.”

She laughs bitterly. “You’re delusional if you think this trip changes anything.”

I fucking *love* how I can still rile her up so easily. And I’m going to keep doing it. There’s a weakness there for me, even after all this time.

She rises to her feet, stepping forwards with a confidence I know she doesn’t have, as if she thinks she’s laying down the rules. Cute.

“When we get there, we work together. No sabotage.” She lifts her chin defiantly. “And no flirting.”

A grin slips. “Now that’s asking the impossible.”

She almost smiles. *Almost*. But it dies before it fully forms. “We work, we get the dirt on Richard,” she says, “and we get out.”

I narrow my eyes. “Fine.”

“*Fine*.”

“But ...”

She freezes as I brush a lock of hair from her cheek with the backs of my fingers, trailing them down along her jaw.

“It doesn’t mean I can’t long for you.”

And I realise, through all my fury that she chose another man, I still want her. Even if she’s the ruin waiting at the end of all this.

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## THIRTY-SEVEN

*Gigi*

I smooth my dress down over my knees, crossing one leg over the other. Richard's office has a heat that makes me uncomfortable. The lingering stench of tobacco swirls round my nose. My throat closes in a familiar way since I signed my life away in this room. It's like my body remembers the things my brain refuses to revisit.

Jamie stands by the fireplace, one hand curled round a crystal glass, the other in his pocket. He hides his fist, though it's been weeks since he laid a hand on me.

"Speak," Richard snaps.

"I need four days," I say. "In Paris."

The truth outweighs the risk of feeding them a lie. If he senses fault with my plan, this will have all been for nothing. I'm relying on the hope the city holds no weight against him.

*For now.*

My pulse quickens at his silence. His expression doesn't shift an inch.

Jamie raises an eyebrow. "What for?"

"It's for the dress fitting."

"It's a bit last-minute, isn't it? The wedding is fast approaching."

As they like to keep reminding me. A few months, I've been told, though they like to keep the specifics concealed.

Richard narrows his eyes. "We can fly the designer here."

“He won’t come,” I say quickly. “Not for anyone. He’s old and the only one I trust to make the final adjustments. He said he’d only do it in Paris. It’ll be easier if we fly out there.”

This is the trick. Talk like them. Make it about money and image. About control.

Jamie steps closer, liquid swirling between his fingers. “You said ‘we’ll fly’.”

“Poppy,” I clarify. “She’ll escort me there.”

The hairs on my arms stand on end. This must work. It *has* to.

Richard blinks. “When?”

“Whenever you’ll allow me to go.”

Both men exchange a silent look.

Jamie smiles, his need for control slipping through. “*Three* days. Two nights. I’ll arrange the time and the appointment. You’ll send photo evidence so I can ensure you’re not anywhere you’re not meant to be.”

*Fuck.*

I grind my teeth. It’ll be tight, but we’ll make it work.

I nod. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“How are you flying?”

“Poppy’s husband will loan us his jet.”

I have an answer to every question they may have. There’s no reason this shouldn’t work out, yet the breath still sweeps from my chest as Richard grunts, “*Fine.*”

“*Fine?*”

He presses his lips into a thin line. “I don’t see why not.”

I smile pleasantly at the sight of Jamie’s narrowed gaze.

Richard presses on. “Need I remind you of the consequences if you try anything?”

“No,” I whisper, dread filling my stomach. “I remember.”

It takes me five days of answering their persistent questions to finally be allowed access onto Leo’s jet. Richard not-so-kindly pulls me aside *again* before I leave, detailing each consequence in grave detail.

By the time the jet comes into view, I’m itching to get on it, though dread pools in my stomach. Security searched my bags twice, and Jamie’s driver has been following me and Poppy all the way to the hanger.

Harry is already seated when we step on, legs spread wide, arms draped lazily over the back of the white sofa like a man who owns the plane. His

shirtsleeves are pushed to his elbows, tattoos peeking out, and one boot rests over his opposite knee. It's criminal how good he looks when he's angry.

When he sees me, his expression doesn't soften. It's like he's spent the past five days reminding himself of every bad thing I've ever done.

"Jamie agreed to let you off your leash for the weekend then?"

*Bastard.*

Poppy follows behind me, giving my arm a squeeze before moving to the bar at the back of the jet, giving us space we both know we shouldn't have.

Outside, the staff are fuelling the jet, loading luggage and barking orders.

I put my bags in the overhead locker, settling in a seat across from Harry. His eyes are like a magnet to the ring. I turn my head away, pocketing my hand in my jacket. I debated leaving it somewhere Jamie wouldn't find it, but it's a necessary reminder of what I'll return to if this plan fails. A reminder of what I don't want and what I must resist.

Harry leans forwards, elbows on his knees. "You're very quiet, Mrs. Callahan." He drags out the title out as if it offends him.

I glare at him. "I'm not married."

"Yet."

I hate him for making this harder. For not knowing. For needing me to bleed in front of him.

"Can we just sit in silence and pretend you don't hate me for a couple of hours?"

He tilts his head. "I don't hate you."

"You should."

A crooked smile twists his mouth. "That would be easier, wouldn't it?"

I lean back, trying to hold myself together through sheer will. With a confidence I know I'm lacking, I stare straight at him. "We're not doing this here."

Harry lets out a dark laugh. "Doing what, Gigi?" He leans closer, his thigh brushing mine. It's the kind of accidental touch that should mean nothing, but it feels deliberate.

"You twitch when you're nervous," he says suddenly, like a casual observation.

"You keeping a file on me now?"

"Princess, I could write a goddamn book."

He says it like I'm his. Like I never belonged to anyone else.

Poppy gives him a pointed look as she returns to her seat, muttering something about “brooding men”. The jet’s engine rumbles. I pretend to adjust my seatbelt just to give my hands something to do, looking at him one last time before turning away.

Thirty minutes later, the plane is cutting through the clouds towards Paris. Poppy sits next to me, a laptop perched on her knees, reviewing satellite footage.

“Here.” She spins the laptop round. “I mapped the coordinates. It’s a building on the outskirts of the city in Porte de la Chapelle. No digital footprint. Satellite shows it hasn’t had power in five years, but something lit up as infrared as of three days ago.”

Harry leans in, elbows on his knees, gaze focused.

“We’re not due to land until 9 p.m., and the coordinates are a thirty-minute drive from the centre. I say we all rest up for the night.” She looks between the two of us.

I ask, “What time should we go in?”

“We need to be careful and check the place out first,” Harry says, a slight snap to his voice.

I can see it in his eyes as they flicker from me to Poppy. He still doesn’t trust me. Not completely. Not with me being promised to Jamie.

He thinks I’ll go through all this just to kill him in the end.

He doesn’t know I’m desperate for this to work – more than any of us. I can’t afford faults with this plan. The consequences are too brutal.

“We go early-morning, *together*. No risking a drive-by. No one plays hero,” Poppy says. “We go in armed, find out what Richard’s hiding, and get out.”

“You want us to go in blind,” Harry says.

Richard isn’t a man who leaves anything to chance. If these coordinates do lead to something, it won’t be accidental. But we all know, even if we’re struggling to admit it, the element of surprise could be the only thing working in our favour.

“What then?” I ask. “What do we do with what we find?”

“Easy,” Poppy says simply. “We use it as leverage and kill him.”

*Kill Richard.*

I let out a slow, steady breath. I want to believe we’ll make it that far.

We have to juggle everything in its path first. Fight whatever awaits us, sneak around undetected, get back home in one piece, and try to squeeze in

a wedding dress fitting somewhere in the middle.

I breathe, “And if we can’t?”

Poppy gives me a silent look, as if to say, “Don’t think like that.”

She’s right. There’s too much riding on this for it to all amount to nothing.

Harry leans into his chair. “Let’s get to the hotel and figure it out from there.”

“About that …” Poppy bites her lip.

Then she hits us with possibly the worst news yet.

“I booked four potential hotels. One’s probably bugged, one’s too expensive, one’s too obvious, and according to a few *Tripadvisor* reviews, the last one smells like wet dog and has zero surveillance.” Her expression shifts grimly. “Guess which one we’re staying in.”

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## THIRTY-EIGHT

*Gigi*

We're in a blacked-out town car. Poppy rides shotgun, scanning her phone. I'm in the back. And so is Harry. He lounges beside me, one hand resting over his knee, the other along the back of my seat, close enough to touch my neck.

We're staying in the city's backstreets, the part not everyone sees – concrete balconies, narrow alleyways, windows hidden behind iron bars. I look out the window, trying not to let my eyes stray to the man next to me.

The hopeful thought from the plane comes to me again.

*Kill Richard.*

I close my eyes and sigh.

Harry's gaze drags over me softly. He drops his arm, his fingers casually brushing my shoulder. I let them stay there, just for a second, giving in to the idea we'll make it out of this. That everything will play into our hands – no hiccups, access to information that'll not only equal Richard's demise but unbind me of my engagement while promising Harry's safety.

Who am I kidding?

I edge forwards, out of his touch, feeling his eyes running over me before finally turning away.

I'm still facing the window when the car pulls up outside the hotel. The wheel hits a pothole on the road before finally drawing to a stop, the night dark, but not enough to miss that Poppy opted for the worst of the hotels. Cracked windows. A front door that barely hangs on its hinges.

Harry steps out first, rounding the car and opening my door like a gentleman. But when I rise, he doesn't move.

"You stay behind me the second it goes sideways."

"I won't."

His voice lowers. "Then I'll carry you."

It not a threat but a promise. A desperate one. Because no matter how much he tries to hate me ... I know Harry would tear the world apart if he thought I was in danger.

He stares at me for a full ten seconds before stepping back.

My eyes follow him, noticing the way he walks in the front entrance, biceps straining from holding all three sets of our luggage. His shirt clings to him from the humidity, emphasising the muscles in his back and the width of his shoulders.

*Engaged*, I force myself to remember. No matter the reason why.

Harry walks ahead, scanning the corners like he's memorising the exit points. Though it seems the only way out is through the main entrance, unless we're looking to break through the iron bars and opt for a window.

The hotel is dated and under the radar. Faded green wallpaper. A suspicious crack in the ceiling. Furniture worn and chipped, stains on its fabric. No cameras. Barely someone manning the reception desk. Poppy steps closer, her fingers drumming against the wood.

The receptionist is slouched in a stool, headphones turned up so loud I can hear the heavy bass from a few metres away. He doesn't bother to look up, sliding three key cards over. *Three*. Thankfully, my luck didn't run short in that department.

"You break, you pay," he says in a French accent.

"Thanks," Poppy says suspiciously, but she doesn't question it.

She turns around, shrugging her shoulders. This is what we wanted after all – quiet and creepy enough to not draw attention.

As to be expected, the lift is broken, and we spend twenty minutes trailing up the stairs.

"The rooms better not smell like piss," Harry groans.

I pant with each step, gripping the railing. *Fucking hell*, I really should have taken some extra training sessions at the Circle headquarters. Through my nights at Pixies and the even longer nights at home, my limbs are embarrassingly weak nowadays.

After finally reaching our floor, we agree to make base in one room before checking out the others. The door groans as I force my whole weight against it. The anticipation leaves us in tense silence as we step inside.

Discoloured carpet. Thin mattress. Shredded headboard. A cracked, lopsided nightstand. And I can still smell something foul, but at least that urine smell has gone. The curtains don't fully close, and the window looks out over some darkened alley.

"Lovely," Poppy muses. She takes her bag from Harry, tossing her duffel onto the bed, claiming this room. Though I can't imagine our other rooms are much better. "I'm going to check the stairwell, make sure we're not bunking above a murder scene." She pauses at the door. "Don't kill each other."

I whip around, ready to hiss at her, but the door has already clicked shut.

Harry clears his throat, running his hand over his jaw. I lift my head to him, taking both key cards from the dresser.

"I'll check out our rooms," he says, "make sure they're clear."

I open my mouth to protest, but he's already gone.

I linger by the door for five minutes before sitting on the end of the rickety bed, crossing my legs. A television plays muted news in the corner, and I watch it dully, straining my ears for trouble.

A news bulletin flashes about the disappearance of a man. The broadcast is in French, but it seems he was plucked from the city centre. Police are actively searching for him, I think.

More minutes tick by, and I anxiously fidget with my hands. My engagement ring reflects the television light. I twist it slowly, my mind drifting.

A deep voice follows. "You're wearing it."

I jerk my head up, finding Harry leaning against the doorframe, arms folded, eyes following the movement. A quick glance over tells me he's free of injury, and something loosens in my chest.

"Should I not be?" I ask.

He pauses as if debating his next question before asking it. Then his eyes flick to the ring. "Can I see it?"

I hesitate, my first instinct being to hide it. The cold metal brushes against my knuckle, a warning of its story. Still, I slowly raise my hand between us. Harry pushes himself off the door, taking it before I can change my mind.

His fingers graze my knuckles as he pulls my hand towards him. They close over mine, his thumb brushing the edge of the ring. I tighten my fingers just slightly, hoping he doesn't notice how inaccurate the size is. He lifts my hand higher, closer towards his face.

"Wow," he says after a moment. "Lucky girl."

My throat feels thick. "Thank you."

His touch lingers where my knuckles ache from clenching, running over the back of my hand, gentle in a way I don't deserve. It's the softest touch I've felt in months.

"That's not the ring I thought you'd choose." His eyes lift to mine, the pull in his gaze drawing me back to the moment I first met him in my brother's room.

"Maybe you don't know me," I say, far breathier than I intend to.

"Do you want me to prove otherwise?" He grins – a hint of mischief that forces my breath short. "Though your fiancé might not be very happy about it."

I don't realise I'm biting my lip until Harry's eyes drop to the movement, his fingers flexing on my hand as if he's tempted to pull it out from my teeth.

Poppy walks in. "Coast is clear— *Oh my God!*"

I jerk away from Harry as if sparked by a current. *Fuck.*

I bring my hands straight to my face, hiding my flushed cheeks. All I hear is Poppy dry-retching, followed by Harry's low chuckle. I peek between my fingertips, seeing the disproving shake of her head.

"I'm so thankful we're all in separate rooms," she says. "Work now, then you can shag later. *Not* in this room."

Harry nods approvingly. "Deal."



The takeout boxes from the local pizzeria sit on the bedside table. We've been dwelling over our plan all evening. We'll approach early-morning, after we've strapped ourselves with weapons.

Harry brought enough knives, pistols, and ammo to stock a gun shop. It's a surprise they allowed him to bring it onto the jet, but security didn't have

an issue with it. I can't say the same for Leo.

His and Poppy's marriage is ... strange. He's called her thirty times since we took off. *Thirty*. She side-eyed each call, as disinterested as the last. Finally, she flipped the phone face down and let it ring. Rather than switching it off, it seems like she's revelling in making him squirm.

She sits in the corner now with her laptop, headphones in, deep-diving into the surveillance footage, her face alight with the soft glow of the screen. Behind her, the hum of city nightlife filters through the window – sirens, heels on pavement, the distant murmur of jazz from a street bar a few blocks away. There's a calmness in the air, almost peaceful. Is this why Mum enjoyed it here?

I'd been looking for a sign since the moment we landed ... but nothing. Paris could have been the only time she escaped William, if his lack of conversation was anything to go by. Was she trying to tell me something this whole time?

Movement to my left makes me pause. I almost laugh. Harry is pouring cocktails in chipped glasses like we're on holiday.

I look up from where I'm sitting on the floor, my back against the foot of the bed. He steps nearer, lowering to the floor beside me, the maneuverer seemingly difficult with the sheer size of him. He settles, sliding the glass towards me.

"To Paris," he says. He braces one arm over his knee, grazing mine when he shifts. A casual move, but not accidental.

I take a sip from the glass. "Since when do you toast?"

He shrugs. "Since I started babysitting engaged women pretending not to be in love with me."

The drink sputters from my mouth so viciously I start to cough. The glass rattles as I place it down, Harry's hand immediately on my back, soothing the outburst. A mischievous grin masks his sympathy.

"You all right?" Poppy barks, unnecessarily loud, headphones still pressed in her ears.

I gesture my thumb up to her. She nods barely, returning to her screen.

"Which was worse?" Harry asks. "What I said, or the proportion of vodka?"

I wheeze. "Both."

He grins.

I roll my eyes, but the corners of my mouth betray me. *Prick*.

He reaches to his left, dragging a bottle between us. “Good thing I bought this.”

“Cheap red wine?”

“Not just any cheap red wine.” He pops the cork easily, and I definitely don’t notice how his muscles tighten while he does it. “*French* cheap red wine. The recipe to getting drunk quicker.”

I debate it for a moment. I hardly trust myself when I’m sober, let alone intoxicated. But then Jamie never lets me—

His name has me clutching the neck of the bottle, chugging it down so quickly Harry laughs. “Whoa there, princess.”

I wipe my mouth with my wrist, handing it back to him. He glances at me sideways, that maddening grin softening just enough to make me forget myself.

“You look like you could use some more.” He hands me the bottle again, but instead of letting go, he holds it as I drink. He tips it higher. I struggle to chase it, a red stream dribbling down the corner of my mouth, running in a slow line down my chin and pooling at the hollow of my throat.

“Oops,” he mumbles drunkenly. The prick is as sober as they come. This was no accident. “I should clean that up.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I’ll be gentle,” he says, but the look in his eyes promises the opposite.

“Why are you like this?” I murmur.

The side of his lips tilts up. “Because it works on you.”

His hand touches my jaw, tilting my face up towards him. The pad of his thumb grazes the spill. He brings it to his mouth, pressing it between his lips. Then he draws back – not completely, just enough for me to gather the sense that this is *wrong*.

“I’m engaged,” I say, more to myself than to him.

“And I’m devastated …” His voice trails off as he leans in.

A splint of fear sends me still. The square-necked T-shirt I’m wearing is enough to cover the poker burn I desperately plastered with concealer, but the closer he gets, the stronger my heart races.

Before I can protest, his thumb is on my chin, angling my head up. And then his mouth is there, licking from the edge of my jaw to the curve of my throat. The tip of his tongue chases the wine, lips tracing my skin, following the path like it’s sacred.

My heart kicks into my ribs as he drags his mouth lower down my neck, where the spill disappears beneath the neckline. And then he kisses me there. My head tilts back against the bed, lips parted, heart in freefall.

His hand slides under the hem of my top, splaying over my ribs.

“Harr—”

“Say my name,” he murmurs against my skin. “I swear to God, Gigi ...”

His mouth trails upward, every breath louder now. Harry’s palm finds my waist, holding me still, hovering just above where the wine was.

My hands move on their own, one closing round his knee and the other braced against the carpet for balance that doesn’t come. I want to push him away and pull him closer at the same time.

I really don’t think the engagement matters to him at all ... because Harry lifts his gaze, staring at my mouth with such intensity I remember what it felt like when he used to kiss me.

For one fleeting moment, why doesn’t the idea seem so terrible? And wasn’t there a reason I wasn’t supposed to be considering this?

“I’m not going to kiss you,” he whispers. “Not while you’re still pretending that ring means something.”

I think I’ve forgotten how to breathe. I’m forced to tilt my head back into the foot of the mattress to meet his eye, and it’s a mistake. Because there’s a promise in it of things I won’t come back from.

“I’m not pretending.”

“Of course you’re not.”

My whole body is screaming for him, greedy and desperate. My hand twitches at my side like it remembers what his skin feels like. And his mouth ... God, his mouth is *right there*.

“If the ring means something ...” His voice is a breath against my neck. “Then why have you just spread your legs for me, princess?”

I freeze, and Harry grins slow, drawing back. Sure enough, my thighs are parted, his hand splayed against the floor mere inches away from where my traitorous body was inviting him closer.

His voice drops to a low growl. “I could feel the heat of your pussy without even touching you.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Poppy groans from the corner.

My face flushes red.

Harry pulls back slowly, his eyes flicking towards Poppy.

“I’m literally *ten feet away*.” She glares at us from behind her screen. “I can see you in the reflection of the window.”

Harry lifts both his hands in mock surrender. “We’re just cleaning up a spill.”

Poppy closes the laptop lid with a huff. “I’ll leave you guys to it. I’m going to sleep.”

My heart stops. Then stutters. Then starts again, faster.

*Leave us to it?*

Oh no. No. No. No. I do not trust myself alone with this man.

I scramble to my feet, almost tripping over myself. Harry leans back on his elbows, dragging a hand through his hair.

“I’m coming with you,” I say quickly.

Poppy shrugs, unbothered, and I duck sheepishly, leaving the room. Though a final look over my shoulder catches the end of Harry’s gaze trailing over my body as I exit.

Ten minutes later, I’m showering with the lights off, letting the water scald my skin, trying to wash off the memory of Harry’s touch, his voice still echoing.

*“I could feel the heat of your pussy without even touching you.”*

He’s across the hall, only a few feet and a couple of walls between us. And I feel him like gravity. Every step I take in the room, every second I pace, is haunted by the pull of him. I slip into the hotel robe, tie it tight, then pace some more. Like I’m waiting for something. A knock, maybe.

Then it happens. Once, strong.

I’m going to put an end to this right now and lay down the rules.

I charge for the door, throwing it open.

I halt.

He’s there, leaning against the doorframe in nothing but dark jogging bottoms that hang low on his waist, drawing my attention to the trail of dark hair that goes lower, *lower*—

I snap my head up. A smile tilts his lips.

His hair is damp. Chest bare. Tattoos half-lit by the hallway sconces. His eyes drag over me, over the robe, over my bare legs, the way I’m holding the door like it’s the only thing keeping me from falling.

“Bedroom light’s still on, princess. That bed not soft enough without me in it?”

He so close I have to tilt my chin to hold his gaze. He leans in, closer than he should. I smell all of him – the leather, the mint. Harry could kiss me right now. I'd let him. I'd let him ruin me.

I look away. My pulse is a traitor.

He reaches out. His knuckles graze my jaw, lingering there.

“You’re marrying someone else,” he says, tilting my face back. “You let him put a ring on you, you let him touch you, yet you still look at me like you want me to ruin you. Admit it,” he says, like he already knows the answer.

“You’re insufferable.”

“And yet ...” His hand follows the curve of my waist. “You haven’t moved.”

I don’t. Because I can’t. Because I want to climb him like a tree.

“Touch me again,” I breathe, “and I’ll shoot you before we land back in London.”

He laughs – *really* laughs – and it’s devastating, full of mischief and memory.

“You sound so sweet when you lie,” he murmurs, leaning in. “Almost makes me want to let you.”

His fingers trail inwards from my hip, toying with the tie of the dressing gown. He doesn’t push. Doesn’t need to. He looks at me with that intoxicating confidence, as if he still owns me.

“You miss me.” He leans even closer, his breath at my ear. “Tell me how much.”

“No.”

He chuckles again, then his lips brush just beneath my jaw. Not a kiss, but the ghost of one.

“You’ll tell me eventually,” he says. “When you’re under me again and you’re too wrecked to pretend he even mattered.”

# THIRTY-NINE

*Gigi*

I wake to a pounding on my hotel-room door. Memories of last night rush in quickly. I roll over, groaning into the pillow. The knocking persists, a fist bashing with intent.

“All right, all right.”

I climb out of bed, treading to the door in my bare feet, and pull it open. Poppy’s standing there, arms crossed, one shameful brow raised at me.

*Fuck.* “What time is it?”

“Seven.”

We’re supposed to be leaving in thirty minutes.

Poppy’s expression tilts into slight concern, and I’d bet my life she’s thinking about last night. She glances towards the hallway, dropping her voice low. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Nothing happened,” I say, as if that makes it any better.

We don’t talk about what any of this will mean when we get home – *if* we get home.

Poppy nods suspiciously, as if she doesn’t believe me, leaving me to shower and change. Between landing in Paris and yesterday, I’ve hardly given much thought as to *why* we’re here. There’s so much riding on today, and here I am, missing alarms and getting distracted by pretty men with tattoos.

There’s no fancy dress code, just a dark T-shirt and cargo trousers, not too dissimilar to what we’d wear on a heist at the Circle. I run my fingers

through my tangled hair and hesitate in the hallway outside Harry's room. His door is ajar, and I take a deep breath before stepping inside.

*No distractions, I tell myself. Get in, get out.*

Harry is across the room, bent over the duffel bag on the bed, his back to me. He peels off his jacket, revealing a black cotton T-shirt stretching over his frame. I catch the glint of steel as he opens the bag, pulling out a series of leather holsters and matte-black weapons. Knives, mostly. A pack of handguns.

He glances over his shoulder. "Come here," he says.

Gone is the flirty behaviour of last night, the reality of what we're about to face adding a chill to the room that wasn't there yesterday. I approach slowly, stopping just behind him.

He turns to me and just ... looks. Down my arms, over my collarbones, across the slight rise and fall of my chest. "Protection," he says simply.

I reach for the smallest of the blades, tracing its edge with my fingertip.

He snatches it back before I can nick myself. "Arms up."

I raise them, and his hands are on me, wrapping a leather sheath round my bicep.

"How many are we expected to face?" I ask.

He tightens the strap just enough to make me gasp. "None, if we're lucky."

He tugs, checking it's secure, then slides a blade into place with a soft click. His fingers brush my wrist as he lifts my arm, turning it palm-up, examining the space just above my elbow.

"Blade here," he says quietly. "Close to the artery. Easy reach."

I nod. His hands slide down my waist next, wrapping the leather band snugly round my hips. He doesn't look up from where he anchors the belt.

"You want me to fetch your Glock?"

"I never knew what happened to it," I say. "Richard confiscated it a long time ago."

Our eyes meet, and I suddenly realise how close he is. Close enough that I'm able to see the flecks of colour in his green eyes. I force a swallow, returning to the memory of the weapon with the engraved initials I once despised.

"I miss it," I say.

He doesn't ask me to clarify which part. There's a breath of silence as he clears his throat. Then he kneels. He fucking *kneels*. His broad shoulders fill

my vision, his eyes fixed on the inside of my thigh.

“I need access here,” he says.

“I bet you do.”

Something hungry flashes across his face, but his expression falls fast. His hands are on my leg, sliding the garter strap up, just high enough that I can feel the weight. His palm curls round the inside of my thigh, spreading it slightly from the other. My breath hitches. He fastens the clip, sliding a second blade in, this one longer.

He looks up. It’s obscene how it feels – him on his knees, the knife hot against my skin, his hands still lingering like he’s forgotten what he was doing.

“What about your weapons?”

He shrugs, the cocky fucking idiot.

I stumble over my words. “And if you get shot?”

“I won’t.” He raises a bulletproof vest off the floor. “As long as you’re protected, nothing else matters.”

I lower to the carpet, kneeling across from him, my face level with his chest. I reach up and slide my hand round his wrist, holding it there.

“Don’t do that,” I whisper. “Don’t plan on dying for me.”

“Then don’t give me a reason to.”

He gestures to the vest held between his fingertips. I release his hand as he pulls it over my head. Harry pulls out my hair from underneath it, tightening the straps at the sides.

“I was always going to wear one,” he says. “Just wanted to make sure I still mattered in your world.”

The relief falls from my chest like a dead weight. “I hate you.”

His voice turns soft. “No, you don’t.”



The coordinates dump us at an abandoned home on the city’s edge. The building looms at the end of a gravel road, ivy clinging to what’s left of its walls. Shattered windows, half-boarded with rotted wood, graffiti sprawled across its exterior.

We pause outside, the rain hammering down.

I blink through the downpour, watching Poppy pull out her phone, double-checking the coordinates against the faded sign above the door. Her heavy exhale tells us we're at the right place.

There's so much riding on this, but I feel my hope dwindling fast already.

The memories flood back with each second we wait, and suddenly, I'm back there, at the Circle headquarters, Jamie's hands round my throat, squeezing until I see black spots. Pain in my jaw as I clench it too tightly. In my ribs, as I forget how to breathe. And Andy. What happens to him if we don't find what we're looking for? He's still secluded in Harry's flat, also desperate for their demise. If he steps back into the Circle headquarters after seeking refuge, or if Richard finds him, his punishment will be fatal.

"This has to be it," Poppy mutters, her voice laced with desperate optimism.

Harry's shoulder brushes the side of my head, and for once, I'm thankful for the comfort he brings. I ache to take a step closer, but he pulls the gun from his jacket.

"Then let's go," he says.

I nod, pushing forwards, clinging to the fragile hope this lead will set us free. Kill Richard, break free from Jamie, and set Harry free from the confines of my decisions.

The door is an old, battered thing, but it still takes the force of Harry's shoulder to open it. The hinges screech in protest, drawing out a groan. The air slams into us, thick with the stench of mould. The back of my hand flies to my mouth to withhold a gag.

Dim light filters through the windows, casting shadows across the floor. I retrieve my phone from my pocket, turning on the flashlight. The beam cuts through the darkness, lighting the floor littered with debris and shattered glass.

"There's no one here," I say into the silence.

No obvious miracle to take down Richard. Nothing other than years of dirt and rot. Poppy whispers curses, scanning the map on her phone again. Harry takes lead, gun raised.

"Fan out. We might still find something useful," he says. "Shout if you find anything or run into any trouble." He looks at me specifically.

I slip a dagger from one of the sheaths. The search turns into a frantic, desperate attempt. There are three floors, all separated by a wooden

staircase barely holding it together. Harry is on the top floor, Poppy and I taking the bottom two.

I push at a stack of crates in the corner, sending up a cloud of dust that makes us cough. Poppy rifles through a desk shoved against the far wall, pulling out yellowed documents that crumple at her touch – nothing but junk mail dated decades ago. She throws it aside, tearing through equipment. I hear Harry upstairs, flipping crates and hunting through drawers.

I rush between rooms, footsteps echoing as I alternate between different floors. Adrenaline masks the fear bottling through me.

I take a moment to catch my breath, finding Harry on the top floor. He kicks at a pile of debris, cursing under his breath.

“Anything?” I pant.

He turns to me over his shoulder, shaking his head. “Nothing.”

It’s abandoned, useless, a dead end.

The coordinates are a lie, a trap, or just some cruel misdirection from whoever sent them. Richard’s probably laughing from across the ocean, toasting to his victory.

“Gigi!” Poppy calls.

My pulse spikes. I’m suddenly gripping the banister, rushing down the stairs. She has to have found something. She *has* to. Each step creaks, threatening to break apart, as my boots slam against them.

I rush into the hallway, catching myself against the doorframe and sucking in a sharp breath. She spins around from where she’s leaning over a dining table, the linen tablecloth stained dark and worn at the edges.

I rush out, “What is it?”

Her face falls, and I draw my brows together.

“What did you—?” I cut off the question and force myself to say, “You didn’t find anything.”

Her silence is answer enough. There’s *nothing*, which means ...

I freeze, panic surging through me. Poppy’s face contorts with the same horror. Her usual fire dims as realisation dawns.

“Gigi ...”

I shake my head, tears springing to my eyes. “Don’t do this to me,” I whisper.

My skin feels tight and wrong, like it remembers every hand that touched it without kindness. I’ll go back to them, suffering more bruises at the hands

of another man. My heart quickens so fast I can't catch my breath. Poppy keeps glancing at me like I'm going to pass out.

The pain hits me like a train, ripping through my body without warning. My breaths turn shallow, each one a desperate gasp that doesn't fill my lungs. I feel every bit of hope slip through my fingers. My hands tremble, the dagger slipping from my fingertips, clattering to the floor.

Flashes assault me – Jamie's face twisted in anger, his fist connecting with my jaw; his foot slamming into my temple; the metallic tang of blood filling my mouth.

I can't breathe, drowning in the terror that's been bottled up for so long.

Harry appears on the staircase, glancing at me, his eyes searching, and for a split second, I want to tell him everything. The truth about how I still ache for him; how every night I dream of his touch instead of Jamie's violence.

Tears burn my eyes as I lean against a crumbling wall. Harry's there in an instant, dropping to a crouch beside me as I struggle to right my balance. Hands grip my face, gentle enough not to hurt but hard enough to make me look at him.

"Hey."

I shake my head.

"Hey." He presses firmer. "Look at me."

His fingers spread across my neck, his thumbs brushing my cheeks. I feel his confusion in the way his brow furrows, his eyes searching mine as if he's piecing together a puzzle with missing edges. Why am I falling apart when we've faced danger before?

He doesn't get it – not with the lies I've fed him.

He doesn't think twice, scooping me into his arms as if I weigh nothing and bringing me into his chest.

"We're leaving," he says. "Now."

An order.

I don't fight him. I can't. Because the realisation has finally settled in.

I'm marrying the wrong man, even though I'd go to war for the right one.

# FORTY

## *Harry*

It's past midnight and I'm wide awake, one arm behind my head, eyes pinned to the cracked ceiling like it might offer answers. The fan above me spins lazily, the blades groaning with each turn.

Gigi traipsed into her room in silence and hasn't left it since. I know because I've kept my ears strained, darting glances into the hall where her door remains closed. I'm half-tempted to knock it down, but Poppy said we should give her the space she needs.

We searched every floor, every hidden nook, every screwed-up piece of paper, but there was nothing. No answers. It was always a possibility, but Gigi experienced a loss that felt life-altering.

Is she still crying now? Is she sitting there cold and alone, suffering in silence?

I didn't know what to expect, but I thought we'd find *something* that'd help us finally be free of Richard. Is that what triggered her meltdown – knowing her father still lives?

I freeze mid-thought, a sound cutting through the walls.

Another one. Louder, sharper, panicked.

A scream.

I bolt upright in bed.

No words. Not at first.

Then Gigi's voice, strangled and raw. "PLEASE, NO!"

I'm out of bed before I can think. My gun rests on the nightstand, but I don't think logically enough to reach for it, or to consider the fact I'm only in boxers. I race to her room across the hall. I don't knock, shoving hard enough for the door to fly open and slam against the wall with a *whack*.

It's dark, the curtains pulled, but I see her – on the bed, curled into herself, one hand grabbing at her neck as if she can't breathe, the other flailing as if she's fighting something I can't see. Soaked tank top clinging to her chest, sweat dampening her collarbone.

“Jamie—!”

I try not to flinch at the sound of his name coming out of her mouth like that. Like she needs him now, even when I'm right here.

I place my hand on her shoulder. She jerks, eyes snapping open, wide and unfocused, like she doesn't recognise me. Her breathing is shallow, as if whatever was in her nightmare followed her out here.

Her voice is hoarse, her throat raw. “Harry?”

“You were screaming,” I say.

She sits up, throat working like she's trying to force something back down.

Then she lurches out of bed, legs unsteady, hand over her mouth. I don't even have time to speak before she's running. The bathroom door slams. The sound of retching follows.

The door isn't shut all the way. I hesitate for a second before following quietly behind her. She's on her knees, hunched over the toilet, a hand braced against the wall, spine arched. Her tank top clings to her, soaked through to clammy skin.

I kneel beside her without asking, lowering myself to the cold tile. I rest against the wall, tilt my head back, and wait.

“I'm fine,” she pants. It's a lie. “You don't have to—”

“I'm not leaving.”

She doesn't say anything, just stares at the wall, her hands trembling. I watch every movement, trying to read through the barrier she's erected round her. She flushes the toilet and leans against the wall opposite me.

“You're not pregnant, are you?”

She laughs, but it's more like a scoff. “No,” she finally says.

*Thank fuck for that.*

Though it doesn't seem appropriate to be celebrating small wins right now. She curls her fists into the folds of her fabric, avoiding my eye.

“If something was wrong, would you tell me?”

She says nothing, and my jaw pulses.

Here she is, vulnerable in a way she never lets herself be. A T-shirt and underwear, and me opposite her on the bathroom floor, in a pair of fucking boxers. But that wall barricading her emotions is still impenetrable.

She shifts her bare legs, drawing them up to her chest.

“I have nightmares too.”

She looks up. “You do?”

“I dream about losing you,” I say. “Almost every night.”

Her face falls, her focus drifting, as if she’s looking through me. As though life has been sucked out of her.

I clear my throat. “Can I run you a bath?”

Gigi’s eyes don’t stray from my face as I stand. She eventually blinks, as if only just returning to the present, and whispers, “Thank you.”

She rises to her feet, and I lean over the bath, putting in the plug and turning the taps. Her hip brushes against mine unintentionally as she braces herself over the sink, brushing her teeth and washing her mouth with *Listerine*. Somewhere between me fixing the temperature and her wiping herself over with a flannel, she disappears.

“Gigi?” My voice trails off.

I watch her return to the bedroom. She’s dressed in an oversized bed shirt now, climbing into bed and pulling the duvet round her, tucking it underneath her chin. She looks lost in the large mattress, projecting how small and fragile she’s become.

I ask softly, “Do you need anything?”

I see the shake of her head as she rests further into the safety of the cushions. My hands flex subconsciously to hold her. I adjust the taps again. When I turn back, there’s a slight shake to her shoulders.

I try again. “Gigi?”

Small cries are muffled by the sheets. I walk closer, sitting on the edge of the bed. The mattress sinks, and her body tumbles into me.

She gasps between broken breaths, “There … there was n-nothing.” She leans into my chest. Cries tumble out of her, and I wrap my arms round her in ways I never thought she’d allow me to again. “I-I really thought …” Tears flood her cheeks, and she gasps, “I thought w-we’d find something.”

“I know, baby.” My lips brush her temple. “I thought so too.”

“How—?” She hiccups, struggling to compose herself. “How can there be *nothing*?”

“I don’t know,” I mumble into her hair, then I brush it back from her face. Tears blur her vision as I whisper, “But as long as I’m here, no one will hurt you.”

My thumb grazes her cheek, and she leans into my touch, eyes fluttering closed.

We sit like this for ten minutes, maybe more – long enough for her cries to subside and for her to realise she’s not alone. I shift beside her, and her fingers grip my forearm.

“Stay,” she whispers. “Please.” She reaches for my hand. I let her pull me closer, enough for our fingers to intertwine, knuckles pressing. I trace slow circles on her wrist with my thumb, her fingers tightening round mine.

The sheets are a tangled mess, our legs intertwined in a way that feels both comforting and dangerously intimate. I let my hand glide down her arm. Her breath hitches when my fingers graze her hip.

My eyes flick up. I pause, waiting for her to pull away. Instead she tilts her head up, her eyes meeting mine in the darkness, wide and vulnerable.

I should pull away. *She* should pull away.

She shifts again, and suddenly, she’s closer, the faintest brush of her hair against my cheek. I press my palm into the dip in her waist, splaying my fingers over her back. The air between us crackles. Her hands push weakly at my chest – not enough to stop me, but enough to show me she’s fighting it.

My heart hammers loud enough to drown out the world outside the room, and the word arrives as a desperate whisper. “Why?”

“Because you’ve lost me.”

“No, I haven’t.” I lean in, hesitating a breath away. “I just haven’t taken you back yet.”

Her lips part just a little, and she moans against my mouth – a soft, needy sound. Then she slams her mouth against mine.

We kiss, deep and urgent, full of everything we’ve been denying. Her hands find the back of my neck, yanking me closer, soft sighs escaping her throat that make my blood rush south. My tongue slips past her lips, pulling her impossibly close, as if I can erase all the walls between us.

I roll her onto her back, my body hovering over hers, trailing demanding kisses down her neck. She arches her back into me, grinding her crotch

against my cock. I mutter a, “*Fuck*,” into her olive skin, nipping her with my teeth.

I hated her for leaving – more than when she lost her sanity – and that fact hasn’t changed. I hate Gigi, but I *long* for her simultaneously. Right now, I want to worship her and punish her at the same time.

I should get out of this bed. But instead my hand wanders between her legs, finding her pussy bare. The realisation has my cock straining sore against my boxers. My teeth graze her chin as she tilts her head back into the pillow.

She’s *mine*, even if the whole fucking world thinks otherwise.

Her breath hitches, a mix of resistance and curiosity, legs parting a fraction more. She tries to speak, but the words evaporate the moment I brush her clit. Her body betrays her, a sharp intake of breath turning into a needy moan.

“I can feel your arousal all the way down your legs,” I whisper against her ear. “You still think I’ve lost you, baby?”

I shift, kissing down her body, my tongue tracing lazy circles over her stomach where her shirt has ridden up. I settle between her thighs as her wet cunt brushes my lips, and I let out a low groan.

She breathes, “Wait—”

*Fuck that.*

I run my tongue along her slit. Her body stiffens for a heartbeat, then she melts into the mattress, her legs parting to full capacity, her body overriding her mind. Her hands fly into my hair, pulling me closer. My cock pulses at her submission, and I grind my hips deep into the bed.

She’s so tight, so responsive, her juices coating my tongue. I growl into her, my eyes near rolling into the back of my head, even the lightest pressure making her whimper. I circle her clit with the tip of my tongue, feeling it swell under my attention, and her protests dissipate completely.

“*Oh … oh God*,” she moans, her voice breaking.

I slide a finger into her, her wetness making it easy to move. I pump into her, sucking her clit to draw out those delicious whimpers. She grinds against my face, her thighs quivering on either side of my head, pulling so hard at my hair it’s borderline painful.

I work her harder, adding a second finger to stretch her.

“That’s it, baby,” I murmur against her, voice rough.

Her walls grip me even tighter as I fuck her with my hand and my mouth. I peer up from her thighs, watching as something washes over her. Something hypnotic. As though it's been *months* since she's experienced pleasure with this kind of intent.

Oh, fuck no.

With a swift motion, I flip her over, guiding her so she's straddling my face, knees either side of my head. She gasps in surprise, her hands braced against the headboard, dark hair falling in messy waves round her. She hovers over me, her pussy just inches from my mouth.

"Use me. Ride my face." I look up at her through the dim light. "I won't touch you, but *fuck*, I want to."

I pat the sides of the mattress to show her I'll stay put despite every fibre of me screaming to reach up and pull her down. She hovers above me, her pussy glistening with arousal. My cock is leaking pre-cum, and I fight the urge to shift my hips with the need for friction.

"Ride me. Did I tell you to sit still?" My eyes darken. "No. I told you to ride my fucking tongue."

I see the shift in her expression, her breath quickening. Slowly, Gigi lowers herself onto me. I let out a growl of approval as her weight presses down. I flatten my tongue, letting her grind against it, hands firmly at my sides.

She sets the pace, and I feel the slight bulge of her clit rubbing against me with each grind. Her eyes are closed, but she's getting bolder, her movements more insistent.

My mind a mess, I yearn to grab her hips, flip her over, and bury myself inside her, mark her as mine. I want to feel her skin under my palms; to erase every trace of other men from her body.

I dig my fingers into the mattress, fighting the temptation.

She's breathing heavier now, moans slipping out that make my cock throb, gripping the headboard so tight her knuckles are white.

"I want to grab you and pull you down harder." The admission slips out. "You're *killing* me, Gigi. Please."

She opens her eyes, her gaze meeting mine as she dips her chin. She takes her palm, guiding my hands to her hips, one at a time. My fingers sink into her flesh as I pull her against my mouth.

"Like this?" I rasp, my voice muffled.

She nods.

I devour her now, sucking and licking with abandon, my tongue delving deep inside her before flicking back to her clit. She gasps, her head thrown back, maintaining that eye contact. She's close – I feel it in the way her thighs quiver and her moans turn into desperate cries.

I feel her getter wetter, her thighs squeezing round my head as she chases that release, pulling her closer to the edge with every second our stare holds.

Her body trembles, her clit pulsing against my tongue. My cock is rock-hard now, straining for attention and super fucking sore, but this is about Gigi. About making her remember what it's like to be truly desired.

"I'm— I'm going to—" she stammers, but she doesn't finish the sentence.

She cries out, her body shuddering as the orgasm rips through her. I keep my tongue on her, drawing it out, the sudden rush of wetness flooding me.

Body quivering with aftershocks, Gigi takes a minute to pull herself together. Hands still on her hips, I guide her down until her knees are bracketing my waist, pushing my forehead against hers. Her eyes lift to mine, and the crushing reality cuts my breath short.

*What are we doing?*

She's engaged. *Engaged*. And I'm here, exploiting her in a moment of weakness, toying with my fucked-up emotions.

How will I cope when we return to London – when she walks into the arms of her *fiancé*, who's awaiting her at home?

Is he longing for her return as desperately as I am?

My hand slips from her cheek.

She grasps my wrist mid-air. "Don't leave." Her eyes flick back to mine, shimmering with unshed tears. "Stay."

And despite myself, I do.

# FORTY-ONE

*Gigi*

One of Harry's arms is draped round my waist, the other tucked under the pillow beneath my head. He's the first thing I feel, warm, solid, and pressed against my back. His hand shifts lazily against my stomach, and my body lights up like it did last night – before the weight of what I'd done crashed into me. Before Jamie's name came storming through the fog.

My stomach drops.

*Jamie.*

Shit.

I sit up fast, my heart already racing. The sudden movement stirs Harry. He shifts behind me, a low groan in his throat as he buries his face in the pillow. I throw the covers back and move slowly, lifting his arm from my waist, careful not to wake him.

I glance over my shoulder. He's still half-asleep, his hair a mess, lashes dark against his cheekbones, the sheet barely clinging to his hips. He looks soft in a way no one else gets to see, making something sharpen in my chest.

Because today, of all days, Jamie is expecting something from me.

Because today is wedding dress fitting day.

I choke on a bitter laugh. What a sadistic, perfectly twisted life I've built.

My tank top is crumpled near the chair, and my phone is buzzing beside the engagement ring with a reminder I hope I'm imagining.

**10:00 a.m. – *Boutique Appointment, Paris***

There are no missed calls, no texts, and strangely, that panics me further. It's as though Jamie suspected I'd mess up and he doesn't want to be the one to remind me.

I dress quickly, pulling my hair into a rough knot. Before I leave, I glance back. Harry's lying on his stomach now, one arm thrown across the empty space I left behind. I bundle the clothes into my arms and slip out of the room as quietly as I can. The lights in the hallway make me wince as I traipse down to Poppy's room and knock twice.

She opens the door half-awake, in plaid pyjamas – a strange sight, since she's always so put together. It looks like she's had a rough night too.

"I need you," I say. "Now."

"Woke up in his bed, or just now leaving it?"

"He woke up in mine." I shake my head. *Not the point.* "I need you to come with me."

She tiredly rubs her eyes. "Where?"

"To a bridal shop."

Poppy gawks at me. "You're serious."

I nod madly, then she curses under her breath, suddenly wide awake. "Tell Jamie you're hungover."

"He knows I'm not." I shift on my feet and say softly, "I need you to come with me."

"Of course I'm coming." She pauses, flashing her gaze to the closed door. "And Harry?"

A door creaks open behind us.

I wince, bracing myself, before finding the confidence to turn round.

Harry's standing in the doorway of my room, one arm braced against the frame, sleep still clinging to him. His hair's tousled from the pillow, and he's wearing nothing but his boxers, but his eyes are sharper than they should be for someone who just woke up.

"You're not serious," he says to me, then to Poppy. "She's not seriously going to try on a wedding dress this morning."

"She doesn't have a choice," Poppy mutters.

"Sure, she does." Harry laughs once. "We all make choices. Like sneaking out of someone's bed before they wake up. Classic choice. And this isn't the first time."

I flinch. "Harry—"

"It's fine, I get it. Last night was a detour."

“It’s not about that.”

“Then let me guess.” His voice hardens just enough to make my stomach twist. “Jamie wants photos, something white and virginal for the files.”

“Stop,” I whisper.

“Why?” he says, sharp now. “You’re not denying it.”

I look at him and my heart cracks, because behind the sarcasm and everything between us, there’s something wounded. He’s trying to make it look easy. Like he doesn’t care. Like I didn’t shatter something.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I say, barely a whisper.

Harry tilts his head, forcing a smile. “Yet you’re marrying him anyway.”

The silence that follows is brutal. And the clock is ticking.

I ache to glance at my phone for the time, but I can’t deal with witnessing Harry’s heart break further. Not again. Though it seems too late now, with the way his grip on his jaw turns white, inflicting pain as if to remind himself this is real life.

His voice is distant. “You shouldn’t go there alone.”

Poppy shifts beside me. She’ll go with me, but with the fucked-up way life loves to treat us, he’s right. We’re still not in the all-clear after touching down in Paris, and we could face anything when we step out of this hotel.

I stare at him. “You don’t have to do this.”

He looks at me like I’ve said something ridiculous. “I do,” he says softly, “because even after all this, I still don’t want you to get hurt.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. His expression deepens. Not angry. Not surprised. Just different. Like he knows exactly what’s happening – and he’s already building the wall to keep it from cutting too deep.

Poppy glances between us and for once says nothing.

Harry nods then turns to Poppy. “Ten minutes. Be ready.”

He walks past me, towards his room, without looking back. The bang of the door echoes down the hallway. I take a minute to lean against the wall, hand pressed to my chest.

Poppy turns to me. “He’s not okay.”

“I know.”

“And you?”

“I haven’t been okay since the day I left him.”

Voice soft, she says, “You love him.”

I close my eyes, exhaling an unsteady breath. “That’s meant to be the easy part.”



It takes forty minutes to arrive at the bridal boutique and less than fifteen minutes to leave. We would have been done in five, but after I send photo evidence of the dress to Jamie as instructed – choosing the first one on the rack just to be done with the nightmare sooner and gushing about the fabric so the lie looks believable – he asks that I try on a couple more. He’s sold by the third.

The gown is now sitting in protective wrapping at the back of the store, ready to fly home with us to London tomorrow, where Poppy, Harry, and I will go back to our usual routines, living completely separate lives, as though this trip were a fever dream.

But I’ll be living for *him*.

The traffic in Paris is heaving, but the backstreets are thankfully less busy. Harry has to guide us through winding roads to find our driver, though as a tourist, each one looks the same. I swear I’ve seen the same man across the street three times already, at least a mile back.

Harry’s eyes mostly slide past me as we walk, as if I’m a stranger on the edge of his memory. But every now and then, I catch him watching when he thinks I’m not paying attention – brief glances that make my lungs lock.

We walk through the streets of Paris as if we don’t know each other. As if our bodies don’t remember what happened in the early hours of this morning.

I want to tell him I’m sorry. I want to scream it at him. I want to fall to my knees and say, “I have no choice.”

Something feels off, and perhaps if I confessed everything, the feeling would ease. But whatever I’m experiencing feels darker, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I’ve been so focused on watching Harry’s back I’ve barely been watching my own.

“Something feels wrong,” I say.

Harry says nothing and continues to walk. His hands are in his pockets, shoulders hunched beneath his jacket.

But I can't shake the feeling we're not alone.

"Did you see that guy?" Poppy murmurs near my shoulder. "The one with the cap. He's passed us twice now."

I shift my eyes to the reflection in a boutique window. He's there – tall, expressionless, walking slow and deliberate like he's taking a stroll, never quite losing pace with us.

My heart misses a beat. It's not the same guy I thought we passed three times.

"I see him," I whisper back. "Are we being followed?"

Harry doesn't respond, but he glances over his shoulder. He notices too.

"He's still behind us." Poppy leans in subtly. "This is the fourth time I've seen him since we left the bridal shop."

If this is one of Richard's men, he'd have already reported back that Harry is accompanying me and Poppy. He could die because of my mistake.

Panicked, I turn to Poppy. She stares back in silence, equally concerned.

Harry glances over his shoulder again before turning back round. His jaw clenches so tight I can see the muscle ticking beneath his skin.

"Down here," he orders.

He takes a sharp right, down a long, narrow alleyway with an exit at the end. His strides are determined, but they falter at the unwelcome presence at the far end. The man I saw earlier stands perfectly still, waiting.

We whip back round towards where we entered. We're boxed in.

The figures start closing in, slow at first, eager in their pursuit.

"What do we do?" Poppy hisses.

Harry's eyes dart to either end of the alley before he turns to me fully. "If I say run," he breathes, "you run. No hesitation."

I nod.

"That goes for you too," he tells Poppy.

She gives him the finger.

Then we hear it. Footsteps. Fast. Closing in.

I flex my hand, knowing I'll be relying on Poppy and Harry to do the damage. I'm pathetic in this scenario, and not as strong as I used to be. But I'll fight back.

A figure bursts from the alley behind us, baton raised.

Poppy spins, intercepting the man in one fluid motion. Her fist connects with his throat before the baton falls. She strikes again with a vicious punch across the jaw, then with a knee to the ribs.

Another rush of footsteps comes from the side.

Harry ducks the punch. He slides his arm behind the man's neck, locks, and twists in one fluid motion. The crack echoes, and the man drops like a puppet.

"Go!" Harry shouts. "Now!"

I hesitate. "But—"

Poppy grabs my hand, yanking me towards a narrow passage between the looming buildings. She skids to a stop as another man rushes from behind with a baton raised at her.

I grab her arm and twist us sideways, barely avoiding the blow. Harry turns just in time, grabbing the attacker's wrist mid-swing. He bends it back until it *snaps*, and the man's piercing scream follows. Harry spins the baton, landing a savage blow to his ribs, then another to his jaw. The man crumbles.

We're panting now. Trapped in the small alley with nowhere to go.

"They're tightening the gap," Harry says under his breath. "Keep moving, and if we have to, we split."

"No," I say before I can stop myself. "We stay together."

He looks at me then – really looks – and for a moment, I see a war behind his eyes. Fury, confusion, betrayal, but beneath it all, the same protection I've always known.

He opens his mouth to respond—

A blur of movement as someone lunges, their fist slicing through the air towards my hair. Harry moves fast, twisting and diving his elbow into the attacker's gut, slamming him face-first into the brick wall.

A scream pierces the air.

I whip my head towards Poppy.

She's throwing punches, but her arms are quickly restrained by two men. She doesn't stop, thrashing her legs wildly and twisting in their hold. But they have her tight, pulling her to the end of the alley, where a blacked-out van sits with its doors open.

They're going to kidnap us.

I yell, "Poppy!"

A tight grip tugs at my scalp, tripping me. A second man grabs me by the arm, yanking me back, one hand already reaching for my mouth.

I twist, jabbing my elbow into his ribs, but he's stronger, hiking me up. I've lost use of my legs, my strength pathetic. I scream into his palm,

watching Harry helplessly as they drag me towards where Poppy has disappeared.

“Run!” I shout, muffled.

He lands a punch across someone’s jaw, and they fall to their knees. Harry’s head whips towards me, and I watch the fury engulf his features.

I thrash against the men’s grip, a palm pressing down hard on my temple, forcing me through the open van doors. My leg slips free, and I kick out, my boots impaling and denting the exterior. They grapple with my legs, and I turn my head over my shoulder to find Harry’s purposeful strides closing in quickly.

“Gi—”

The barrel of a gun groans as it’s cocked beside my temple. Harry freezes, his face falling instantly. Slowly, he raises his hands, palms up.

“Please.” His voice is tortured. “Don’t hurt her.”

He meets my eye for only a second, and I see it: the pain, the panic. There’s a slight shake to his hands as he watches me.

The man holding me nods stiffly. Another rounds the car, pulling Harry’s arms behind his back and locking them tight.

“You’d better get comfortable,” he says, shoving me in through the open doors. “It’s gonna be a bumpy ride.”

## FORTY-TWO

*Gigi*

The van groans beneath us, metal grinding with every dip in the road. We veer over another bump, and I nearly slide off the metal bench. I've lost all sense of direction. Left, right, north, south – it doesn't matter anymore. Wherever we're going, it's secluded and difficult to find.

The air inside the van is thick with engine fumes. A stray of light creeps in through the back of the doors, casting shadows across the floor. The three of us sit facing each other on steel benches, wrists bound, ankles loosely chained to the floor.

Across from me, Harry is hunched forwards, head down, the vein twitching in his neck. A jolt sends my shoulder crashing into the wall. I hiss, trying to ease the pressure from my arms, and Harry whips his head up. But as if remembering I slipped from the bed this morning, he turns away.

"They must be driving in fucking circles," Poppy mutters. "This can't be the main route."

This could be the work of Richard's men, ready to follow through on their promise that Harry's life is expendable, but it feels ... different. Besides my aching scalp and the sheer panic when a gun was drawn to my head, they didn't actually hurt us.

The driver slams on the brakes, and we topple sideways, chains clattering. The tyres screech. Outside, guards murmur through radios.

Someone bangs twice on the side of the van before the rear doors swing open, and blinding daylight floods in, stabbing my eyes.

“Everybody out!” a voice barks.

One guard grabs Poppy, and the other yanks Harry to his feet. They drag me out last, my feet slipping against the floor, landing hard on uneven gravel. I squint against the daylight, whipping my head round, but all I see is open sky and barbed wire.

They usher us inside a long, dark hallway, chains echoing with each step. Somewhere, a man screams protests in French, his strangled curses vibrating off the walls. The guards veer us right into a holding cell with one small, barred window up near the ceiling. A bench on either side. Concrete floor. Metal toilet in the corner.

One man from the truck crouches down, securing the chains round our ankles to the metal hooks embedded into the wall. They step back.

Poppy barks, “What are you—?”

The door slams shut behind us with a thick metallic clunk.

Harry leans against the wall, arms folded across his chest, while Poppy sinks onto the bench.

“The coordinates were a trap, clearly.” She runs a tired hand through her auburn hair. “At least it wasn’t all for nothing.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry deadpans. “Thank fuck for that.”

She shoots daggers at him. I strain my hearing, noting nothing other than faint droplets of water echoing in the corner of the cell.

Then ...

“Do you hear that?” I whisper.

Footsteps.

Slow, precise, echoing on the concrete floor outside.

The metal door groans as it swings open, and my stomach drops to the floor.

A man steps into the room, dressed in black from head to toe. At first, all I see is broad shoulders, the tall silhouette cutting through the dim light. The figure steps forwards, and for a second, my brain refuses to comprehend what my eyes are seeing.

I don’t move. I don’t breathe. None of us do.

I stare, trying to process the impossible.

He stands there for a long, painful beat, his presence heavy in the room. I swallow hard, my throat dry. When he finally speaks, his voice comes out low and hauntingly familiar.

“Well,” Jack says as if he’s just walked into a family brunch. “You all look terrible.”

*Jack.*

My brother.

My *dead* brother.

He clasps his hands together once, like this is the beginning of a game. “Surprise?”

My lungs forget how to function. My tongue is a dead weight. Every version of reality I’ve pieced together over the past seven years unravels in an instant.

He’s supposed to be *dead*.

My vision tunnels, and I’m suddenly nineteen, back watching the coffin being lowered into the ground, hearing the thud of dirt falling on wood, feeling my heart shatter into a million pieces. And triggering Mystery Mondays for half a decade.

I thought it was suspicious, but this ...

No. I never expected *this*.

Yet here he is, wearing a tailored black jacket, sleeves pushed halfway up his forearms to reveal dark ink, with a faint five o’clock shadow dusting his face. The same dark hair and eyes we inherited from our mother. But there’s something new in his gaze now – it’s older, sharper.

“Jack?” I breathe, barely louder than a thought.

A million questions slam into my chest all at once, but I can’t choose which one to scream first.

Poppy beats me to it. “Are you fucking *kidding* me?” she hisses, standing despite the chain on her ankle. “You’ve been *alive* this whole time? Did you enjoy watching us fucking grieve—”

“I know,” Jack interrupts, holding up a hand like he’s calming a classroom. “Believe me, I didn’t plan all the drama. It’s not exactly like I could text you all, ‘Hey, not dead. In France. Gonna have my guys nick you from the streets’.”

I blink hard, but he still appears in front of my open lids. I’m not hallucinating. He’s standing right in front of me, slightly tense but mainly amused as Poppy drills into him, nostrils flared, wagging her finger. I don’t think Harry has taken a breath since the door opened.

“You could’ve told me.” My voice is small.

“Yeah, I could’ve.” Jack’s face softens only slightly. “But that’s the thing, G. I didn’t know who I could trust. Not then. Not now.”

“And kidnapping us was the logical solution?” Harry cuts in, his tone sharp.

Jack tilts his head as if only just acknowledging his presence. “Harry,” he says smoothly.

His jaw clenches. Jack just grins.

“Look, I’ll explain everything, I promise. But first” – he gestures towards the hallway with a lazy nod – “let’s get those chains off.”

A quiet shuffle at the door reveals a fifth figure. A woman with sleek hair, mid-thirties, walks in with a ring of keys and a pair of scissors, freeing us of our restraints. I rub my wrists as the cuff falls away.

Before anyone can fully process it, Poppy moves fast. She steps forward and punches Jack hard, right across the jaw.

He doesn’t falter, doesn’t retaliate, just turns his head slowly, a hand to his face, and smirks a slow grin. “Well,” he says, glancing at Poppy. “I see you haven’t lost your touch.”

Her breathing staggers, hands flexing at her sides as if she’ll make another hit. I wouldn’t blame her.

Jack rolls his jaw, easing himself of the ache, then stretches his arms overhead casually. “It’s a bit of a walk. Anyone need to stop for a piss?”

We gawk at him. How is he acting so casual? Like he didn’t just drop a massive bombshell. Like he isn’t meant to be fucking buried. Like he isn’t alive and standing right *there*.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he says.

He slips into the hall. Poppy, Harry, and I exchange glances before begrudgingly following behind him. I notice a faint smile on Jack’s face, as if he knew we’d have no choice but to follow.

We keep a short distance away from him as we trek down the hallway, each cell empty as we pass. There are a few short steps before we escape the thick air and walk over clean floorboards. I glance down, feeling a faint vibration underfoot like a mechanical hum of power, but I can’t help but stare at Jack. This isn’t real life. It *can’t* be.

Harry’s hand brushes the back of mine – a silent question. “I’m okay,” I mouth. It’s maddening, the weight of everything unspoken between us, brushed aside for the sake of this almighty curveball.

“You gave us fake coordinates to lure us here,” he says from beside me.  
“Why?”

Jack briefly glances over his shoulder. “I just said I’d explain everything, didn’t I?”

“But how?” I breathe, ignoring his dismissive, teasing tone. “How did we end up here?”

“You’re all so impatient …” He pushes open a set of double doors, and we continue ahead. “It didn’t take much convincing on our end to trick Richard into thinking Paolo Ricci held something against him. I was in the city anyway, so it made sense for me to plant the hard drive.”

“It was you?” I ask in disbelief.

“*Oui, oui*, little sister. The plan was to be in and out in a few minutes.” He pauses as if revisiting something disturbing. “Then I had to unlock that fucking gate in the basement for you both.”

I remember it now. I saw him in the cellar of Paolo’s party, saying nothing. Just staring. I thought he was a figment of my imagination.

“Those hallucinations weren’t just your imagination, G.” He’s still facing ahead, his voice turning distant. “Someone had to pull you back from the edge.”

*Fucking hell.*

I rub my thumb and my forefinger against my temple. This is too much to take in. The memory of my insanity flashes in forcefully, making me cringe.

“I had to leave a message – a way for you guys to find me – but I couldn’t make it easy. We set up the coordinates as a decoy, just in case they got into the wrong hands.” His deep tone carries down the hall. “Once you had the drive, it was up to you to use it against Dad. I’ve been waiting for the day you figured it out, and here you are. *Finally*, might I add.”

“Couldn’t make it easy” sounds fucking right. I spent more than a year with it unknowingly in my possession, suffering in silence while it was stashed in my changing room.

Jack buzzes an intercom on the wall beside another impenetrable metal door. He waits, resting his boot back against it as it rings. I stare up at him. He looks older, carved from something harder than before, but underneath it all, I still see the boy who once swore he’d never leave me.

“You really think we’re safer with you?” I ask.

He smiles again. “*Sweetheart*, everyone is safer with me.”

*Sweetheart*. I shiver inwardly.

“Too close to home?”

A voice comes through the speaker. “Name?”

“Jack Thomas.”

“Password?”

“Marie,” he says in a French accent.

*Maria. Mum.*

My heart stills, and my eyes widen. Jack turns to me slowly, the doors audibly unlocking, groaning as they slide apart.

“Mum came here every spring. She tried to tell you, G.”

Poppy grumbles, “Way to make her feel guilty, dick.”

He raises a brow, amused. Then his eyes drop to her wedding ring, and he looks like he might say something. Jack clears his throat before turning back round.

“How’s Andy?” he asks. “I miss that son of a bitch.”

“Alive,” Harry clips.

“Barely,” Poppy counters. “Richard damaged the fuck out of that man. Though you wouldn’t care about that, would you?”

Jack whips his head towards her as we follow him down a long staircase, a flicker of something unspoken behind his eyes before he turns back ahead. The underground air is cooler, and I can feel it sinking into my bones as we descend. Harry walks silently at my side, close enough that our arms graze every so often.

The stairs open onto a vast open space that stretches far. Bright white light spills from the ceilings, highlighting the fact we didn’t just walk into a basement. This place is a fucking fortress.

There are rows and rows of workstations, each one manned. Maps pinned with red lines and blinking dots cover an entire wall, while a whole workforce of armed people move through the space with quiet urgency. Monitors flicker with code, satellite imagery, and encrypted message threads.

“Not quite as charming as Notre Dame, but much harder to be tracked in,” Jack says without turning round.

“What is this place?” Poppy asks.

“A former wine storage facility,” he replies. “Now it stores the biggest international manhunt in Europe, and occasionally decent espresso.”

Jack leads us past a long, glass-enclosed room, where two women are arguing over a decrypted blueprint. One of them looks up and nods at Jack.

He nods back then glances to us.

“They’ve been tracking Richard’s movements. We’ve had eyes from overseas, with a group extracting women when they can. We’re yet to find where they’re being held hostage, but we’re getting close.”

Harry scoffs as if he knows the feeling.

I glance at Jack then. Did he know our dad once tried to sell me to the highest bidder? If he does, he says nothing, continuing ahead.

We turn a corner, entering a narrow corridor. Jack presses his palm to a scanner. A door hisses, opening to reveal a private chamber. Part office, part fucking war room. There’s a sleek black table in the centre, digital interface embedded in its surface. Maps flicker to life as we step inside.

The door seals behind us with an airless click.

Jack throws himself into one of the leather chairs as if he owns the place. Because, apparently, he does.

“This is what I’ve been building since I disappeared,” he says, stretching his legs out. He taps the glowing map on the table. A red dot pulses just outside of London, and I recognise it as the Circle headquarters. Another pops up at Pixies. I force myself to blink again, because ... *what the fuck?*

“I know this is a lot,” he says quieter now. “But the next few weeks are going to shape everything. I didn’t just lead you guys out here to play catch-up.”

I stand by the monitor table, Poppy at my left, watching the red pins blink tauntingly. Jack’s face is lit by the screen, stripped of jokes. Harry stands to the side, arms folded, eyes flickering to the map.

Jack sighs. “We need someone inside.”

I glance at him, already bracing.

“I need someone who can get close to Richard and hear the plans. I don’t mean bugged phones and satellite feeds – I mean *inside*. A pair of eyes right next to him.”

He doesn’t look at Harry. Doesn’t look at Poppy. Doesn’t look towards the hall at the surveillance crew.

He looks at me.

“You’re the only one who makes sense,” he says. “It has to be you.”

I stare at him, waiting to feel something like fear or rage or purpose, but all I feel is the same numbness I’ve felt since I slipped the ring onto my finger.

“We saw the engagement in the papers last week. One of our analysts flagged it,” Jack continues, oblivious. “You’re engaged to Jamie. That grants you access no one else has. He trusts you.”

The words don’t exactly shock me, but hearing them out loud, spoken so simply, like it’s just a fact of nature, makes my stomach twist. I see Poppy flinch barely. She knows what returning to Jamie’s arms means, and she doesn’t say a word, because I made her swear she never would.

“You want me to go back,” I say.

“We’ve heard talks of something happening at Pixies. We suspect potential buyers are flying in. If I can gather more information, we could put a stop to all this. Imagine the lives we’d save.” His gaze is strong, unrelenting. “Just give me a few months – weeks, even – of tracking Richard up close.”

I swallow, my throat burning. Harry shifts beside me, arms flexing where they’re braced against the table.

The room feels like it’s holding its breath.

Jack watches me, and there’s something different in his eyes. “I need you to say it, G,” he says gently. “Are you all right with this?”

The question hangs in the air between us. I inhale through my nose. I’ve practiced this breath. I’ve learned to make “I’m fine” sound like gospel. This is about the safety of women.

“I’ll do it,” I say. “Whatever you need, I’ll make it work.”

Jack searches my face as if he almost *knows*. But then the moment passes, and he nods once. “Good,” he says. “You’ll report directly to me. No one else.”

“That’s a hell of a risk,” Harry says.

I finally look at him. He’s staring at Jack, his jaw tight, eyes dark with something other than suspicion.

“She’ll be fine,” Jack says.

Harry’s eyes flick to me just for a second. “Will she?”

“Yes.”

“I can handle it,” I say.

Harry’s voice is low. “You shouldn’t *have* to.”

“It’s her fiancé,” Poppy says blatantly.

“Well-the-fuck-aware.”

She feeds into the lie. “She’ll be okay.”

I nod even if I don't fully believe it myself. "What if Jamie finds out?" My voice breaks a little on his name, and I cover it with a cough.

Poppy folds her arms like she's bracing.

"He won't," Jack says smoothly. "Because we'll train you properly."

I turn towards him.

"You're not going without defence," he says, his voice calm but sharp. "You'll train. Combat. Tactical. We'll start right now and figure out a plan for when you're home."

I'm half-tempted to say I can handle myself to avoid suspicion, but if I'm to return into Jamie and Richard's clutches, I'll need all the training I can get.

I nod. Then I glance at Harry, whose eyes are narrowed. He doesn't know what Jamie's done, but he *knows* there's something I'm not telling him. The thought terrifies me.

Jack goes on. "We have a team specifically dedicated to building women's strength—"

Harry cuts in firmly. "I'll do it."

Jack looks between us, amused. "Well, I was going to suggest Nathan. He's excellent with hand-to-hand—"

"I said I'll do it." Harry's voice drops into something possessive and final.

Jack hasn't stopped smiling since he butted in. Pulling himself together, he says, "I'll walk you through communication set-up later. In the meantime ..." He tosses me a key card from across the room. "We have a secure penthouse downtown. Our guys are moving your stuff in as we speak. There's a spare room for each of you. No cameras inside, just perimeter tracking. Don't touch anything encrypted, don't answer the landline, and *don't snoop* in the drawer by the bed."

"What drawer?" Poppy asks.

Jack winks. "Exactly."

She rolls her eyes, but there's a ghost of a smile on her lips.

She's not the same round him. Their history walks between them. I don't know what happened, but I know it left a mark. I know Poppy still looks at him like she wants to throw him off a cliff and kiss him in the same breath.

## FORTY-THREE

### *Harry*

I stay behind, pretending to examine the monitors. Poppy and Gigi linger at the far end of the hall, outside a surveillance room. My fingers itch to pull her back inside. There's so much we haven't said, and I wonder, with the weight of today, whether we'll even get the chance to speak before we return to London tomorrow.

My gaze traces the lines of her face, and I feel Jack watching me. Gigi pauses at the doorway, glancing back. There's something there – a question; longing, perhaps – but then she's ushered away just as quickly.

Jack waits until their footsteps are gone before speaking.

“You planning to tell me what the fuck’s going on, or am I supposed to guess?”

I drop my head between my shoulders and exhale. I turn to find him leaning against the wall, arms folded, expression casual. He’s got that smug grin that always made me want to punch him, back when we were just boys. Like this is just another joke between old friends.

*Old friends.* Right.

“You used to be my favourite person,” he says after my lengthy silence. “Until I remembered I have a sister.”

I let out a low laugh. “You don’t get to pull the big brother act. Not after vanishing off the face of the earth.”

He smiles. “Fair.”

“It’s not fucking fair,” I snap. “I watched you *die*.”

My mind flashes back to that night. The pop of gunfire. Jack's body hitting the ground. He was dying in my arms. I watched the life drain out of him, for fuck's sake. And yet he's here, alive and breathing, acting as if it was all a minor inconvenience.

He tilts his head, studying me.

"And Gigi?" I ask, voice quieter. "Besides the grief, do you have any idea what she's been through?"

His eyes flicker, and that's all the confirmation I need. The bastard knew, and he did nothing. He might've aided her in retrieving her sanity, but what would've happened if I hadn't stepped in? I feel sick as I think about it – Gigi being sold like a commodity to Richard's trafficking ring.

I grab Jack by the collar, shoving him back against a shelf. Books tumble to the floor with a thud. A flurry of activity appears in the doorway almost instantly.

I peer over, then I do a double-take. Three men built like soldiers, armed with guns, draw their weapons. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

Jack's eyes don't stray from mine. "You can leave."

The guards hesitate.

"It's all right," he tells them. "Go."

Their footsteps fade down the hall before disappearing completely.

"She could have been assaulted," I spit.

"But she wasn't." His expression hardens. "I couldn't storm into Richard's auction like some white knight after everything I've built here. I picked my visits specifically. G wouldn't know I was alive until the time was right."

I want to vomit, to scream, to wrap my hands round his throat and squeeze until he understands the depths of his betrayal.

"She's just a name on a list of so many other women we have to find." His voice drops low. "She had to fight her own battles."

I stare at him, disbelief and rage warring inside. I release him with a shove, stepping back as the weight of his words sinks in. He waits before straightening his jacket, and I run an irritated hand through the front of my hair.

"You think I enjoyed it, watching from the sidelines while my family fell apart?"

"Fell apart?" I laugh. "That's putting it fucking lightly, since Gigi had no family to protect her."

“Luckily, you had each other for that.”

I tear my head away, feeling my face heat up, a mix of fury and embarrassment flooding through me. I watch him in my peripheral where he stands a few steps away. We used to stand like this after a multimillion-pound heist, the world in our hands. Before he disappeared.

Jack goes quiet. “No matter your grudge towards me or my family, just speak with her, Harry.” He looks at me then. “She’s just a girl, standing in front of her brother’s best friend, wanting him to love her.”

My brow creases. “Did you just quote *Notting Hill*? ”

He sighs. “I really fucking miss London.”



I step into the penthouse and throw my jacket over the back of the sofa. Floor-to-ceiling windows give way to polished black floors, a sleek, modern kitchen, and minimalist furniture.

Chatter drifts in from the balcony, the glass doors slightly ajar. Poppy is perched on the edge of a seat, a blanket wrapped round her hunched shoulders. A faint glow emits from the seat beside her as I open the glass doors. She lifts her head at my approach.

The blanket falls from her shoulders as she stands. “I’ll let you both speak.”

I smile at her in thanks.

She steps inside, closing the balcony doors. The wind pulls at Gigi’s hair, loose strands brushing her face.

“Rough day, huh?”

She draws in a breath. “Tell me about it.”

The heel of her foot is propped on the edge of the chair, thigh tucked tight to her chest, the other resting casually underneath her. Her chin is pressed against her kneecap, and there’s movement to her shoulders. As I get closer, she draws her head back, giving way to a lit cigarette between her fingertips.

She hands the packet out to me in her opposing hand. I pocket it in my jeans, a smile in my voice.

“Smoking’s bad for you.”

She laughs on an inhale. “Hypocrite much?”

Gigi rests her cheek against her shoulder as I sit beside her. I rest my forearms on my thighs, my gaze drifting to the Paris skyline, the Eiffel Tower twinkling in the distance.

I turn back to find her gaze still lingering. Some might say it means nothing, but I know it means *something*. She turns away, dismissing any wandering thought with the shake of her head.

I’d do anything to know what she was thinking.

Was she thinking about us?

Was she thinking anything at all?

Or worse ... was she thinking about *him*?

I want to shake her and beg, “Just let me in, baby.”

She didn’t tell me she was hallucinating Jack. There are a lot of things she’s not telling me. But there are rare moments – moments like this – where her character is stripped back, and she’s present. It’s the closest thing I have to seeing her heart. A heart that once made space for us but is littered with so much heartbreak and grief I’m not sure I brush the surface.

I clear my throat. “Can I ask you something?”

Her shoulders stiffen on her next inhale.

“Why did you scream Jamie’s name last night?”

She flinches slightly.

“You don’t think I see it? You think I wouldn’t burn the whole world to the ground if you needed me to?”

She shakes her head, lips pressed tight.

“Is it him?” I ask. “Did Jamie do something? Is he—?”

“No,” she says too quickly. Then, quieter, “It’s not that.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

I open my mouth to speak.

“Please,” she cuts in, her voice cracking. “Don’t make this harder.”

She stubs the remainder of the cigarette in the ashtray then slips her leg out from underneath her, bringing both knees to her chest. Her eyes focus on a piece of loose wicker on the chair.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she says finally.

“Maybe not ... but let me try.”

She turns towards the skyline through the darkness.

“I’m here. You can talk to me or not, but I am here.”

I'd protect her from anything – she only has to ask. Perhaps that's pushing too far, since she's engaged to another man. I force myself to swallow the disgusting thought.

She knows I'd help, and she knows I'd stay. That's what scares her the most, I fear. I was destined to fall for the seventeen-year-old girl at my best friend's house, yet she's *right here*, and I'm further away than ever before.

Her voice is so gentle I wonder whether she even intends for me to hear. "You can't fix me."

"I can try."

Our eyes meet, and she passes an unsteady breath through her lips.

"You're unbelievable," she says, catching her breath.

My mouth twitches. "You love me really."

The words come quickly, like a reflex, and I almost take them back. I watch her carefully as her eyes cloud with something deeper than tears. Possibly too heavy for either of us to understand. They glisten, outshining the stars above us.

"I love you, Harry," she breathes so quietly I barely hear it. "I love you so much it hurts."

I feel the words in my spine, in my ribs, in my fucking bones. I lean closer, but she draws back slightly, as if my love will burn her if I get too close. The reaction hits me hard.

"It means nothing, clearly."

"It means *everything*," she says, her voice breaking. Then she pauses and whispers, "I'm marrying Jamie."

I thought I'd prepared for this. I thought I'd braced for it. But hearing it – *really* hearing it – and spoken so blatantly, as if I haven't already tortured myself over the idea – still feels disgustingly *wrong*.

I shake my head. "You can't mean that."

Her eyes are shining wet, and she doesn't answer. I stare at her, every inch of me screaming to pull her into my arms; to take her away from whatever this is.

She turns her body towards me, pressing her bare feet to the tiled floor of the balcony and taking my hands into hers. "Will you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"I need you to hate me, Harry." A devastating smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. "I see the way you look at me ... the glimmer of hope in your

eye that you can save me.” She looks at me fully. “Hate me before I break you.”

I scoff. “You have no one to prove anything to.”

“This isn’t for anyone – this is for *me*.” Her voice catches, and she closes then reopens her mouth before she’s able to compose herself. “*I chose this.* And I can’t expect you to understand. You don’t know. You *don’t*—”

“Then tell me!”

“I CAN’T!”

I turn my head away, my teeth piercing my bottom lip. Her breathing is heavy, with a slight shake, drawing my head back to her slowly.

“I need you to let me go.” Tears tremble in her eyelids as her gaze meets mine. “In the thousand lives we said we’ve lived, I’d like to think I gave you everything. Maybe we loved so strongly this is just the universe catching up. Be with someone else, Harry. Find someone good. Live the life that you deserve. God, just *live*.”

“What if I don’t want to live without you?”

She sighs, ducking her head. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“What does that even mean?” I growl. “You *are* hurting me. You tell me you *love me*, and then you tell me you’re going back to him! You can’t fucking do that – not to me.”

She turns away fully, and I see her jaw trembling. “I love you,” she repeats. “And that’s why this has to end.”

“Just leave him.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?”

The words sit heavy in the air. She presses her hands to the sides of the chair, knuckles pale.

“Marry me.”

Her face blanches.

“Marry me instead,” I say. “If a wedding’s what you want, or a ring, I’ll give it to you. Christ, I’ll give you anything, just as long as you *stay*. Fuck what Jack said – we’ll find another way.”

Her lip quivers, her silence scaring me far more than anything she’s admitted tonight. My heart beats so profoundly my hands shake.

“Do you love him more?” The words are painful. “Is that what this is all about?”

*I have loved you for nine years,* I want to tell her, but I don't. Not when her silence is petrifying.

She's going back to him.

I thought for a moment she might have been screaming at him, but Christ, it was clearly *for* him. My chest grows heavy, and I pinch my temple, concealing my eyes with colourless hands.

"Tell me," I say.

For a few seconds, nothing. Not a shift of movement or any adjustment of her chair. I lower my hand, clasping my jaw.

She lifts her chin, tears shimmering in her eyes. With a sad smile, she says in a way I don't understand, "I'm still marrying him."

So this is it. After all we've been through, she's choosing someone else.

I grip my jaw so hard I fear if I tighten the grip much harder the bone will snap.

"I see." I nod slowly. "Then so be it, if that's what you want. I'll hate you, as promised. Anything for you, princess."

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# FORTY-FOUR

*Gigi*

I can't bear this torture a minute longer.

*"I'll hate you, as promised."*

I turn away from Harry, if only to camouflage the emotion choking me. This is for him – he just doesn't know it yet. The ring on my finger feels heavy and unyielding, a reminder of the life I've chosen.

The city lights blur as tears well in my eyes. I take a step towards the French doors that lead back inside.

"No," he says as I reach the handle. "No."

His hand grips my wrist, spinning me round to face him. His eyes are dark, mixed with a desperation that makes my breath catch. He tugs me to his chest, cupping the sides of my neck and crashing his mouth against mine.

The kiss steals the air from my lungs. He kisses me with everything he has left to give.

"Tell me this feels wrong," he pleads into my mouth. "Tell me I should give this up. Tell me this reality isn't meant for me and you. Try to tell me I won't fight for you every single day."

I cry, fistling his top. "Harry, stop."

"I hate you." He kisses me harder. "I fucking hate you for not letting us have this. I hate you for ever coming into my life and ruining every other woman in existence for me, because it's only you. It's only ever been you. It will only ever be you, Gigi."

I try to pull back, my mind screaming at me. His life means more to me than anything. Harry knows we shouldn't, because his kiss becomes demanding, like he's claiming me right here – even if just for now.

Words die on my lips as he closes the distance between us. I kiss him back fiercely, my hand fisting his shirt, pulling him closer, until our bodies are tight. His lips move against me with a hunger that matches mine, his tongue sweeping in to tangle with my own.

His hands roam my body, one sliding up to cup the back of my neck, the other wrapping itself round my waist. He kisses me with such desperation that it obliterates every rational thought.

My knees weaken, and I cling to him, feeling the hardness of his chest, the heat of his skin seeping through his shirt. His teeth sink into my lower lip, drawing out a soft moan. The sound ignites something primal in him. Before I know it, his hands are on my hips, and I'm wrapping my legs round him instantly.

Harry carries me inside, kicking the door shut behind us with a force that rattles the frame, his mouth never leaving mine. There's an anger to his touch but a desperation to mark me as his. And I am. Mind. Body. Soul. Touch.

He sets me down, backing me against the kitchen counter. His cock is already hard against my hip, straining through his jeans. "Gigi," he whispers, low and gravelly.

I'm desperate for him in a way that scares me.

His hands are everywhere – gripping my waist, sliding under my shirt, thumbs brushing my nipples. I pull at his jeans, freeing his cock eagerly. It's thick and hot in my grip, veins pulsing as I stroke him, my thumb smearing the pre-cum over the tip. He hisses at the contact, his eyes locked on mine, filled with that mix of love and lust that makes my chest tighten.

That breaks him. He lifts me onto the counter in one swift motion, the cold stone shocking my bare skin as the shirt bunches up round my waist. His hands slide up my thighs, his body pressing against mine as I pump his cock, feeling him pulse against my palm.

He *moans*. Fucking moans. And it's the most mouthwatering sound.

"*Fuck, I've missed you so much.*" I can hear the desperation in his voice, like he's been starving for this. "*Spread your legs for me, baby.*"

His lips move to my jaw, his teeth grazing, leaving a trail of bites that's instantly soothed by his tongue. I tilt my head back, exposing more of

myself to him, and pump my fist faster, needing him *now*.

“I need you.” My voice is a mix of warning and plea, but he doesn’t stop.  
“Please.”

His hand darts to my waist, pulling me to the edge of the counter. I spread my thighs further, as he asked, brushing his wet tip against the centre of my thong, feeling my arousal seeping through it.

His grip turns desperate, and he tugs at the collar of my shirt.

The cool air is replaced by his mouth as he kisses my collarbone, his tongue flicking out. The stitching rips, his mouth following the bare skin. I run my hands up his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart. He yanks his shirt over his head, revealing muscles slick with sweat.

Voice lethal, he demands, “Ring. Off.”

He takes my hand, harsh enough to show his determination but not enough to hurt, and tugs off the engagement ring. He launches it across the room. It hits the wall with a defined *clink*.

Before I can even think, his hands are on my face, tilting it up to meet his, and then his mouth is crashing against mine again. He kisses me with such force that I forget how to do anything else.

His tongue sweeps in, his fingers finding the edge of my underwear. “You’re not going anywhere,” he growls against my lips, his breath hot.

Harry doesn’t hesitate, sliding two digits inside me without warning. I cry out, my hips bucking against his hand, fingers clutching at his shoulders, nails breaking skin.

His head drops down, drawing my nipple into his mouth, my shirt now shredded and torn. I tilt my chin towards the ceiling, one hand clinging to the back of his head. But we’re a mess of wandering hands, and he draws back, burying his face in my neck, matching my groan as he buries his fingers into me, knuckles-deep, curling them up in a “come here” motion.

“You’re mine,” he pants against my neck, his voice strained. “Only mine.”

And I believe it, lost in the haze of ecstasy.

“Yours,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

His thumb draws circles on my clit that make me squirm against the counter, his fingers still brushing the sensitive spot inside. I reach for him, pushing his jeans down enough to free him fully, his hard cock lying flat against his stomach.

“I need you,” I say it again. There’s no mistaking the desperation in my voice. “Now.”

I look into his eyes, seeing the hunger there. My hips buck forwards onto his fingers, pulling a growl from the base of his throat.

He breathes, “Hips up for me.”

I follow his command, lifting my hips from the surface and whining at the loss of contact. He tosses my underwear aside, positioning himself, the tip of him brushing against my entrance. I wrap my legs tighter round his hips, pulling him closer.

The words tumble out before I can second-guess them. “Don’t stop.”

It’s a plea, and he obeys, thrusting into me in one smooth, powerful motion that makes me cry out. The sensation is overwhelming, a mix of pleasure and a slight sting as he fills me completely. His forehead presses against mine, our breaths mingling as we adjust to the intensity.

“Fucking hell, baby,” he groans, his voice restrained.

He obliges my request, each thrust coming deeper as he lifts my leg up higher on his waist, building a rhythm that has me gripping the edge of the counter for support. His hips slam into mine, each thrust sending waves of pleasure crashing through me.

The counter shakes under us as he pounds into me, each hard thrust knocking the breath from my lungs.

I pull desperately at his shoulders, pulling him onto the counter with me. He settles between my legs, drawing my knees up to my chest then linking my thighs round his waist. He doesn’t hold back. His hands move to my hips, holding them steady.

“You’re beautiful. You know that, right?”

I hesitate. “Harry—”

He pounds into me so deeply my whole body trembles. The cry catches in my throat, and I can’t breathe.

*Oh fuck.*

He holds me tightly as he slams his hips forwards, deep and unrelenting, his other hand tangled in my hair, pulling just enough to make my scalp sting.

His voice is rough with emotion. “*Mine.*”

Tears prick at my eyes, because I am Harry’s, completely, even if it’s wrong.

“I’m … yours,” I choke out, my words broken by the rhythm of his thrusts.

Teeth meet my shoulder, my throat, my collarbone – everywhere. He moves his arms, curling them round my shoulders. His knee nudges my thighs up higher, *higher*, until I’m curled so far inward my ass isn’t even on the counter. He thrusts with a force that’s animalistic.

I reach forwards, gripping the backs of his thighs, his skin slapping against me with each powerful movement. He can’t decide if he wants his hands on my shoulders, my thighs, my hips—

“Fuck,” he curses.

He brings his hands down, fistng my ass in both his hands and spreading me, curling my hips even further inwards in a way that has me scared for his next move.

Harry smirks then – that wicked, knowing smile that makes my stomach flip. Our lips collide in a messy, frantic kiss, tongues tangling. He angles his hips and drives forwards, hitting my G-spot, making stars burst behind my eyelids. He fucks me with such force that I’m nothing but a mess beneath him.

My lips part on a scream—

Harry draws back, curling his hand over my mouth. I moan into his palm with each of his thrusts, the tightness coiling in my abdomen. I cling to him, my nails raking down his back.

His lips brush the shell of my ear. “Good girl.”

I pry his hand off my mouth and tilt my chin up, panting my whimpers into his neck. His mouth vibrates with every groan, every “fuck”, and every growl of my name. My chest tightens with the familiarity of him, the way his body is so near after so long.

“I’m close,” I whimper.

He responds by sliding a hand between us, his thumb finding that sensitive spot and circling with pressure. I bite down into his neck, my hands in his hair pulling him closer as waves of pleasure ripple through me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, sparks of colour bursting behind my closed lids. His lips meet mine, swallowing the sound of my release as he buries himself to the hilt and spills into me, his body shuddering against mine.

My heart is still slamming against my ribcage by the time we’re both finally coming down, bodies spent and wrecked.

“Oh my God,” I pant.

My hands slide over his broad shoulders, fingers digging in as if to hold onto the moment. I look up at Harry, the way he's still struggling to suck in a breath. All I can think is how much I want to reach out and trace the lines of his face.

His broad chest rises and falls, a sheen of sweat making it glisten as he catches himself beside my head. He looks down at me with utter submission.

"I love you so fucking much," he pants, each breath uneven.

And God, I love him back, with a fire that burns through all the lies I've told.

I bury my face in his chest. He wraps his arm round my shoulders, keeping me close, his other arm lightly trembling from keeping himself aloft. He persists, holding me still, our bodies locked together, breath mingling.

My fingers twitch against his chest, digging in further. I can feel the fear rising in my throat, sharp and bitter, as I imagine the consequences. Harry's life on the edge because I couldn't keep my hands to myself.

"Tell me." His voice is a raspy whisper. "Tell me what you're thinking."

The words bubble up inside of me, desperate to spill out. I swallow them down, knowing they'll only shatter this fragile moment. Instead I tilt up my chin, sliding my fingers into his messy black hair.

He responds instantly, tugging me closer until there's the familiar feeling of nothing between us. Not even air. Our mouths meet, deep, hungry, and unrestrained, as our bodies press together.

The world blurs at the edges, and we give in to each other again.

## FORTY-FIVE

*Gigi*

I lean back in the plush leather seat of the private jet, the engine humming as we speed from Paris to London. Poppy sits at my side, her head propped in her palm as she scrolls through her phone absentmindedly.

Harry's a few seats away, staring out the window with an intensity only he's capable of. He's dressed in his usual get-up: a dark shirt unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a hint of the chest I was clawing at a matter of hours ago. I can still taste him on my lips; feel his hands on my skin, the way he worshipped me everywhere and fucked me as if the world were ending. Perhaps it is.

I can't let it mean anything, no matter how much it *kills* me. It was reckless.

And now, as the jet slices through the air, I'm left with the cold reality that I'm returning to Jamie and his unpredictable temperament – even if it is at the price of a few remaining weeks, maybe months.

Harry catches my eye then, his gaze lingering. There's a question in it.

*What are you thinking about?*

I look away, focusing on my lap as I twiddle my thumbs. Poppy locks her phone, drilling into me about my *idiot brother*, contrasting the storm raging inside my head. My lack of communication has her looking at me puzzled.

Her eyes dart between Harry and me.

I shake my head. *Don't ask.*

The pilot's voice crackles over the intercom, announcing our descent. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing shortly. Please fasten your seatbelts."

As the jet begins its descent, I peer out the window. The world outside tilts, the city sprawling below us. The air feels thick, like a noose growing tighter, *tighter*, until the plane touches down with a jolt. My head pounds, numbing the noise of the wheels screeching against the tarmac. We taxi to the private terminal, eventually drawing to a stop.

The pilot's voice comes through the speakers again. "Welcome to London City Airport."

The cabin doors open with a hiss.

I stand on wobbly legs, my joints feeling like lead as I grab my bag. Poppy stands simultaneously, groaning as she stretches out her limbs, having been sat in the same spot for more than an hour.

"We know the plan." Poppy turns between Harry and me. "Jack will be in touch when he's got news, but in the meantime, life resumes as normal."

Silence swarms the three of us. Unless there's any vital information from me before we hear from Jack, it's a waiting game with no clear end in sight.

Poppy's focus zeroes in on the side of my face, but I avoid her eye, wanting to bask in ignorance for a few minutes longer. The second I step outside, this trip will become an odd fever dream.

At the thought, I turn my head just slightly. Harry tilts his head up a fraction, and our eyes meet. For a second, it's like we're back in that room, his body pressed against mine.

He turns away.

I swallow, forcing a steady breath through me, trying to calm my racing pulse before I walk into the arms of another man.

Poppy stands in the doorway, motioning for me to follow. I force a nod, heaving my bag over my arm. Harry's *right there*, mere inches away, but I don't have it in me to say goodbye.

I choose silence, heading down the aisle between the seats.

"Gigi?" he says softly.

A second passes before I turn to him fully. He rises to his feet slowly, stepping closer. I see his discomfort in the way he rolls his head round his shoulders.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ring – the one Jamie gave me. Harry launched it across the room last night. *Fuck*. I drop my head to my

empty finger, having completely forgotten about it through the chaos.

I always thought the ring was huge – an ugly, massive thing – but it looks tiny cushioned in Harry’s palm.

He doesn’t say much as he holds it out. His eyes meet mine, and there’s a depth there; a sadness that mirrors the void growing inside of me. I know what he’s thinking, even if he won’t admit it.

This is it – the end of whatever we had before it ever really began.

I mutter, “My ring.”

I want to tell him to keep it, to throw it out the window into the Thames. I look into his eyes, and for a fleeting moment I consider confessing it all. The abuse, the threats, the beatings; the fact I’m only marrying Jamie to keep him from hurting the people I care about.

Instead I force a weak smile, taking the ring from him.

He watches me slip it back on, his jaw tightening, but he doesn’t argue.

We stand there for a moment, the silence stretching out. His gaze drops to his hands, and when he looks back up again, there’s rawness in his expression that breaks me a little more. Harry’s face is vulnerable in a way I’ve only seen in glimpses.

His tone is careful. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

He tilts his head slightly, as if he *knows* something but doesn’t know what. He blinks it away, pushing his hands into his front pockets. “Don’t forget who you are in there,” he says, his voice rough. “I once saw you impale a man’s skull with your stiletto.”

I smile. “You remember that?”

“I remember it all.”

My hand twitches to reach out to him. “I’ll come back to you,” I say. “For the training.”

I give in to temptation, reaching up slowly to touch his face. My fingertips hover over his cheekbone, gently brushing. His eyes close, just barely.

“Swear it,” he says.

“I swear.”

He leans in, bringing his forehead to mine. I let myself pretend, for one breath, that this is enough. But I want to bury my face in his chest. I want to fly this plane somewhere else. Harry wouldn’t even hesitate.

He mumbles, “Don’t look at me like you’re trying to remember.”

“Gigi,” Poppy calls.

I jerk away from him, my cheeks flushing. Poppy doesn’t look directly at us, but I see the knowing glance she shoots my way. She steps outside the plane without another word.

I take a deep breath, stepping round him, hoisting the bag further up my arm. I walk down the aisle to the doors of the jet and then glance back at Harry, who deliberately lingers in his seat, out of sight of whoever’s awaiting me on the runway.

I see the resignation there – the quiet acceptance that this is how it has to be.

He bows his head in goodbye.

I step out of the jet.

The cool London air hits me, carrying the faint scent of rain and petrol. There’s a blur of activity – ground crew shouting, luggage carts whirring by, engines whining in the distance – but my focus narrows on the figure waiting at the edge of the tarmac.

Jamie’s leaning against a sleek black car, arms crossed, hair slicked back, his face a mask. His eyes lock onto mine, sharp and cold, like he’s already sizing up every second I’ve been away.

I force my feet to move, descending the stairs. My heart shatters with each step towards him. As I reach the bottom, he extends his hand to take mine in that firm, controlling grip.

“There you are,” he says smoothly. “Missed me?”

It’s a taunt.

I murmur something noncommittal, but inside I’m screaming, because just like that, everything is back to normal. The door slams shut on any hope of escape as I step into the car.

The drive back is a silent torture. Jamie doesn’t say much, his thumb flying across his phone screen. Something feels off. Even the air feels still, as if the world is holding its breath.

I glance sideways, but his face is impassive, that predatory smile gone. Did he find out why I was in Paris? Does he know Jack is still alive? But above all else, has he found out about Harry?

The thought sends a spike of panic through me, and I clench my fists in my lap.

As we pull up on the driveway of the Circle headquarters, I watch as the building rises in the distance like a fortified prison. The gates open with a

creek, giving way to ... absolutely nothing.

*Where is everybody?* is the first thought that hits me.

The courtyard is eerily quiet, the usual bustle of recruits absent. Normally, the place is a hive of activity, but today, it feels like a ghost town.

Jamie helps me out, his fingers digging in just enough to hurt. He guides us towards the main entrance, hiding that cruel, vindictive smile that's become his trademark.

Before I left for Paris, I had the overwhelming fear something was happening behind closed doors. Now I feel that concern pressing on my chest so intensely I struggle to catch my breath.

He ushers me through the corridor, hand gripping my elbow. I look in each room as we pass, but there's not one person there. Not one lingering soul in any part of the Circle headquarters.

Then I hear it at the far end of the hall. The muffled hum of laughter coming from the ballroom.

The doors are slightly ajar, and I catch a glimpse through the crack.

A sea of people in elegant gowns and suits, crystal chandeliers casting a golden glow over the tables laid with food and champagne.

*Guests?*

*What the fuck is going on?*

My confusion mounts as Jamie quickens his pace past the entrance. He pulls me down a side corridor, his grip on my arm unyielding.

“Jamie, wait—”

He cuts me off with a sharp look.

We reach a dressing room at the end of the hall. He shoves it open, pushing me inside. I stumble forwards, catching myself on a nearby chair.

Jamie leans against the door, a mix of triumph and cruel amusement. A woman appears behind a clothes rack carrying an armful of fabric. I recognise her. Liv, the fashion designer from Pixies. She gives me a quick once-over.

“Ah, finally,” she says, her voice brisk. “We’ve got a lot to do and not much time.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Jamie’s smile grows. “Surprise, darling.”

“This one’s for tonight – silk, elegant, with a subtle shimmer,” she says. “Then tomorrow, you’ve obviously got your gown. They’ve just collected it from the jet for safekeeping.”

“Tomorrow?” I ask, my voice shaking.

Liv starts pulling out dresses from her pile, holding them up against my body. “Pre-wedding dinner tonight, and the wedding tomorrow.”

Her words hit profoundly, the world tilting dangerously as I process them. My knees buckle slightly, and I grip the back of the chair to steady myself, the room spinning in a dizzying whirl.

I feel my face pale, my mind reeling as I stare at Jamie. “You brought the wedding forward,” I grit out. “Why?”

“Just couldn’t wait for eternity with you—”

“*Bullshit*,” I snap.

“Thought I’d keep it quiet until the last minute. No chance of you running off again.” His smirk widens, and he taunts, “What’s the matter? Backing out?”

And then I see it. The bulge of a gun under his suit jacket.

The panic surges, hot and suffocating, as I realise I’m back where I started: trapped, *bound*, more than I ever was, with Harry’s memory fading like a dream I can’t hold onto.

Tomorrow, I’ll be bound into this mess, trading my heart for his life.

Jamie’s grin deepens at the sight of my despair. Liv begins to measure me, her tape measure cold against my skin.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Jamie says, pushing off from the door. “Make sure she looks perfect, Liv. It’s only forever we’re talking about.”

He turns round to leave, sauntering into the hall as though it’s no big deal at all.

Barely thinking, I grab the seamstress scissors and charge forwards, swinging with all the fury boiling inside me. “You fucking—”

He whirls round, enclosing his fingers round my wrist, the scissors a millimetre from carving his fucking eyeballs out.

“Ah, ah, ah.” He tuts, eyes flaring with that familiar rage. “One word from me, Gigi, and he’s gone. That’s all it takes to end this. Is that really what you want?”

Anger fuels me so intensely my grip falters on the scissors. He knows he’s won. He knows there’s nothing I’ll do. He releases my wrist slowly, his fingers trailing down my arm in a way that makes me grimace.

“Only forever we’re talking about.” His words are like venom.

Liv takes the scissors, chatting about hemlines and fabrics, her hands moving over me with mechanical precision.

I want to spit in Jamie's face. I want to fight back. But I stand helpless as he walks away.



The rest of the day blurs into a haze of forced normality, Jamie's shadow following me everywhere. Hours later, I'm at the pre-wedding dinner, surrounded by guests who chatter and laugh as if everything's perfect. The room is a glittering nightmare, bright flowers a vibrant reminder of the life I'm supposed to be celebrating.

I nod numbly at the endless stream of well-wishers, my cheeks aching from the fake smiles I plaster on.

I can't take it anymore.

I mumble an excuse about needing to freshen up, my voice sounding distant, like it's coming from someone else. The guests barely glance my way, too engrossed in their toasts.

Hudson steps into my path, his body an impenetrable wall. He opens his mouth to speak.

I shake my head. "Not now."

I bypass him, my heels clicking on the marble floor. I quicken my steps until I'm at the end of the hallway, pushing open the dressing-room door. I slam it shut behind me, the sound reverberating through the small space.

I sink to the floor, my back against the cool wall, burying my face in my hands.

"Fuck," I whisper to the empty room.

And then it comes – every bit of emotion I've been containing since my mother died. My chest tightens, each breath a struggle as waves of nausea wash over me. Hot tears finally spill over, streaming down my cheeks. The kind you can't breathe through.

Helpless. I'm fucking helpless.

The sobs come harder, my gut twisting into knots. I can barely breathe. I throw my back against the wall, struggling to keep my control, my vision shaking with the impact of my skull.

*Breathe, for fuck's sake.*

My hands are shaky as I wipe the tears, drawing in a sharp breath. I force a calmness through me, pulling my phone from my bag and hesitating before I click on the number Jack left. I press it to my ear, holding my breath.

It rings twice before his voice crackles through, like he's in the middle of something he can't afford to stop. "G? Is everything okay?"

"How long?" I rush out. "How long until this is over?"

"You've only just got home—"

My words are laced with desperation. "How long?"

Jack hesitates, then he says, "Few weeks at least, maybe four. It depends when the buyers come in."

"Sooner. I need it sooner."

There's a pause.

"I can't. I'm so sorry."

The silence is so loud, the weight on my chest so heavy, my grip weakens against the phone. I may as well not even be holding it.

These fragile months that I barely survived have extended to a lifetime. Tears blind me as I stare ahead into nothing.

My mum stayed with a man she hated for twenty years to keep her children safe. Will I survive that long under Jamie's hands? Would he kill me to give himself access to the full fortune?

Jack's voice is a distant mumble. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." The words hitch in the back of my throat, and I cough to clear it, prepared to end the call. "I'll speak to you later."

"G?"

I raise the phone back to my ear, hearing him pause.

"I'm not sure what's going on between the two of you, but Harry is a good guy."

I smile sadly, a tear slipping from the corner of my eye.

*I know.*

I confess quietly, "It's my wedding tomorrow."

A momentary pause, and then, "You never said anything."

I turn to the entryway as the door opens. Hudson stands there, suited in designer as usual, but now there's something else. Sadness, or maybe guilt. I grip the phone tighter, staring straight at him.

"I'll speak to you later," I say into the phone. "I'll see you soon."

I hang up, dropping the phone into my lap.

“I’m so sorry this is happening to you, Gigi,” Hudson finally says. “I wish there was something I could do.”

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## FORTY-SIX

### *Harry*

It still haunts me, the way she looked at the ring as if she wanted me to take it back. As if she wanted me to save her from this madness. And I didn't.

The life I offered her may not be the conventional one, nor the life he's promised her, with money and a relationship worthy of tabloids, but I'd give her everything.

It's now been a full twenty-four hours, and I'm still as restless about the whole thing. Something foreign sits in my chest, forcing me to rub the area. I feel sick.

*For Christ's sake,* I watched her walk into someone else's arms when she's *mine*—

*Fuck, no.* Fiancé, remember? She has a fucking fiancé – the wanker with the trust fund.

I need to pull myself together.

I pull up my motorbike outside Poppy's home and kill the engine. The bungalow sits a few metres from the pavement in the middle of the countryside. I throw up my visor, the bike still ticking from the ride over.

I called to talk about a potential new lead, but she was busy getting ready, her voice holding a slight shake. She always has control, but something had clearly spooked her. After pressing her about it, she told me to come over.

I leave the helmet on the seat of the bike, pushing open the creaky gate beside the overgrown path, the metal scraping the concrete. The door swings open almost immediately. Poppy is dressed in a silk blue gown, red

lipstick not too dissimilar to the colour of her hair. Nothing like the mess I expected.

“Harry.” Her voice is flat, like she’s trying to sound normal but failing. “Come in.”

I follow her inside. The house smells faintly of flowers. There are a few dotted round the home, starting to wilt. Ragged breathing draws my attention to the living room. The curtains are drawn, and I can hear the faint beep of machines coming from inside.

“How is he?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

Poppy’s gaze drifts momentarily. “Same as yesterday. Same as he’ll be tomorrow, I imagine.”

“Give him my best,” I say.

“I will.”

I sit down on an armchair in the entryway at Poppy’s request, unable to take my eyes off her. I try to act casual, but my voice comes out rougher than intended.

“You look … dressed up.”

She says nothing, accessorising herself with a pair of earrings. After a tense pause, she turns to me fully, finally lifting her head. Her expression softens, and she looks … *sorry*?

I don’t understand.

I study her more carefully. The hair, the gown, the slightly heavier makeup. The last time she dressed like this, she was going to Gi—

No.

Fury and something so much worse – *loss* – start to coil round my ribs.

“Don’t,” I whisper, my voice strained. “It isn’t …”

“I wouldn’t be a good friend if I didn’t say anything.”

“Poppy,” I grit out, panicked.

She hesitates, and if I didn’t know her so well, I might have thought tears were welling in her eyes. But I know Poppy, and I know she’s not capable of such an emotion.

“It’s Gigi’s wedding day.”

I laugh. I actually laugh, because she has to be joking. “No, it’s not.”

“Harry …” She inhales a deep breath. “I’ve known this whole time. I knew before we went to Paris. I knew the minute we got home.”

Her words hit like glass. She might as well have ripped my heart from my chest.

“I’m so sorry.”

I turn my head away, unable to stand even looking at her. I grip my jaw hard, inflicting searing pain. This is no nightmare.

“Why would you do that?”

She starts. “Listen—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I launch to my feet. “You’re meant to be one of my closest friends, Poppy. Fucking hell, I *gave you away*.”

She flinches. “Harry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you—”

I put a hand up to silence her.

“Where?”

“There’s nothing you can do—”

“Where?”

She turns her head away and sighs, “Westminster Cathedral.”

I nod slowly, taking a moment to think the plan over.

Poppy starts tripping over her words.

“They had to make sure someone got her home from Paris in time,” she rushes out. “I said I wouldn’t go, but Richard isn’t giving recruits a choice. Press will be there. Harry, you *can’t*—”

But I’ve already left.

The door slams shut as I mount the bike, kicking off the stabiliser.

The helmet does little to contain the whip of wind as I race down the streets, forced to squint behind the visor. I’m not thinking rationally, missing a traffic light as it changes from yellow to red and blasting across the junction. A horn blares, tyres screeching on the pavement in a desperate attempt to avoid a collision.

*Fuck.*

I right the bike, tightening my grip on the handlebars as I race ahead, the sharp scent of burnt rubber following behind me.

I narrow my eyes, the fog on the inside of the visor obstructing my view. I throw it up, scanning the upcoming streets, certain I need to make the next turn. There’s a white van ahead, waiting for a woman to clear the crossing.

I give the bike gas.

The van is midway through turning as I pull up on its inside. The tyres squeal as it swerves to the right to avoid me, the woman jumping onto the pavement. Curses follow. My bike wobbles momentarily before regaining its balance.

I grip the handles tighter, pushing the bike to its limit, the world a streak of colours as it whizzes past.

A car brakes suddenly as I swerve into its lane, narrowly missing the Harley. The driver loses grip of the wheel, ploughing into the intersection with an explosive bang. I dart a look over my shoulder, watching as the driver wrestles with the airbag.

A few minutes later, a piercing siren races closer. Flickers of flashing blue and white lights creep up in my peripheral, a police car hot on my tail.

“FUCK!” I yell.

I turn back ahead ...

I slam the brakes, almost ramming into a security barrier blocking the main road into Westminster. My body nearly goes over the handlebars as the bike comes to a stop.

I see the cathedral in the far distance, its spire piercing the clouds.

I twist the handlebar straight and skid off. The rear tyre leaves a black stain the shape of a semicircle as the bike spins round.

Doubt rushes through me as I race down the narrow London streets, trying to find an entry point. What if I don’t make it on time? What if she’s already said her vows? I have to make it. I *have* to.

The whole road is shut with barricades, hundreds of people hovering round the “road closed” signs. They mill about outside, dressed in their finest, paparazzi swarming like vultures.

I skid to a stop on a street opposite, leaving the engine running as I dismount. I pull the helmet off my head as I shove through the crowd, weaving between strangers.

An echo of gasps has me whipping my head up, tucking the helmet underneath my arm.

The cathedral sits above a cascade of steps, draped in white flowers. The large oak doors, flanked by security guards, open, sparking a flurry of activity.

My heart stumbles as Gigi appears in the entryway.

She looks exactly like she’s supposed to.

The dress is white, sleek, and cruelly perfect. Her hair’s pinned up in soft waves, diamonds sparkling round her throat. Her veil is pinned on her head, cascading behind her.

There’s a dull ringing in my skull with each step she takes—

*Wait. It’s a chime.*

Wedding bells.

Her eyes flick to the crowd as she descends the stairs slowly. She spots me through the chaos, and her fingers tighten round her bouquet, dipping half an inch. Her lips part, just barely.

She takes a single half-step, as if—

Jamie cups the back of her neck and pulls her to him, his other hand touching her hip. Her eyes never leave mine. For a heartbeat, she doesn't close them.

But then he kisses her.

And she lets him.

I feel something twist inside me. Not jealousy. Not even heartbreak.

It's betrayal.

She *married* him.

Then, like a tidal wave of violence, the back of my skull screeches with the sound of wedding bells, shattering something within me. The woman I've loved in secret since I was a teenager, the one who's haunted me and driven me to the edge, has just promised her forever to someone else.

I fight the urge to storm over there and rip her away to confess it all again – how I ache for her; how I'd burn the world down if it meant keeping her safe; how she's wasting herself on him.

The flashes keep going until it's just white noise. Gigi breaks the kiss first. Her eyes are still on me, wide and unblinking.

She doesn't move.

For a brief moment in time, she seems to forget where she is. It's a fraction of a second, like she's stepped out of herself before snapping back in.

And I swear – I fucking *swear* – she looks like she's drowning.

## GIGI

I thought I'd have an entire vocabulary of words to describe my wedding day, but there's only one that stands out above all else.

*Cunt.*

I thought I'd seen the worst of Jamie, but this sickly act he's putting on for the cameras is pathetic. He's as ugly as they come. Let him run off with Richard's money – God knows he's earned it with this façade.

The declarations of his love at the altar as he took my hands knowing I had no other choice ... I kept my face neutral, serene, as he expected from his bride. But under the veil, under this skin, I was *boiling*.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to tear the dress to shreds with my bare hands and set the altar on fire with all these fucking candles. Above all else, I wanted to spit in Jamie's face.

He stood there as if he were God's gift to the world, the gold ring on his left hand glinting in the light, but he looked at me with the primal stare of ownership, as if my silence were consent. When the officiant asked if I'd take Jamie to be my husband, every fibre of me screamed no – and yet I stood there, my voice calm, looked him in the eye, and said, "I do."

Because I won't run. I won't cry.

I'll survive this – and then I'll ruin him.

He and Richard are both here now, watching, celebrating the life I'm shackled to.

Today feels no different from the hundred other ways we've already celebrated. Gowns, beverages, violins, an accumulation of people whose names I don't know. Though this time, my left hand is heavier. That's the thing with weddings and rich people – you have the pre-wedding dinners, the post brunches, the bollocks.

But I played into the story. Walked down the aisle and gave up everything. Now I'm here in the wreckage I created. Harry saw a girl in white standing at the top of the cathedral steps, smiling at a man she doesn't love.

God, I felt him there. Before I even saw him, I felt him. Like a pull behind my ribs—

I blink back to the present. A photographer shouts directions. "*Tilt your head, hold his hand, kiss her cheek.*" I obey, puppet-like, my head spinning with each flash. I force a laugh when Jamie says something in my ear. He ushers away the cameramen, his hand leaving the small of my back. He's mid-stride towards the bar when—

No warning. No breath on the back of my neck. Only fingers closing round my wrist.

A breath catches halfway up my throat as I'm spun round.

Harry's eyes crash into mine.

His chest is rising fast, his eyes raking over me – the dress, the ring, this *life* – like it's all one giant betrayal.

Then, all at once, reality crashes into me. He's *here*. Wearing the same clothes I saw him in a matter of hours ago, the leather jacket and dark jeans. That reckless lone strand of hair dangling in the centre of his forehead.

Harry is here. Alive. In the same room as—

*Oh ... fuck.*

I look round wildly. Richard is near the bar, speaking with a politician. Jamie is on the opposite side of the room, laughing with his father's lawyer, oblivious for now. But not for long. Not if Harry stays.

“You need to leave,” I tell him sternly.

Eyes dark with disbelief, his attention flicks down to the wedding ring then back up to my face. “Don’t think I won’t shut you up and kiss you in front of everyone in this room.”

My head whips back towards him.

“And especially in front of your husband.”

Utter fear courses through me. I shake my head.

“You don’t think I would?”

“I never said—”

“Ask. Ask me to kiss you.”

I don’t, because I know Harry will have no issue following through on his threat.

I dart my focus across the room to anyone who might be witnessing this interaction. If they see ... this marriage, Harry’s protection – it’ll all be for nothing.

The party goes on round us, oblivious. Laughter. Applause. The clink of silverware on porcelain.

Harry’s voice sounds distant. “You actually did it.”

He towers over me, staring at me with such intensity it’s like he’s waiting for me to crack. Like if he looks at me hard enough, the truth will show itself. His hands tighten for a moment, then he points a shaky finger in my face.

“You’re marrying him while we were ...” His face contorts. “You’re ... you’re ...”

“A whore?” I rasp, my voice turning soft. “It’s okay, Harry. You can say it.”

His face pales as if that was the last thing he was thinking.

Behind me, I hear a laugh. Jamie’s. My spine stiffens. Harry needs to leave now.

“You have to go.” I step closer, trying to use my body to block him from view. “If they see you. Harry, if Jamie or Richard see—”

“Let them.”

My throat tightens, and I whisper fiercely, “No.”

I notice Jamie’s gaze cutting through the crowd. I take a step back, but Harry follows as if to say, “You don’t get to run from this.” I feel Jamie’s gaze again, his chin tilting up to look over shoulders, feet shifting to peer round obstacles.

*No. No. No.*

With maddening precision, before Jamie’s eyes can find him, Harry pulls us sideways into a cluster of guests. Violins echo round our private bubble in the middle of the room.

I place my hand on his chest – a gentle push. My heart is about to tumble out of my throat.

“A week,” I whisper. “That’s all I’m asking for.”

His brow rises. “Then you’ll tell me what you’re hiding?”

“If that’s what it takes for you to leave.” I hesitate. “Then yes.”

He searches my face. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not.”

His green eyes narrow into slits, and a tense moment passes between us. Slowly – tortuously slowly – his mouth twitches, a hint of a weak smile.

“I miss the time when the girl desperate to find out the truth about her brother was the one begging *me* for answers.”

*Oh, Harry.*

I want to hold him and say, “Me too.”

“One week,” he says. “One week, and you’ll come back to me. You’ll tell me everything.”

Quietly, almost trembling, I say, “When this is all over, I’ll tell you everything.”

If I didn’t know Harry any better, I’d swear he’s about to fuck the plan and throw me over his shoulder in my wedding dress, then drag me out of here. But with whatever remaining trust he still has left for me, he pulls himself together.

Voice tight, he says, “Don’t lie to me again.”

“I won’t.”

His hand grazes mine at my side, just barely. My fingers flex, and I reach out to hold onto him. He steps back, oblivious, before I have the chance. I feel the loss of him as he backs away, blending into the crowd, his eyes turning to me a final time before he disappears.

An exhausted breath tumbles from my lungs. And I wonder, as I press my hand to my stomach as if I can hold myself together from the inside out, how much more of this either of us can survive.

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## FORTY-SEVEN

*Harry*

I think I'm coping well. Then I arrive home.

The door to my flat creaks open, the light already on. Emily's sitting on the sofa, curled up under a plaid blanket. I don't have the energy to think about why she's here.

She lifts her head when she sees me, face dropping as if she already feels my torment. "Harry."

"She married him," I say.

My voice cracks in the middle from how badly I want things to be different. Not just because I've lost her, but because I was stupid enough to think I never would.

Emily stands slowly. She reaches to help me shrug off my jacket like a child who's been hurt. I feel her watching me as she stands in front of me, waiting.

"I saw her kiss him." My voice breaks with every word. "She chose him." And I fucking lose it.

I stagger towards the sofa and fall onto it, pressing my palms to my eyes as if it will push the images out of my skull.

They're branded there – the white dress, the bells.

I want to scream. I want to burn something. I want to drive back to that church and tear it apart brick by brick.

I peer up through my palms, pleading through glazed eyes. "What do I do, Emily?"

She pulls me into her arms. I press my face into her shoulder, my own shaking.

“You’ll survive this,” she says. “Even if you don’t want to.”

She’s right. I *don’t* want to.

“And if I can’t?” I ask. “What then?”

“You will.”



The post-wedding coverage is the only evidence Gigi isn’t dead, since we haven’t heard a peep from her. And there she is ... a minimum two-page spread in every magazine, tabloid, and newspaper in the entire country.

The pictures make me wretch when I first see them, but I torture myself by returning to the kitchen counter to look again. Gigi hangs onto Jamie’s arm, the veil framing her face. I stare at the image for long enough that Poppy finally rips the paper in half and throws it in the bin.

We’re day five following the wedding, and I *know* she said a week, but my pulse is only racing faster with each hour.



Poppy’s liaising with Jack through an encrypted server. Her coping mechanism is productivity. Mine is watching the front door. We’re clutching onto the last few minutes of the day, the clock blinking mockingly at me from the oven.

Headphones in, she mutters, “If you stare much longer, you’ll burn a hole through it.”

“Good.”

She rolls her eyes, but I notice when her glaze flickers to it too. She’s just pretending not to be worried.

A new hour ticks in. And then the clock turns: 12:01 a.m.

*Gigi’s late.*



The days start to pass in a blur.

Emily checks in, having annoyingly taken on the role of my mental health guardian. I tell her I'm fine, but we both know I'm full of shit. Frankly, she's making things fucking worse.

Mia visits at least once a day, even if it's only for a few minutes, to check on Andy, who's still holed up in the bedroom. The conversation is almost always the same.

"Heard anything?"

I shake my head.

She nods, pushing away the concern with rolling shoulders as she walks down the hall and knocks on his door. Andy barely emerges from the room, only to eat (minimally) and go to the toilet. We're all playing our part in trying to bring back the man he once was, but he's still in the depths of recovery.

The same night, after falling asleep on the sofa facing the door, he appears in front of me. "Anything?" he whispers.

I blink, sitting up against the cushions. "Not yet."

I try my luck by offering him a beer. He declines, returning to his room.

On the following day's offer for a drink, he reluctantly agrees.



I bribe Whizz Tech Dan to hack Jamie's private phone just to hear Gigi's voice. There are no voicemails nor texts between either of them. The only logical solution is that they're together.

But I *need* more.

Another bribe, the cash under the floorboards dwindling, shows surveillance footage from Jamie's house. The most we find is a glimpse of

Gigi's back as she turns a corner. Unless all other footage is wiped, she's purposely avoiding the cameras.



Jack gets in contact through the burner phone on day nineteen. He picked up through Richard's phone transcripts that the buyers are due to arrive at Pixies any week now. Gigi is the only way we'll have the upper hand, and unless she magically appears in the next week, we'll have to start making plans without her.

Poppy searches the Circle headquarters to no avail. Jack makes the call to send Sacha, a high-ranking member of his crew, to investigate.



Jack's mole sent in to infiltrate Richard's network goes dark.

Jack knows Sacha well. They train together, drink together. She's one of the only people he trusts with the job.

Her body turns up in the River Thames four days later.

No witnesses.



Day twenty-four, I break protocol.

I send a message on the most secure line we have.

*You swore.*

There's no reply.



Day thirty-two, Jack tells us there's chatter in Richard's inner circle: one of his assets has gone missing. The meetup at Pixies is delayed, with a new date to come.

Poppy doesn't say what she's thinking, but I see it in her eyes.  
I don't say it either, but I wonder.



Jack is now drafting plans for us to infiltrate Pixies alone. Someone will go in and gain the buyers' trusts by appearing interested in purchasing the merchandise. Jack hopes to send in a trained crew, but we know the risk ... Pixies doesn't allow strangers. I refuse to consider the other alternative.

We're all reaching the same conclusion. Gigi's dead, or she betrayed us. Either way, she's gone.

Poppy goes out to fetch supplies for the heist, needing to escape cabin fever. She doesn't ask if I want to come. She knows I won't leave the apartment.

It's been five weeks, and now the silence crawls under my skin.

I haven't slept properly in a week, my hands shaking when I smoke a cigarette. I flick a lighter open and shut, calming the tick.

Three knocks echo on the door. I puff out a breath, my limbs groaning as I step up after hours of sitting still. My hands find the gun in the waistband of my jeans before my brain can argue with the reflex.

Voice rough, I call out to Poppy, "Forget the key again?"

I unlock the deadbolt, pulling open the door with a practiced scowl—

My breath stops, my heart spiralling down into my stomach.

Gigi's standing in the hallway, dripping with rain, her hair wet and tangled, face pale, eyes darker than I've ever seen them.

My hand stays on the doorframe as if I need the wood to keep me upright.

“You came back.”

Her voice is barely above a whisper. “I swore I would.”

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## FORTY-EIGHT

*Harry*

I hover to a slight crouch, crooking my finger at Gigi. “Let’s get on with this then.”

She sulks, pressing her cotton-wrapped hands to her hips. “Can’t I just train with Poppy?”

“You lost your right to negotiations after disappearing for five weeks.”

The furniture has been pushed into the corners of the room in the apartment, barely making space for our makeshift training area. I’ve been circling her for twenty minutes now, ready to pry the truth out of her.

She fights it, eyes occasionally drifting to my torso and snapping back to my face a second later. I smirk, letting her bask with no subtlety for a while longer.

“Now,” – I curl my finger again – “I asked you to come here.”

She begrudgingly moves towards me.

I sweep my leg out. She dodges, but not quickly enough. Her foot slips, and I catch her before she hits the ground. My arm wraps round her waist, and I feel a tiny tremble in her chest.

Her face is close, tilted up towards mine.

“You good?”

“I’m fine.” Her voice is shaky. “Let go.”

I do slowly, positioning her back on her feet. She steps back quickly. Tight workout gear clings to her curves as if it’s begging for my hands. I’m

sweltering in this apartment, even the gym shorts too much, yet Gigi's wearing long sleeves.

Would it be pushing it too far to ask her to take a layer off? Probably.

"You should've told me no if you weren't ready for this."

"I am ready," she snaps.

"You're shaking."

She exhales, frustrated. "Maybe it's adrenaline."

"Maybe it's me."

Her eyes betray her again, tracing the lines of my tattoos, dark ink swirling over my shoulders and my chest, and dropping lower with intensity, as if the V disappearing into my shorts is an invitation. It can be, if she wants.

"Show me again." Her voice comes out breathier than intended.

I put my hand up. "Let's just start from the beginning."

We start slow, demonstrating a simple block and counter. She mimics me, our bodies moving in sync, but every time she swings, I dodge with ease.

"What happened to the feisty little thing who used to pin me with knives?"

She growls.

I grab her arm, pulling her into me for a takedown demonstration. "You've got three seconds to break this hold," I say against her ear. "Ticktock."

She counters, spinning round, her fist cutting through the air towards my jaw. I trap her arm, gentle but with purpose, and twist her round, her back moulding against my chest.

"Too slow," I whisper.

Gigi shivers, but she doesn't move. I don't release her either. I press my palm flat on her stomach, splaying my fingers over her abdomen, pulling her in that last inch.

"Now." My voice drops low. "You going to tell me where you've been hiding?"

She spins out of my hold, eyes flashing with determination.

"Honeymoon?" I ask. "Jamie whisk you off to the Bahamas?"

"Not his kind of thing."

"Is it yours?"

"Why?" she counters. "You taking notes?"

"Maybe."

We trade blows – her jabs light and precise, mine firm but controlled. She's quick, but I'm quicker. I block a kick and pull her close again, our faces inches apart. Her cheeks are flushed, sweat glistening on her forehead.

"Where does your husband think you are right now?" My hand lingers on her waist, my thumb tracing a slow circle on her hip.

Her breath catches. "Why'd you ask that?"

"Because if you were mine, I'd know where you were. Every minute of every day. Who you were with. What you were doing."

She twists in my hold, trying to break free, but I hold her firm.

"Is your possessiveness meant to turn me on?"

I smirk. "Is it working?"

I feel the tremor in her legs as I press closer, backing her against the wall. I cage her in, bracing my weight on the hand beside her head. Our noses brush as a smile creases my mouth.

In the treacherous weeks of her disappearance, Gigi was extracting information after all, pieces here and there. She eventually found the buyer due at Pixies. Hugo, a Spanish man, never seen without his right-hand men. Gigi found all three of their mugshots in Richard's office. Jack was able to set up perimeter tracking at all British airports and ferry crossings. If anyone with a similar appearance showed, we'd know.

"I've captured you," I rasp, "which makes you mine."

She doesn't move, her breath shaking against my neck.

My thumb brushes her pulse as I position her, drawing both hands above her head. Her limbs loosen, eyes never leaving mine.

She's breathless, forbidden, and intoxicating.

"I'm going to release you ... Will you run?"

Her response is a tremble of breath.

I back away, though her hands remain above her head as if I'm still holding her hostage, her back slightly bowed, eyes dark.

I stare down at her. "You tell me to leave, and I will ..."

She swallows.

I lower my head, skimming my lips over her collarbone, across her chest, then I drop to my knees. My mouth hovers above her waistband. The sliver of olive skin glistens with a light sheen of sweat, and I ache to taste it.

My hands start at her hips, moving to her waist. My desire to just fucking hold her has me wrapping my arms round her. I flatten my palm between her shoulder blades, pulling her tighter.

Her voice wobbles. “Harry, I—”

Poppy strides in.

I rest my temple against Gigi’s stomach with a defeated sigh. “Fuck.”

I feel something move through my hair, gentle fingertips threading through the strands. I tilt up my head, skimming her skin. Her eyes hold mine momentarily before she slips her hands free as if being caught doing something she shouldn’t.

Poppy coughs to clear the tension. Does this little wench always need to walk in at the most inconvenient times?

“The uglier sibling is on the phone,” she says. “It’s bad.”

I rise to my feet, nearing the phone. Gigi closes in on my right, wiping sweat from her brow. Poppy holds it between us, putting it on speaker.

Jack’s voice crackles through the line. “We’ve got intel moving fast.”

“You’re certain?” I ask.

“Hugo hit the coast twenty minutes ago. They’re due to arrive in London in a few hours.”

Gigi mutters, “Shit.”

“That’s not all.” Poppy grimaces.

“My crew are tied up with an extraction up north. We’ve been trying to gain access to Pixies’ guest list all week, but it’s too risky. If they suspect a rat, they’ll close it down.” Jack pauses, and I’m already bracing, my muscles locked tight. “Your name’s already on the list, Harry. They know you.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “There’s no other way.”

I’m a second away from snapping the phone in half.

I run a tense hand through my hair, forcing my breathing to steady. *Gain the trust of human traffickers.* I can feel bile creeping its way up my throat at the thought of playing the part of a buyer interested in acquiring women.

I grit out, “So what does this mean?”

“You’ll need someone to pose as yours ...” The line falters for a moment. “Put on a display so they think you’re one of them. Make it look like you’ve got a willing girl under your thumb.”

“Who would possibly agree to that?”

Poppy’s eyes flicker – only slightly, but I spot it.

I feel a surge of protectiveness as Gigi’s eyes widen knowingly, my hand instinctively reaching out to her, but I stop myself.

She shoots a sidelong glare at Poppy. “Why can’t you do it?”

“*Gross*,” she mutters. “I’m married, don’t forget.”

Gigi glares, narrowing her eyes. “So am *I*.”

*Would it really be so bad?* the selfish, anxious part of me thinks instinctively. Then, as I suddenly come to the reminder she’ll be surrendering her dignity, I want to strangle her fucking brother, former best mate or not.

“What about Emily? What’s she up to nowadays?”

“Gigi.” Poppy’s voice drops deadly serious. “That’s his *cousin*.”

“You know Richard, how he acts, what he’s capable of, G. You’re better equipped for this scenario than any of my team,” Jack says. “Think about the girls who don’t have a choice.”

Her fingertips tangle in her hair, concealing her flushed face.

Poppy is uncharacteristically sympathetic, placing a hand on her shoulder.

With a soft exhale, Gigi pulls her hands free, meeting my eye. “It’s not you I’m worried about.”

“Jamie,” I say knowingly.

She hesitates for a beat, then she nods.

“I have an idea,” Poppy sighs, “but you’re not going to like it.”

Gigi turns from me to Poppy as if looking for confirmation. “Whatever it is, we’ll give it a try.”

Scepticism has me stepping closer to the phone, but Poppy hangs up, slipping it into her back pocket.

“This isn’t something your brother should hear.”

“Spit it out then,” Gigi quips, flustered.

Poppy maintains eye contact and details, “If you’re looking to pass off as unrecognisable, you need to dress in something so daring they’ll be too blindsided by what you’re wearing to even make the correlation. Pixies has plenty of lingerie—”

Yeah, absolutely fucking not.

No. No way.

The thought of men seeing Gigi in such a vulnerable manner has my hands already flexing, imagining the joy I’ll get smashing their skulls in. Obliterating the images of her ingrained in their putrid minds.

I’m reeling with madness, only clinging to fragments of the conversation. Something about *sitting on his lap*, then needing to *escalate if needed*. Wanting to be seen as submissive, under his control.

I glance at Gigi. She stands there, arms crossed, her face a mask of determination. But I can see the unease in her eyes; the thick lump in her throat.

For the sake of my own inability to stay calm, I put myself in her shoes. She must be fucking terrified, the weight of the women heavy on her shoulders. And in the disgusting reality we're faced with, I know I'd never trust her life in anyone's hands but my own. Jamie fucking Callahan included.

I'm finally coming back round when Poppy concludes, "There are plenty of costume wigs at Pixies to choose from, and coloured contact lenses too."

Gigi nods, swallowing hard, but it looks more like surrender than agreement. Poppy's eyes flick to me, and the vein in my neck throbs with unease, but I nod too.

"But what if he does notice?" Gigi asks, a hint of either guilt or fear. "What do we do then?"

"I won't let anyone hurt you," I say. "I promise you that."

She gives a small nod, her tight-lipped smile not reaching her eyes. Poppy slips her phone from her back pocket, and I notice her enjoyment in watching it ring before she answers Jack again.

Voice tight, he asks, "You told them?"

"I did."

He says nothing, encouraging Gigi to ask, "When do we need to be ready?"

"Hugo and his men are expected to rest for the evening, so we'll need you both at Pixies tomorrow night."

She nods, pulling herself together quickly with poise.

I narrow my eyes sceptically at the phone as Jack outlines the final detail – a flight back Thursday night, this being our only shot – and that losing focus will sacrifice everything.

His voice is a distant buzz as I backtrack. There's not a glimmer of remorse for what he's putting his sister through; not a hiccup in his tone. Although he once took pride of place as my best friend, this is where we differ.

Jack favours the lives of all women.

I favour the life of *my* woman.

I'll protect Gigi always, even when she confesses to me what she's hiding, no matter how terrifying I fear her lies will be.

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# FORTY-NINE

*Gigi*

I sit on the edge of the bathtub beneath a flickering bulb, my feet skimming the laminate floor. Red lingerie clings to my body underneath my open robe, a lace corset hugs my breasts, matching knickers ride up my ass, and stockings stop on my upper thigh. My skin blooms purple and green underneath the sheer fabric – the ghost of Jamie’s hands.

Poppy is kneeling between my legs, clicking open the concealer palette with a sigh. “He really did a number on you this time.”

Her fingers are practiced, but I still bite down on my wobbling lip to keep from wincing.

Her gaze flicks up, then back down. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

She dabs on makeup layer by layer. Her mouth twists as if she wants to say something but knows it won’t change anything, though she eventually gives in to temptation.

“This is why you disappeared.”

It’s not a question.

I turn my head away.

“Fucking hell, Gigi.”

She smothers a layer across the scar on my chest and the finger-shaped shadows on my arm.

I’ve been avoiding the outside for the sake of protecting the lie. Jamie hasn’t opposed, enjoying keeping me on a leash. With what’s at stake –

Andy, Harry, and the girls – I can't fall at the last hurdle. Too much is riding on my promise.

And if tonight doesn't work, I don't know if Jamie will let me live to see next week.

Jack's been on the phone detailing final plans for tonight. I'm certain he only called to ensure I haven't backed out. Judging by the thundering of my heart, perhaps I should have. He asked to speak with Harry privately, leaving us to get ready in the bathroom, since Andy only occasionally appears from the bedroom.

"I hate him," Poppy says.

I'm half-distracted. "Jack?"

"No. Jamie."

The words sit heavy in the air.

"I want to tell him," she says, her voice shaking. "Harry, Jack, the world."

"You can't."

"I *want* to."

Tears well in my eyes. "You promised."

"I know." She loosens the corset, blending concealer into the mottled skin of my ribs. "You have to tell him tonight, when this is all over. He'll find out from someone else otherwise."

I feel a surge of anger and shame. The extractor fan buzzes louder in the quiet, eating away at me.

Poppy's voice is barely above a whisper. "You can trust him."

*I know.*

With each passing hour, I'm getting closer to accepting the fact I'll have to tell Harry soon. But it's his reaction that scares me most.

"Turn a bit."

I shift, and Poppy works on the bruises creeping up my side, her touch clinical but caring.

"I'm almost done."

I close my eyes, letting myself dream. Maybe this heist will change everything. Maybe I'll be able to put it behind me like a bad dream.

Poppy rises to her feet, tilting my chin up with one hand and slipping the contact lens in with the other, the cool blue film snapping into place.

"Other one," she says.

She pushes the second lens in and then moves to my side, tugging the black wig onto my head. It's sleek and chopped close to my shoulders, the

ends dyed a deep red, matching my lip stain. I watch as she positions the strands just right before stepping back to survey her work.

I look in the cracked mirror in Harry's bathroom, shock forcing me to blink. I turn my chin back and forth, meeting Poppy's gaze in the reflection.

"I barely recognise you."

I offer a weak smile. "That's the point."

She steps round to face me fully, slipping the robe back onto my shoulders and tightening the waist with a knot. The breath I inhale pulls at the tender spots of my skin.

Poppy gestures to the painkillers on the sink. I take them in my palm as the phone rings in her pocket. She barely looks up.

"I'll be just a minute." She slips out the door, muttering quietly, "Dad?"

I turn back to the mirror. Poppy was right. There's nothing recognisable behind the costume, every identifiable part of me concealed.

I just hope it's enough to trick Jamie, Richard, and their crooks.

The door groans, and I lift my head.

"Everything okay at home?"

I meet Emily's gaze through the mirror. There's a long, sharp silence as we stare at each other, no sound other than the *zing* of the faulty bulb and the door shutting behind her with a soft click.

Harry enlightened me to her vigilance in case I find myself in her firing line. I'm already preparing as she glances over the façade, her eyes drifting to my wedding ring on the countertop, the diamond catching the dim light.

"Congratulations," she drawls. "I saw your face in the paper, and I thought, 'No, not Gigi Thomas'."

"I'm not here to fight with you."

She laughs, the sound full of disbelief and resentment, stepping forwards as if she's sizing me up. If she were to swing at me, I'd probably let her.

"Do you know what it's like ... to hold someone together who's on the brink of giving it all up? Do you have *any idea*?"

I nod slowly. Not because I know what's it's like – though I do – but because I hear her. God, I hear her. She's just trying to protect the man I've destroyed. And I would've done the same if the roles were reversed. Probably worse.

Her voice turns so quiet it's barely audible. "He loves you – you know that?"

I breathe softly. "I know."

Her eyes narrow, watching me for a stretched-out moment before she warns, “Think very carefully about what you’re doing.”

Someone clears their throat.

We both turn to the doorway, where Harry’s standing, his shoulder resting against the wooden frame, legs crossed at the ankles. He heard every word.

“That’s enough,” he orders.

Emily stammers over nothing, the sight of him within my vicinity bringing on a fresh wave of protectiveness. “I’m not watching you get hurt again.” She shakes her head, whipping it towards me. “Do you realise the damage you cause—?”

“Emily,” Harry cuts in, firm.

She doubles down. “*Do you?*”

“*Emily*,” he growls. “If you even think about saying another word, I’ll rip out your tongue with my bare hands and make you plead forgiveness without the ability to speak. Get the fuck out!”

I duck my head as she follows begrudgingly, pulling the door shut behind her. Their voices are muffled behind it. I can’t make out anything other than a string of curses, then Harry’s low, unforgiving voice having the last word.

The front door slams a moment later.

My feet pad against the floorboards before I turn the handle. When I step into the kitchen, Harry is resting his head against the front door. He doesn’t lift it as he says, “She shouldn’t have said that to you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. She wasn’t wrong.”

He draws his head back, passing the kitchen counter as he approaches. He slips his signature dagger into his palm, spinning it between his fingers. “You’re not damaging, Gigi,” he says, cradling my cheek with his spare hand. “You give me *purpose*. But I can’t keep asking – not anymore.”

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know,” I vow. “If we make it out.”

I’ll tell Harry everything. The beatings, the betrayal, how my heart bleeds for him.

“When,” he corrects me. “*When* we make it out, you’ll tell me everything.”

My voice cracks slightly. “I swear.”

Harry nods, eyes glimmering with concern for the truth that sits within the cage I’ve built. He blinks it away to ask, “How are you feeling?”

“Nervous,” I admit, reaching out for the vodka bottle on the countertop. “I’ll drink to take the edge off.”

He moves quickly, placing the surface of the blade on my wrist, mid-air towards the bottle's neck. "I wouldn't put more in your system than you have to..."

Confusion forces me to draw in my brows. *I don't understand.* The question sits on the tip of my tongue.

But realisation hits me slowly. "You're drugging me."

Harry audibly swallows. "Jack's seen what we might be up against. The story needs to be believable, and that'll only work if you're under the influence." His words are followed by a strangled breath. He hates the reality possibly more than I do. "I won't let them lay a finger on you, but if they offer you something else ... I'm not sure what I can do."

"And you want me to put my entire trust into you?"

"Yes." He takes a slow step closer. Rather than taking the same step back, I raise my chin to maintain his gaze. "Put your full trust into the person who betrayed you, ruined your life, and lied to you."

*We stand on even ground then.* I part my lips to say it.

Harry moves the blade up my skin slowly, until it's flat over my mouth, silent at his command. The sharp tip presses into the centre of my bottom lip, drawing a bead of blood out onto the blade. Harry presses it to his mouth, between his lips.

"But as I've always promised you, baby, I would die before I ever let a man put his hands on you without your consent. I once made a threat I'd turn Pixies into a slaughterhouse for you. Don't think I won't still stand by that promise." He slips the knife from his mouth, then asks, "Do you trust me?"

Yes. "No."

"Good." He smirks.

The blade appears in front of me again, but when I look down, a white circular pill sits on the tip of the steel.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I'd rather you not know."

"That's a huge level of trust to give to you, St. James."

A small, knowing smile briefly replaces the grimace tugging at the edge of his mouth, though the weight of the drug continues to plague the silence, drowning us both.

"Just know that I'll never let anything bad happen to you."

I stare at the pill, struggling to stray from it, until Harry says with quiet emphasis, “Never, baby.”

“If something goes wrong in there—”

“Don’t give me that. Don’t expect me to do the honourable thing, because you won’t like it when I don’t,” he says. “You’ve been my priority since the moment I laid eyes on you. Tonight doesn’t change that, no matter what’s at stake.”

The look in his emerald eyes is so demanding and reassuring I can’t help but to be drawn to them. Slowly, he slips the tip of the blade between my parted lips and onto my waiting tongue.

I swallow the pill.

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# FIFTY

*Harry*

Pixies is just as I remember it – feminine, with velvet draped on every wall, and disgustingly pink in a way that makes me shiver inwardly. The music bounces off the walls, vibrating in the depths of my bones.

I lower myself into the leather booth, spreading my arms wide across the back of it. Gigi approaches, the lingerie hugging her in all the right places. I trace the inside of my cheek, withholding a groan. It takes every dutiful part of me not to drop my gaze to her cleavage. Despite the display she's about to put on, I'm holding onto my last ounce of respect.

I wasn't going to drug Gigi completely – fuck what Jack asked me. I trust her to play the part, and I'm not having her do anything she wouldn't do sober. Though she doesn't have to know that.

The pill keeps her pliable, a soft buzz in her veins that blurs the edges but leaves her sharp enough to be aware of her actions – I made sure of that. It'll provide the extra confidence she needs, but all her actions will be made of her own free will.

Awareness flickers in her eyes, highlighting the piercing blue contacts she wears. I suck in a breath as she lowers herself down, her knees bracketing my hips, her face only a few cruel inches from mine as she presses herself into my chest.

An arm loops round my neck, her fingers lacing through my hair. I feel the heat of her core against my crotch before she grinds her hips down. Her

body stirs something primal in me, her breathy whimper against the shell of my ear making the leather groan under my tight grip.

Gigi shakes slightly, the chemical haze sparking adrenaline in her blood. I draw back to look at her. Her eyes are glazed but focused.

“You okay?”

She nods.

The second she isn’t, this charade ends immediately.

Her gaze holds mine with an intensity that’s far more intimate when she drags her hips deeper.

“I’m sorry for whatever reaction I may have.”

“Are you though?”

I smile against her neck. “Not really.”

Slowly, deliberately, she starts to move, her hips rolling in a slow, sensual rhythm against my lap. The friction is electric, her lingerie practically nothing against my trousers. I can feel every delicious part of her. The bulge of her clit as she rides my length.

*This is fucking dangerous.*

I hiss, shifting my hips to loosen the restraint on my rock-hard cock. The line tethered to reality blurs as her ass grinds down, circling with a deliberate tease that draws a low groan from my throat. I cup her ass, squeezing, pulling her close until she’s fully settled against me.

Gigi’s voice is a breathy whimper. “Your heart’s beating really fast.”

“Just playing the part.” A low growl leaves my throat as she rolls her hips in a slow figure eight. “Are you nervous?”

“Not really.” Her lips ghost my jaw. “Not when I have you.”

*Well, this is fucking torture.*

I fight the urge to flip the table and end this display right here. I slip my hand lower, inwards, brushing her sensitive spot through her underwear, feeling the wet lace.

“H-Harry,” she gasps.

I spot movement by the bar. Hugo – sleazy, black hair, a scar carving the side of his face – has been transformed to slightly presentable in a business suit. His right-hand men flank his sides, Rafael and Daniel, neither too dissimilar in appearance. They could easily pass as twins.

All three of them, each one more repulsive than the last, trace the way the lace rides up Gigi’s ass. “Don’t lose focus,” Jack said, yet I’m minutes away

from carving out their eyeballs until there's nothing left but endless black pools in their sockets.

I tamp down the ferocious jealousy, brushing the short hair off Gigi's neck while I maintain eye contact with the table. I place a delicate kiss on her shoulder. Her breath hitches, arousal dampening my trousers.

"They're watching." My hands roam up her back. "I won't let them touch you."

Her hips slow but don't stop, her eyes meeting mine. She breathes, "I know."

For a moment, it's just the world zooming in to her body against mine. I'm immobilised by her stare, and when I blink, two of the men have suddenly materialised on the sofa opposite us, nothing but a low circular table to keep us apart.

"How much?" Hugo asks in a thick Spanish accent.

That jealousy sparks into blinding, white-hot rage. Gigi stiffens on my lap. Her grinding falters as the words sink in, but I guide her with my hands, encouraging her to keep the show going.

I force a laugh, trying to sound casual. Inwardly, I'm still ripping out eyeballs. "She's not for sale."

Eyes still lingering on her ass, Hugo raises his brow, while I fight the urge to bark at him.

"I don't like my property being touched," I say. "Surely, you can understand that."

Daniel, the third man, circles me slowly. He dips his head, and I bet he's trying to figure out if Gigi's been drugged. The glassiness of her eyes has him giving a stiff, approving nod in my peripheral.

I feel Gigi's heartbeat against me – or maybe it's mine, raging in my chest from narrowly passing the first hurdle.

"It doesn't mean I'm not looking to expand my stock." The lie rolls off my tongue. "This one has been declared missing for eleven months now. I snatched her up, stumbling round Camden, drunk and alone."

I grip Gigi's chin tight, but not enough to hurt, placing a heavy kiss on her lips and sweeping my tongue into her mouth in such a crude display that I see Hugo volley his head back. She jostles, but it's only a passing beat before she's kissing me back with a similar intensity.

I can feel the heat building between us, movements calculated to keep their attention. My hands slide up to cup her breasts, squeezing just enough

that they notice. Her breathy whimper vibrates my mouth, forcing my cock to throb, making it nearly impossible to focus.

When I pull back, Hugo is leaning forward, his elbows on the table. His expression doesn't change. "So you've been to the warehouses?"

*Warehouses? As in, where they're keeping the girls?*

Renewed anger slams through me at the thought of women strung up helplessly in such facilities. I open my mouth to speak, but Gigi leans in subtly.

"It's a trick." Her voice is a breathless pant against my ear. "Richard mentioned it on the phone. It's their way of seeing if you're too keen. He's trying to fool you."

"Funny of you to think you're able to waste my time." I chuckle darkly, shaking my head. "If you're not going to fuel my interest, you can just leave."

"I've heard about you, Harry St. James." He drawls my name like it's poison, tapping a finger on the rim of his glass. "What makes you think we can trust you?"

I force a calmness through me.

"Hudson Anderson paid one million pounds for Gigi Thomas seven months ago. It's the highest bid on record, and I witnessed everything." My palms run up her thighs. "The terror in her eyes, the way she broke and collapsed. I know a vulnerable girl when I see one, and Christ, she was fucking *helpless*."

Gigi's fingers feather through my hair, drawing herself that bit closer as her hips move. I feel the chill and the stiffness seeping through my limbs at the memory.

She nuzzles my neck, her voice an airy breath. "I'm okay."

"I'm looking for young, obedient girls," I continue. "Money is no issue."

Daniel lowers himself beside Rafael. His eyes narrow, disbelief keeping him guarded, but I see Hugo's intrigue creeping through.

Their silence feels like a small victory – an inch closer. I keep my face blank as I say, "I need to know what I'm getting into and who I can trust. Who's the main man round here?"

The three men snicker, the sound of clinking glasses and thump of the bass intensifying.

"Something funny?" I ask.

Rafael quips, "You a cop or something?"

“No one’s running it, kid.” Hugo crosses his arms tight. “Paolo Ricci and Richard were the organisers before some bird gave Paolo the chop. Richard controls the central location where the girls are being held now. That’s it.”

*Fuck.*

My stomach twists, but I keep my expression neutral even as rage shimmers beneath the surface. I need details – locations, names of the people bringing the girls to Richard, anything that can lead me to where they’re being held.

“Richard, huh?” I say, letting my hands wander down Gigi’s side, cupping her ass. She arches into my touch, whimpering. “Where’s he keeping them?”

Her hips press harder, grinding down in slow, teasing circles that make me feel a mix of guilt and desire despite how hard I try to stay detached.

Rafael’s thin blond hair clings to his forehead. He leans a tad closer, scepticism lining his brows. “What game are you playing?”

There’s a cruelty behind his eyes. The sadistic fucker that likes to hurt women has the audacity to look at *me* with disapproval. I’m going to kill him, slowly, and bask in his agony.

My attention snaps to Gigi when I feel a subtle shift – a quick, involuntary tensing of her muscles. Her hips stutter, faltering the rhythm.

I pull back to look in her eyes completely. They flicker with a darkness that wasn’t there a moment ago. Her thighs clamp tight round mine as if she’s trying to shrink into me.

And suddenly, she seems completely sober.

“What’s wrong?” I mouth, instinctively palming her waist.

She doesn’t answer right away, her eyes darting towards the bar, where a new figure emerges. I follow her gaze through the crowd.

Jamie Callahan.

He waltzes in, his arm draped over some blonde. How fucking dare he arrive with someone else when he has everything he could ever want at home.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur calmly, but inside, I’m seething.

She’s barely moving now, as if any motion might draw too much attention. I slide my hand up her back, trailing the curve of her spine, feeling the knots of tension under her skin.

I force myself back to the present. Voice clipped, I ask again, “Where are they being held?”

Hugo growls, irritated. “Are you interested or not?”

In the distance, Jamie laughs, the sound carrying through the club. Gigi’s thighs clamp tighter round me in defence.

“Look at me.”

She shifts slightly to pull away, her eyes still averted, but I dig my fingers into her waist, demanding her attention. She presses her lips together grimly, and as she repositions herself on my lap, the flickering neon sign catches her skin in a way I haven’t noticed before.

I turn to Hugo as he speaks, then I whip my head back.

A patch of swollen purple bruising peeks out from the edge of her lingerie, marring the smooth skin.

I freeze.

What. The. Fuck. Is. That?

Gigi tugs at the hem of the lingerie. The movement sends another jolt of fear through me. She’s pretending it’s nothing, but I see the fear and pain ingrained in her features.

Fuck the trafficking ring. Fuck the intel. Fuck this heist.

Fuck *everything*.

*What the fuck is this?*

“Gigi ...” I mutter, voice barely holding steady. “What ...?”

My thumb traces the edge of one of the markings without thinking. I draw it back, rubbing it between my fingertips. Makeup ... No.

“There’s a bidding war happening next week.”

I draw my head up momentarily.

“Highest bidder takes the prize. It’ll be no different than before—”

The words are a distant buzz, drowned out by the roar in my ears.

My gaze is still zeroed in on Gigi’s bruises, my confusion deepening with each second. She tries to tug the fabric again. I capture her wrist then release her immediately, frightened to even touch her.

My body starts to vibrate with the lethal rage coursing through it.

I’m about to rip someone’s fucking head off.

“*Qué está haciendo?*” Daniel mutters, his thick accent seeping through.

“*Don’t lose focus.*” Jack’s phantom voice stabs through me. “*It sacrifices everything.*”

Ignoring both the physical and mental voices, I grip Gigi’s chin, turning her back to face me. I see the defiance in her expression, and the momentary fear. My heart near shatters at the sight.

*Was it Jamie?*

She shakes her head at the unspoken question. Either she's ashamed or she doesn't want to drag me into her mess. I want to shake the truth out of her, but I'm caught between wanting to shield her and not knowing how.

Memories barrel into me so quickly I'm forced to blink.

The breakdown in Paris when the coordinates led to nothing. The way she shook so violently, as if the world was ending—

She *didn't* scream for Jamie that night. It was *at* him. She was screaming, frightened, knowing what she was returning home to.

I suck in a sharp breath. She fucking lied to me.

"Harry?" Hugo's voice comes through again. "Last time, are you fucking interested?"

"*No confío en él,*" Rafael mutters.

Daniel snaps a response, a tense discussion in their language.

Dazed, I turn to face them but glance at Gigi in my peripheral, seeing the faint yellow of her ribs peeking out from the sides of the lace. A suspicious marking on her chest, hastily covered with makeup.

*Did he fucking burn her?*

Rage floods through me, drowning out the three men entirely. It builds to a fever pitch, my vision tunnelling, my heart pounding with such ferocity it's about to burst.

Why the fuck didn't she tell me?

I would've—

And then, like a bad omen emerging from the shadows, Jamie saunters over.

My mind screams for violence as his steps come closer. He's close enough that I could snap his neck right now; feel his bones crack under my fingers.

The fury is a living thing inside of me, roaring for release, demanding I grab the knife from inside my shirt and slit his throat. The thoughts claw at me, making my vision blur.

*Not here,* I force myself to think. *Not now. Not yet.*

I need to hear it from her first. And she's not about to tell me here, with sleazy men and rapists crawling every disgusting inch of this place.

With Jamie only a few feet away, coming closer, I stand abruptly. Gigi hits the crook in my elbow as it darts out to catch her.

"Outside."

“Harry—”

“Now.”

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# FIFTY-ONE

*Gigi*

I grab a coat from the hook as I leave, to conceal the lingerie, but it does nothing to mask the chill as Pixies' front doors shut behind me. I turn a corner, stepping into a nearby alley. I slip the wig from my head and take the contacts out of my eyes, blinking freely now.

Harry's footsteps echo behind me. I spin round as he paces closer, hands tugging at the collar of my coat. His eyes bore into the poker scar.

"Princess, what the fuck is that?"

Dozens. Dozens of scars litter his body. A vicious reminder, he once claimed, that he was indebted to me for the rest of his life. I mirror that feeling more than he knows.

His jaw tenses with impatience. "Did Jamie do this to you?"

"No," I say instantly. "The burn wasn't him."

"Is that why you flinched when he came up beside you?" Harry's voice croaks. "Is he hurting you? Is that why you're with him—?" He cuts himself off mid-sentence. "Does ...?" He tries to speak, but the words break apart halfway through. "Does he force himself on you?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to scream my denial, to put on a façade to protect him *always*, but I falter. My voice fails me, laying out the truth between us like a beacon of light in the dark.

Harry nods knowingly, a lethal, chilling calm washing over him. "Then why are you married to him?"

I shake my head madly.

“Tell me – right now. You know what? I’ll fucking kill him instead.”

My fingers snap round his wrist, stopping him mid-stride.

“Why?”

I shake my head, quicker now. “Don’t make me say.”

“Gigi, get off.” He pulls at his wrist, meeting my eye. “I don’t want to hurt you, so I need you to *let go*.”

I strangle out, “No.”

I tighten my grip. His body trembles with the physical torment of withholding his rage.

Baring his teeth, he roars, “Fucking tell me!”

I fight the instinct to flinch. Tears spill down my cheeks as my chest breaks in two, my breath hitching. “I did it for you.”

His eyes flood with bewilderment. “What—? What do you mean?”

My shoulders are shaking, barely held together by the weight of what I haven’t said. “Harry, no—”

“I need you to say it, Gigi. I swear to fucking God.”

My fingers won’t stop shaking, and I curl them tighter round his wrist. But I see the disassociation there; the confusion and betrayal in his eyes.

“Harry, please.”

His eyes shimmer with unshed tears before I even say the words.

The fight leaves me, and I break into a sob. I try to wipe the tears away and pretend I still have control, but I don’t.

“I did it because—” I choke on the rest of the sentence, the confession lodged in my throat, my voice shattering with the words. “Because they’d kill you otherwise.”

He takes a step back – not big, but enough for me to feel the distance between us. And something behind his eyes just ... dims. His gaze passes over me with utter devastation, like he doesn’t recognise me. His emerald eyes are lifeless now, as if he’s completely disassociated from the present.

His mouth opens slightly as if he wants to say something – but nothing comes out.

Everything comes to a screeching halt at a deep, familiar voice.

“Gigi?” the person calls. “Is that you?”

Jamie.

Harry doesn’t move. Doesn’t blink. Just stares past me like he isn’t here anymore. I’ve broken something in him that can’t even register pain.

I surrender to panic, shoving at his chest, concealing him in the dark shadows creeping along the sides of the alley. “G-get out of here.”

He backs up easily, even though in any other circumstance I’d struggle to lay a finger on him. Then he snaps back to the present, clutching his fingers round my wrists. He holds them between us, tormented, his mouth slightly open as though he’s forgotten how to breathe.

“He can’t see you.”

The steps draw nearer.

Jamie calls again. “Gigi?”

Disbelief continues to render Harry still.

“Go,” I beg.

I’m not allowing the months I signed my life away protecting Harry’s life to amount to nothing. Not when we’re unprepared for a fight. I’ll add another selfish tally to the wrong decisions I’ve made, though none stand clearer than the decisions that leave him unharmed.

I give him a final shove, and he falls into the darkness.

Squeezing my shoulder firmly, Jamie pulls me round to face him. “I told you not to come out tonight,” he states, brows drawn tight. “You’re meant to be at home.”

“I wanted to see you.”

He brings his fingertips to my hair, rubbing the few strands between them. Then he lifts them to his nose, inhaling deeply before exhaling. “Let’s go home.”



As I step through the front door, Jamie pushes past me, headed straight to the kitchen. I toe off my shoes, making it only a few steps as I watch from the safety of the entryway. He pours himself a glass of whiskey, rolling his shirtsleeves up to his elbows.

He takes a slow sip. “Are you not taking off your coat?”

Alarm flares through me at his cold voice, but I remain still.

Silence descends, increasing his staggered breathing.

The glass splinters between his fingertips, the cracked shards shattering to the marble tiles. He flexes his hands, the remaining fragments trickling to

the floor like rainfall, and then turns his back, running his hands under the tap.

I peer up the stairs slowly, hoping to go unmissed with my quiet strides down the hall.

“You’ll stay in my room tonight.”

No.

Panic has me near stumbling, my hand meeting the wall. I turn round hesitantly. He’s leaning against the counter, the sight making my skin crawl with the effect of thousands of tiny spiders.

“Have I done something wrong?”

“Something wrong?” he asks dismissively. “Why would you have done something wrong, Gigi?”

I see it – the look in his eyes.

He knows.

He knows where I was tonight, why I was there, who I was with.

I hesitantly pass my gaze over the block of knives. They’re usually stacked full, yet one is missing. Perhaps it’s in the dishwasher. Perhaps there are a million excuses for where it could be, but the palpitations of my heart suspect the bitter truth.

While I try desperately to rein in my fear, Jamie’s voice is deadly calm.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

I should run free. I should defend myself. I should leave now—

A sound echoes in the hallway. I barely register it.

Jamie sighs irritably, pushing himself off the counter. He barges out of the kitchen, and I watch as he traipses through the hall, slamming the front door and locking it tight.

“Can’t even close the fucking door behind you,” he snaps. “Are you capable of anything?”

I duck my head. “No.”

I watch him in my peripheral as he leaves, ascending the stairs.

“I expect you in my room in ten minutes.”

I’m in the room within five, blade in hand.

As I slip under the sheets in fresh pyjamas, they feel bitterly cold despite the excessive tog count.

With each second that passes, I feel everything. *Hear* everything. The ticking of the clock. The spray of water from Jamie’s shower. The groans of the house.

My hand trembles on the knife tucked under my pillow. One of us isn't going to make it out of this night alive. If I run now, he'll only find me, and I need this fight – I've persevered with him enough.

The shower stops, and I listen out. The closing of the shower screen. The pad of his feet against the tiled floor. The wipe of the mirror. A routine I've grown accustomed to before his violence.

Will this time be my last?

Jamie exits the bathroom, steam billowing round him. He's naked, water droplets clinging to his skin. He doesn't even bother with a towel. He just stands there, dripping onto the carpet. I turn my head away as he nears the bed. He grips my jaw hard, forcing me to face him. I let him turn my chin.

His voice is low, edged with that familiar menace that makes my stomach churn. "Look. At. Me."

I do – slowly. His pupils are slightly enlarged, anger lingering under the surface.

"Why were you at Pixies tonight?"

"To see you."

He grips my cheeks, curling his fingertips into the skin. He squeezes so hard I feel my teeth groaning with the movement, aching for redemption.

"Now the truth," he persists. "Why were you there?"

I couldn't even speak if I wanted to.

He shoves two fingers into my mouth, wrapping them round my bottom row of teeth. He tugs down forcefully, sharper with each second. My jaw screams in agony, feeling like it might snap.

I slap my hands on his chest. "STOP," I try to say, but it comes out muffled. Nothing.

I'm completely at his mercy.

Again.

"Harry St. James was in the venue tonight."

My jaw groans until, suddenly, I feel a crack.

I scream through hissed teeth, tears falling from my eyes. I attempt to beg, but it's fruitless. Jamie eases the ache slowly, withdrawing his hand.

For one pathetic second, I think I've gotten into him.

My hands cushion my jaw, and I wince at the pain, barely hearing him say, "And he was there with a woman. Some whore, they said ..."

Jamie leans closer, *closer*, until I can feel his hot breath on my face, laced with the bitterness of whiskey. "So I ask you again, Gigi, why were you at

Pixies tonight?"

My hand slips under the pillow, and I wrap my palm round the knife's hilt.

His dark eyes bore into mine. I stare back.

"I'm giving you three seconds." His features sharpen, but his voice is void of emotion as he counts. "Three ... two ..."

"One," I finish.

Before he's even registered it, I swing hard, impaling the side of his neck. He roars as I slice through the skin, embedding it into the part just underneath his jaw, narrowly missing his carotid artery.

*FUCK.*

I twist in his hold as his hands slip from me, clawing at the sheets behind me to slip out from underneath him. My hands flail, grabbing for something – the lamp on the nightstand, a book – anything to use as a weapon. I manage to knock over a glass, shards scattering across the floor, but it's not enough.

I flip myself onto my front, clinging to the end of the bed to pull myself to my feet—

There's a flash of something metallic in his hand before he swings.

He stabs deep into my side. A burn of fire rips through my flesh, and I scream, the sound echoing off the walls. Pain explodes through me, white-hot and blinding. Blood seeps out, staining the sheets.

Hands grip my hips, flipping me onto my back. Adrenaline surges through me, pushing me to fight. I lash out instinctively, my nails raking across Jamie's face. He roars, the sound shaking the room.

When he staggers backwards, I manage to roll to the side, landing hard on the wooden floor. My vision blurs from the impact, and from the wound on my side. Jamie's on me in a second, his weight pinning me down. The knife clatters to the floor as he cuts off my pyjama shorts, using both hands to hold me in place, his knees forcing my legs apart.

"JAMIE, NO!"

I fight back with everything I have, scratching at his arms, biting his shoulder, kicking his torso.

Jamie howls, "You stupid fucking bitch!"

He slaps me hard across the face, the impact snapping my head to the side, and stars explode across my vision.

His grip is unrelenting on my wrists, pinning them above my head with one hand while he forces himself between my legs, his breath rancid against my neck. I thrash wildly, trying to buck him off and screaming for my life despite how awful the reality is.

I thought this day would come, but now it's here, I don't want to die.  
*I don't.*

Jamie releases my wrists, his strong palms capturing my neck, silencing my scream. I pummel my hands into his chest.

He pushes hard with the desperation to kill, limiting the effectiveness of my movements with each lost breath. I gasp for air, my lungs burning, as he squeezes.

"I'm going to kill you." His voice shakes with each word, his whole body vibrating with molten anger. "I'll fucking *kill* you."

His fingers tighten like a noose, and the world starts to fade, black filling my vision. The pain in my side loosens. I feel nothing. Nothing other than the wet sensation of blood smearing the floor underneath me.

And with each second, I feel the truth in his statement.

*He's going to kill me.*

Darkness creeps in, my body going limp under his grip. Jamie's face blurs above me, his eyes gleaming with triumph.

My ears scream with white noise, and I can't hear anything – nothing other than the creak of a floorboard.

In my remaining flicker of light, I peer over Jamie's shoulder.

I see the silhouette of a man; piercing green eyes that hold me captive.

He draws his arm back in one swift movement before slamming down. Jamie's body shudders with the impact, and I watch the trickle of blood start from his hairline.

His head whips to the side with another brutal slash.

He rolls off me, and I cry out, finally clutching onto a breath. My hands grapple for my throat as my thundering heart slams against my ribcage.

*What happened—?*

*What—?*

I turn my attention sideways, my body shaking with the adrenaline coursing through it.

Harry stands there, his lips parted, shaking with an inhale of breath, a look in his eyes that completely obliterates the rage swarming his body. It's

so powerful I barely notice the knife gripped in his palm and the pool of blood dripping from the sharp edge of the blade.

The pain fades slowly as time stands still.

Harry stares at me, straight into my soul, transporting me to somewhere elsewhere. Somewhere where death, pain, and anguish aren't our reality. Somewhere far away from every sacrifice we've made.

Jamie stirs, groaning from the brutal shot Harry inflicted.

Harry blinks as if bringing himself back to the present, and that dark, demonic rage swarms him as he strikes unrelentingly again. And again. And again.

He doesn't stop.

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## FIFTY-TWO

*Harry*

*Every thought comes to fruition in the first few seconds of seeing her.*

*I'll do everything in my power to protect her. Anything that will mean she never faces a moment of pain. I'll crawl to the ends of the earth to gift her everything she's ever wished for.*

*From this very moment, laying eyes on her, I know. I know I'll fall to my knees, if only to provide her with an eternity of peace.*

*She wants me dead? I'll happily provide her the knife to land the brutal blow.*

A distant crack through the memory, the wet sound of blood spraying.

Broken flesh, the echo of bone cracking, my fist lost within the dark red brain matter.

*In the years to come, I'll offer her the world, but it'll be a poor attempt in my desperation to make her happy. Instead I'll give her everything I have. And even then, I'll—*

My skin splits open as it connects with bone, shattering it beneath my knuckles. Jamie's cries were once gurgles, but now ... nothing. The hole in his face is nothing but a dark, infinite void, features indistinguishable.

Yet still, I can't stop.

Something blinds my vision, darker, *darker*.

Then, suddenly: "Where are you taking me?"

I blink back to the present, time distorting.

Gigi's voice is distant, but perhaps that's me. Perhaps I've dissociated so far from our excruciating reality that I'm somewhere faraway.

"To the hospital."

Not Medical – a hospital. Somewhere fucking normal.

So be it if they arrest me for his brutal death. I'm up to my elbows in his blood and bodily matter. It's smeared into the grain of the steering wheel, dripping down the cracks in the leather as I tear through red lights, barely missing a pedestrian on a corner.

The thought won't stop screaming through my skull.

"*I did it for you.*"

I let her walk back to him. He would've fucking *killed* her.

I hiss through my teeth at the memory, feeling myself slip back into that dark, depraved headspace. I have to shake my head to fight it off.

The road ahead is a blur of headlights. I can't hear the engine; can't feel my fingers on the steering wheel. All I know is that she's beside me, her blood soaking through her oversized T-shirt and the towel I pressed against her waist.

Her head lolls to the side, and I glance at her quickly, hair matted to her forehead, bruises climbing the sides of her neck. There's dried blood at the corner of her mouth. Her wrist ... Fuck, her wrist doesn't look right. Bent too far the wrong way.

I step harder on the gas.

The entrance to A&E is full, smokers hovering near bins, kids crying, someone shouting down the phone. I barely park. I throw the car door open and carry her, arms round her shoulders and under her knees.

"HELP!" I shout as I barrel through the sliding doors.

A nurse leaps out from behind the desk. Panic registers in her eyes the moment she sees Gigi, her chest rising slow, crimson *everywhere*. A man in blue scrubs follows quickly.

"She's been stabbed. Her breathing's not right. I think her jaw is broken."

"Put her here!" the man advises.

A trolley is wheeled in from the side, and someone tries to take her from me. I hesitate. My arms lock round her tighter. I don't want to let her go. Not again.

"Sir," they say carefully. "Please – we need to get her stable."

*Shit.*

I lay her down as gently as I can, but I don't step back. Someone else starts to check her pulse, and her soft, strangled whine punches through my ribs.

A doctor joins the chaos. He looks thirty at most, glasses slipping down his nose. I reach into my coat pocket and yank out my wallet, throwing it at his chest. It falls to the floor in front of him, springing open, cards and cash spilling across the tiles.

"She needs the best care," I snap. "I'll cover the whole ward. I'll pay anything."

The doctor looks down at the wallet, unimpressed. "This is the NHS," he says flatly. "We don't work like that. We're a public hospital—"

"Then *make it private*," I snarl. "Call in someone better. Bring someone down from a ward. Bring in the consultant on call. I don't give a fuck how your system works, but *make it work*."

Security edges closer, one of them muttering into a radio. When I peer up, Gigi has already been wheeled down the corridor. I follow, striding ahead, but the nurse steps into my path. She tries to be kind, touching my arm softly.

"She's in good hands, I promise." She says it like she means it. "You'll have to wait outside, sir."

Security stops their determined footsteps as the nurse ushers me into a waiting-room chair. I lower my head into my hands, trying profusely to pull myself together and dull the wrath simmering in my blood.

Time passes – I'm not sure how much. Hours, maybe. I don't check, nor do I ask. I'm so incapable of doing anything that it's only inevitable I'll break.

My hands are still stained red. There's blood under my nails – Gigi or Jamie's, I'm not sure. It's on my wallet too, still lying open on the floor since no one touched it.

The door swings open, and a male nurse steps into the waiting room, clipboard in hand. I'm on my feet before he can say a word. He hesitates, watching me sceptically, like I'm the sick bastard who inflicted this pain on her.

"Gigi," I rush out, "How is she?"

"Her last name?"

He has some fucking balls to be asking me that. If he didn't save lives for a living, I'd happily make him spend the rest of his life regretting ever

speaking to me that way.

“You want to ask me that again?” I say darkly.

“U-uh, she’s conscious,” he says quickly, like he knows I’ll hit him otherwise. “Fractured jaw. Four broken ribs. The puncture wound on her side missed her liver. She’s lost a fair amount of blood, but she’s going to be fine.”

“A-and her wrist?” I ask. “Her wrist didn’t look right.”

“Sprained. We suspect torn ligaments between the bone and the wrist.”

The memory hits me again, slipping me dangerously closer to the edge.

*My eyes sweep over Gigi’s trembling, collapsed body convulsing on the wooden floorboards, her lips blue from being barely able to catch a breath, hands grappling for her throat—*

“She’s in recovery,” a female nurse says cautiously, my exhale coming out as a shudder. “Only family are allowed in at this stage. I’m sorry—”

“No,” I grit out. “But you will be.”

She sighs, defeated, sparing a glance at her colleague. He blinks tiredly, slipping into the mess of A&E without another word. A baby wails in the distance.

“Are you the husband?”

The world is asking for violence today. Husband? Fucking *husband* – the one who did this to her?

She says it again. “Are you the husband?”

A statement, not a question.

She’s trying to help me. *Fuck.*

I hesitate, then I nod stiffly.

She writes something down, gesturing down the hallway for me to follow. I do, cautiously. Every step forwards feels heavier than the last. Is Gigi awake? Broken? Afraid?

Reaching room nine, I pause.

My hand is jittery on the handle, my breath stuck. I flex it, wiping my clammy palm against my jeans and reaching for the door again. I hear her soft voice from inside, her whisper cracking at the edges.

I ... I can’t do it.

## GIGI

Every few minutes, a nurse slips in. Angela stands out from the rest, her name written in cursive on her badge. She was at my side when Harry charged through A&E. Everything after that is a blur, but her kind smile and

her ash-brown hair stand out predominantly through the fog. While my injuries look severe, she assures me they're only minor considering what I suffered, asking if I need any more pain meds.

All I want is for Harry to come in.

His broad shoulders are slumped, elbows resting on his knees, his large frame barely balancing on the chair immediately outside the door.

“Harry?” I rasp, my throat screeching. “Talk to me. Please.”

He says nothing, shifting slightly in the seat. I thought he was angry, but now I’m fairly certain he feels nothing. Not in the way he doesn’t care, but that caring too much hurts.

The nurses speak softly round me, whispering details of the abuse that I still manage to hear. A middle-aged man walks in wearing a crisp police uniform. I look past him as someone mumbles to Harry outside.

“Mrs Callahan, I was hoping we could ask you a few questions.”

It takes me nearly a minute to come to my senses. *Mrs Callahan. Fuck, he’s speaking to me.* I rub my eyes, fighting the desire to clear my throat of its almighty sting.

“Sure,” I croak.

Angela sits me upright, pressing a pillow to my chest as she says, “Hug it for support. It’ll help ease your ribs.”

The officer slips out a notepad, and sweat immediately beads my forehead. “Do you know who did this to you?”

“Uh ...”

The door opens, and I look up too quickly. I recognise the blue eyes of Officer Brady before the sympathetic smile touches her lips. I stare wordless before the reminder I haven’t spoken yet sparks.

“Who did this to you, Mrs Callahan?”

I cringe as the man presses further.

“Can you give me your best recollection of what happened?”

“The poor girl has been *strangled*,” Angela cuts in sharply. “Can you officers not do this another time?”

The male officer opens his mouth to argue but is intercepted by Officer Brady placing a firm hand on his arm. She drops to a crouch at my bedside, and I turn my head away.

“Gigi ...” Her voice is quiet, motherly. “The team have just visited yours and Jamie’s residence.”

I nod barely.

“Our crew searched your home … but there was no sign of him. Actually, there was no evidence of a crime scene at all.”

I whip my head towards her then, my neck screaming with the movement.

“The house has been cleared from top to bottom.”

*Richard.*

Fear rattles my bones. I peer past her to the hallway, where Harry’s still hunched on the plastic chair, unmoving. After battering Jamie to a bloody pulp, he carried me straight to the car. This isn’t his doing.

I know it’s Richard. There’s no way it can’t be.

Our only saving grace is that he purposely avoids Britain’s government sectors. He erected Medical from the ground up for the sake of avoiding the public eye. As long as I remain in this hospital bed, we’re safe. He won’t come here.

“Do you think Jamie covered the scene and fled?” Officer Brady asks.

I look to Harry again. I’m not sure what story he wants me to tell. I’m not sure what lies he’s told. I’m not sure if he’s said anything at all. God, I just need *him*.

I stare for longer than I should, my subtlety washing down the drain. Angela approaches my other side, wrapping the blood pressure cuff round my bicep.

“His nervous system is overwhelmed,” she says, her voice low. “What that man is experiencing is a trauma response. He thinks he failed to protect you, and now he’s dissociating.”

That’s what I keep replaying over and over: one minute, the veins were bulging up his biceps, across the column of his throat, his jaw, and moulding to his temple; then, like the flick of a switch … nothing. He shut down.

My voice barely holds steady. “I never wanted t-to hurt him.”

“This is his mind trying to process something too big, too painful, all at once,” she says. “When someone we love is hurt, it can trigger something primal. Shock, anger, helplessness. You’ve both been hurt. Different wounds, but they both run deep.”

The machine beeps, the cuff practically cutting the blood circulation off to my arm. Angela apologises, jotting down the number on a piece of purple paper.

I turn to Officer Brady, watching the ways her gaze traces the lines of my face before she takes my good hand in a gentle squeeze. The touch is comforting, bringing tears to my eyes.

“For someone like Harry, who carries the weight of protecting people, it feels like he has a duty to you. When he found out what your husband did to you ... it shattered something in him. He just needs time to process his failure, but he’ll come back.”

I realise now, throughout everything, I’ve broken the one thing I was trying to save.

Him.

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## FIFTY-THREE

*Harry*

I'm slipping. There's a cold place in my head I recognise. It's where I go when the outside becomes unbearable.

I press my palms into my eyes and breathe, just to feel the pressure.

I can feel my psychosis slipping in. My thoughts feel like they're being controlled by something outside of me. But I'm sane enough to know what I'm feeling is *wrong*. Anger towards the woman I would give everything for.

The closest explanation is utter devastation. *Why?*

I'd have done anything.

I can't stop replaying it, every snippet of memory. I should have known. The screams. The loss of weight. How when I fucked her she looked like she hadn't felt pleasure in so long, only pain.

She lied to protect me, but who was protecting her?

*Me.* It was supposed to be *me*.

I can feel her gaze when she thinks I'm not watching; hear her soft voice when she thinks I'm not listening. She needs me, but what if I fail her again?

What may look like silence to her feels like screaming inside me.

I lean against the wall, legs stretched out, the tile cold against my thighs. My T-shirt smells like old coffee and hospital soap.

There are very few staff working the night shift. I hear the distant shuffle of shoes and the clack of a computer keyboard. As a nurse slips from her

station, I glance down the hall. I know this routine – she'll be at least three minutes. I pull myself to my feet and reach over the desk, taking Gigi's notes from the top of the pile.

My eyes burn, and I blink hard.

Precautionary antibiotics today for her jaw. A follow-up CT scan tomorrow to rule out long-term effects from the lack of oxygen. Changing the wound dressing on Wednesday. An open referral to a domestic violence hotline.

I flick through the pages, pretending I know what any of the doctor's terminology means. I lift my chin slightly towards her open doorway. There's a darkness inside that contrasts the hall.

I can't see her, but I can feel her watching.

I hear the steady beep of machinery echoing from her room. The notes said she's stable with minor injuries. *Minor*. What a useless word when someone looks like that.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it, still encapsulated by the darkness in the hospital room.

A nurse walks past, slowing when she sees me, looking over my dark eyes, messy, tousled hair, and the dried blood still ingrained on my skin. But it's the notes in my hands that make her pause. I smile politely, returning them to the desk with a gentle tap.

She sighs but says nothing.

My phone buzzes again. This time I check it.

Jack's private line.

I glance back at Gigi's room before slipping down the corridor, pressing the phone to my ear. His voice comes through without argument.

"I've been trying to get through to you for *days*. Hugo and his men are dead. We intercepted them at their hotel, but I need to know what was said. What. The fuck. Happened? Why did you bail—?"

"No. I didn't bail. I *walked*. I want to make that perfectly fucking clear," I bite out. "Gigi's in the hospital."

Silence. Then, "How bad?"

"Bad enough," I hiss. "You should be here."

His voice is low with exhaustion. "I can't risk everything I've built here."

"You're her fucking brother. You don't have to do anything except show up when it matters. It fucking *matters*."

"You know what happens if I show my face."

Jack turns quiet again, Richard's wrath lingering in the silence like a bad omen.

"You know what? You're right." I clench the phone so hard I swear I feel the glass threaten to shatter beneath my grip. "I don't care about the fortress you've built and your defences, nor the fact you were once my best friend. If you even think of coming here, I'll kill you myself."

The pause stretches.

"I'll find a way to help from here," he says finally.

"Don't bother."

The continued silence on his end of the line compels me to speak again.

"I didn't expect anything less from Richard, but from you?" I tsk. "The only reason you're still breathing right now is because you mean something to Gigi. You try to contact her again, I'll end everything you've tried so desperately to build."

I don't care how obscene or bitter I sound. Jack will pay if he crosses those boundaries. Mark my fucking words.

"I need to know what happened—"

I hang up.



It's been a week, maybe longer. They're keeping Gigi in for observation – or perhaps out of fear I might up my weapons and cause a riot if they don't see her treatment through.

I jolt back in my chair, the plastic groaning against the wall. My body has succumbed to such extreme tiredness that my heart is skipping beats and I'm breathless. That's new.

I scrub my hand down my face, forcing myself to my feet. There's a set of vending machines at the end of the corridor, and I need coffee. As I approach, I lean my forehead against the buzzing screen, breathing through my teeth.

"You look like hell," a familiar voice says.

I don't turn right away. I know it's Poppy.

I've played out this interaction a million times in my head, most of which ended with my hands round her throat. *Don't tell me you knew too*, I shout.

*Don't fucking tell me that.*

But I've come to realise everyone knew. Fucking everyone – except for me. I was so blinded by finding the trafficking ring and my failure to those I was meant to protect that I couldn't even see through the truth standing right in front of me.

I turn to Poppy slowly. Her bright hair is pulled back in a ponytail – the only sign of her disarray with the few fallen strands either side of her head.

“You knew.”

Her voice is maddeningly calm. “I did what I had to do.”

“You knew.” I say it again, letting the words sink in. “You knew everything.”

“I did.”

“You knew Jamie was hurting her. You knew why she married him.” I can feel my muscles coiling, the stiffness of my jaw making it shake. “And yet you said *nothing*? ”

“I kept you alive.”

“You think that's a fair trade?” I snap, “Watching her waste away to protect me—”

“And if I gave you the truth – what then?” She cuts in, her voice sharp. “You'd go after Jamie and potentially kill you both? She *begged* me not to tell you, Harry. Not because she doesn't love you. Because she does. Enough to disappear into that hell for you.”

I press my thumb and my forefinger to my temple, sucking in a bitter breath that barely satisfies the tightness closing itself around my ribs. “I don't think I can ever forgive you.”

Poppy nods slowly, like she knew that was coming. “It's okay,” she says. “I don't expect you to.”

My eyes narrow. “Was it worth it?”

“For the sake of your life, it was.”

I stare at her as if I don't know her anymore. Because maybe I don't.

“I didn't come for forgiveness.”

“Then why are you here?” Even I can hear the bitterness in my voice.

She looks straight at me. “Because someone had to stand beside you when it all broke apart.”



A woman in red scrubs slips out of Gigi's room, glancing at the clock above the nurse's station, which reads 1:20 a.m.

I push myself to stand, stretching the ache out of my spine. The door to her room is cracked. The nurses keep closing it, but somehow, it always ends up half-open.

*"She loves you that much,"* Poppy said before she left. *"More than her own life."*

The words bring my hand to the door handle, and I push it open the rest of the way.

The room is dim, the bed small, and Gigi looks even smaller inside of it. Wires hang in her arms, a bandage wrapped tight round her side. Her skin looks pale against the white sheets. Her throat ... *Christ*, her throat is still mottled with finger-shaped bruises, though they've faded in my absence.

Her head is tilted back on the pillow, dark circles underneath her eyes as she drills them into the ceiling. One hand is resting on her stomach, fingers twitching.

I sit down on the plastic chair at her bedside. Her other hand hangs loose. I move without thinking, leaning forward on my elbows and taking her hand in mine.

I wonder if she hates me now. I wonder if she thinks I abandoned her.

I want to yell. I want to ask why she didn't trust me to protect her. But above all else, I want to know why she didn't think her life was as worthy as mine.

Closing my eyes, I press my lips to her knuckles, breathing her in. I want to hate her, but I don't – not when she thought it was her only choice. I hate Jamie Callahan. I hate *myself* for not seeing it coming.

I tilt my head up, meeting her eye. My hands are shaking by the time I've brought her knuckles to my chin, running my thumb over the back of her hand.

"*Why?*" My voice cracks. "*Why did you do it?*"

I know even if she can't say it. Her mum sacrificed her peace at the price of protecting the ones she loved. This is no different in Gigi's eyes.

“Why don’t you think you’re capable of experiencing happiness? Because you made a few mistakes before? Your bad decisions don’t define you. Don’t think for one minute that you deserved this, I swear to fucking God, Gigi—” I catch my breath then almost choke. “You still went back there after Paris. Fucking hell, *I let you go.*”

My shakiness betrays my guilt, and her palm slips from my fingers as I bring a quaking hand to my jaw.

“I’d have rather died. I’d rather *die* than know you withheld everything.”

Her voice is weak, catching on a tremble. “Harry—”

“You will never do anything for me again – do you understand?”

“Harry ...”

“*Anything*, Gigi.”

That defiance lingers in her eyes, tears leaking from the corners as I push.

“Swear to me. I need you to swear you’ll never do anything like that again.”

“I-I swear.”

A quiet sob rocks her body until she’s shaking, the sound muffled behind her palm. I bite my lip and turn my head away, trying to keep my emotions at bay, but the attempt is as useless as my inability to love her.

I take her hand again. Her fingers wrap round my forearm, pulling me closer. She pulls me halfway, her cries muffled into my shoulder as she just ... breaks. The sobs pour out of her like a girl who’s lost everything clinging to the only thing she has left.

I hold her delicately, and with strength. I’ll be her anchor, if that’s what she needs. I’ll be here for her, always. The beacon of light in this dark world – and her in mine.

I sit on the edge of her bed, and her hands curl into fists on the front of my T-shirt.

“I will never let them touch you again, baby girl. I-I swear with everything in me that they’ll pay. I’ll do better.” My lips brush her temple with more wordless promises that I’ll tear this world apart and make every man pay for wronging her. “This is just the universe catching up, remember?”

She sniffles, clutching me tighter as I vow, “I’m never letting you go.”

That night, I fall asleep with my head resting loosely in her lap, her soft fingertips running through the strands of my hair. Delicate and gentle.

Finally at her mercy. Though it's far from the reality I ever wanted us to face.

And for the first time in a long time, I sleep peacefully despite the world crumbling round us.

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# FIFTY-FOUR

*Gigi*

My eyes flutter open to blinding white light. I shift, sitting up, the pain in my side intensifying to a deep, thudding ache that I manage to breathe though.

The monitor to my right beeps rhythmically, but there's something beyond that. Muffled voices outside the door, rising. Two men shouting just beyond the wall.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, steadyng myself. The IV tugs at my arm, and I unhook the cannula from round my wrist splint, pulling myself to a stand.

The shouting escalates.

“She’s been through enough.”

“I just need to talk to her—”

“You don’t *get* to talk to her, you egotistical prick.”

I reach the hallway just in time, a slight limp in my step. Harry slams Hudson against the wall, a forearm across his throat. His veins bulge with the restraint to hold him still.

“Harry!” My voice cracks as I shout it.

Hudson’s struggling, but Harry’s stronger. He doesn’t look at me, his knuckles digging into Hudson’s collarbone, grinding him further into the wall. Hudson coughs, his face flushing.

“Harry,” I demand. “*Let him go.*”

He finally glances back. His green eyes are wild, tousled hair in disarray, his breath trembling with rage.

“Are you going to ignore what he did?” he growls – not to me, but out loud. “Do you know how many times he let it happen and said nothing?”

“I know.”

“He let you stay there.”

“I know.”

He looks at me again, his jaw ticking as he tries to ease his fury while *needing* to find someone to blame. His torment is gut-wrenching, and it kills me.

Harry’s hand finally drops from Hudson’s throat. He stumbles back, coughing. The hallway is dead silent. A nurse down the hall is frozen with a clipboard in her hands.

“Leave,” Harry demands.

She nods quickly, rushing off down the hall.

I walk to Harry slowly, my fingers brushing his arm. He’s *shaking*.

“You can’t undo what happened.”

His eyes meet mine, fuelled with pain and something darker. “I have to try.”

He exhales like he’s been holding his breath for days.

*Fuck.*

I want to return to the moment I was only seventeen and he was nothing more than a shadow outside my living room. I want to clutch his hand and run away with him. I want this not to be our reality.

I love him so strongly it hurts.

Tears lining my eyes, I take his hand and squeeze softly. He pulls me steadily into his arms, planting a kiss in my hair that I know is to control the rage rattling his limbs. As I peer up, Hudson finally looks at me.

“Gigi,” he says hoarsely, “I … I should have done something.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s not your fault.”

He forces a swallow to ease the lump in his throat, shuffling on his feet. “There’s something I have to tell you,” he says.

I pull my head back, stepping from Harry’s embrace. He stiffens beside me in the silence, his thumb caressing the back of my hand.

Hudson looks between us. “I know where the girls are being held.”



Ten minutes later, we're crammed into my hospital room, the door sealed shut. I sit on the bed, with Harry perched at my side, his long legs reaching the floor. Poppy paces at the foot of the bed, and Hudson leans forward on the plastic chair close to her.

"I had to be absolutely sure," he says. "I didn't want to risk hope."

"How?" Harry asks.

"When Gigi set the Circle headquarters on fire, Richard lost contact with anyone who mattered in his world. They didn't think he was trustworthy given that his empire was targeted. The blaze hit the east wing – cellars, cleaning closets, nothing of any value. It sparked an idea in him as he rebuilt everything. He's been keeping the girls underground for safekeeping, waiting for the time to sell them at auction. The wedding ..." He grimaces, avoiding Harry's death glare. "It gave Richard the opportunity to speak with people in power again. They're due to be sold any day to more people than just Hugo and his men."

I feel the colour drain from my face. I saw a woman months ago in the hallway. She looked spooked when she saw me, out of place. I knew she was different, but I wasn't thinking properly at the time. The signs were right there.

This is *my* fault.

I drop my head into my hands, whispering, "Fuck."

"No," Poppy cuts in, her chin jutted towards me. "Keep your head up. You are not to blame."

"That's not all."

What else? What else could possibly be worse than this? Haven't we dealt with enough?

Harry's eyes meet mine for a second. *I've got you*, his gaze seems to say. To Hudson, he growls, "Get on with it."

Hudson runs a hand through his hair, the tension clear in every line of his body. "Richard has eyes on the hospital."

That pulls the breath from my lungs.

"He's sent two men to ask questions downstairs."

Poppy is already at the window, her eyes narrowing in on the car park. I can't see what she's looking at, but judging by the echoed, "Shit," Hudson's telling the truth.

"I have a way out ... but you're not going to like it."

"No." Harry turns on him immediately. "If you're about to say what I think you are, then I'm telling you right now, it's not happening."

"You know I'm right."

I turn my face between them both. "What is it?"

Harry's gaze flicks towards me. "He wants to take you with him."

I blink hard, feeling my heart stumble.

"Richard knows Harry won't leave your side now he's killed Jamie. The second we leave this hospital, he's coming for you. I say we take two cars and separate. Richard won't suspect you're with me." He turns his gaze to Poppy, who's still staring out the window. "You go with Harry. You've both fought through worse – you'll make it out."

Poppy says nothing, but I see the truth behind her silence. It might be the only way we can get out of this.

"I truly think you can escape him this time," he rushes out. "We can get the girls out too if we just work out a plan."

"A plan?" Harry counters. "Why should we trust you? Why should *Gigi* trust you?"

Hudson bows his head. "Because nobody hates me more than I hate myself."

Harry turns his head away, tension lining his jaw, but I see through the cool, indifferent mask. He knows the feeling. "And what if they catch onto us – what then?" he asks slowly. "You going to save her, Hudson Anderson? I promise you ... no one will be better for her in that car than me."

"I'm not denying that. I don't have the skills to murder like you do, but you haven't seen the things I've seen her go through. You haven't seen the way Jamie—" He cuts himself short and sighs. "Let me set this right and give you both the best chance."

None of us question what it means if we don't make it out, yet it lingers in the air, unspoken. Between me and Harry, at least one of us would be free if the plan failed. We're still a walking target while the Circle reigns.

"Let me think about it."

Anger lines Hudson's words. "We don't have the time—"

“Then *make* time!” The words tear from Harry’s chest. “I’m not giving you a decision now, and that’s final.”

Hudson turns to me in a final plea. I feel the weight of Poppy’s stare from across the room. One more sacrifice. *One more*, and this could all be over. Harry and I could get out of this. We could flee, run for the coast, and get lost in some country abroad with new names and identities. Nothing else would matter, as long as we have each other.

“Give us a minute,” I say quietly.

Harry watches the door close as they leave the room. He says nothing, but I see the tension in his rigid shoulders.

“What if he’s right?”

“And what if he’s not?” The muscle in his jaw tenses. “What if he takes you back?”

“He won’t.”

Harry’s words come out brittle, as if even a breath will shatter what’s left of him. “I’ve only just got you back.”

I shift on the bed, bringing myself behind him. My eyes move over the back of his neck, the circular scar at the nape that slips underneath the collar of his T-shirt. A reminder of the life that will always be chasing us.

I sit on my knees, resting my chin softly on his shoulder, my lips grazing the white patch of skin.

He lifts his head just slightly. “I don’t think I can say goodbye to you again.”

My fingers touch his jaw, turning him towards me fully. I meet his gaze as my thumbs cup his cheeks, running over the tender skin underneath his dark eyes. “Then don’t.”

I press my lips against his mouth, kissing him softly. A breath of warmth spills into my stomach, my heart plummeting to the depths of my chest.

I will fight for him, whatever it takes.

“I’m not losing you again.”

“You won’t,” I whisper. “We’ll survive this. We always survive.”



I blink awake, adjusting to the darkness. Poppy is slumped on the sofa opposite, her head resting in her palm, breathing soft. Hudson's jumper hangs loose on her knees.

I lie still for a moment, my eyes flicking towards the crack of light beneath the door. Hudson and Harry are standing just outside, speaking quietly. Harry stands nearest, his shadow stretching into the room.

“You sure you can get her through the checkpoints?”

Hudson answers him even lower. “I’ve got it covered. A doctor will be waiting for you down south to check Gigi’s recovery before you travel onwards.”

The quiet stretches taut.

“If anything happens to her ...”

Harry’s letting me go. And even though it’s the smart move and the one I asked him to make, it feels like tearing open a wound that barely started to heal.

“But just give me one last day with her.”

Hudson says nothing, but I imagine he nods.

I keep my breathing even, feigning sleep, as the door creaks open. I feel Harry’s eyes through the crack in the entryway, his stare lingering as if he’s remembering.

Then, finally, he breathes, “Take her.”

## FIFTY-FIVE

*Harry*

The day passes by far quicker than I anticipated.

*One more day*, that was all I asked, before Hudson takes her away. Now it's nightfall, and Gigi will be gone by morning. I need more time, clutching onto misplaced hope we'll make it out together.

We're hunched in her small hospital room, Hudson on the sofa, his arm draped to the floor, legs stretched over the armrest. Poppy's nothing but a small ball tucked in the corner.

The beeping of the heart monitor is the only thing that breaks the silence, ticking time away slowly. I lie on the stiff hospital bed beside Gigi tracing lazy patterns on her back, trying to settle into this fragile peace knowing it won't last much longer.

Her breathing is shallow, twitching every now and then, but the minute she settles into my side, it eases her. Though it lasts only a minute before she jolts awake.

"Hey, you're safe." I reach out. "It's just me."

She blinks, adjusting to the dim light. "Harry?"

"I'm here." I slide my hand over hers. "What were you dreaming about?"

"I ... I was back there ... in that house."

She hesitates for a beat, so I say, "You don't have to talk about it if you're not ready."

"It's not that." She clears her throat, finding the courage. "When the nights got particularly bad or I was overworked at Pixies, I made myself

dissociate, knowing it was the only way I'd get through. I used to imagine I was somewhere else ... somewhere safe. I'd think of you."

My heart clenches tighter with each broken word. I don't deserve to be her safe haven when I failed to protect her.

"Gigi ..."

"What I went through isn't your fault."

Every ounce of guilt she should have never had to carry sits within her gaze.

I let out a harsh, ragged breath. The sting of everything she suffered forces me to decompress, and I don't realise my fists have absentmindedly clenched until she pries my fingers apart.

"You don't have to prove yourself to anyone." Her hand cups my cheek. "I just wish you could see everything I see in you. You deserve to feel chosen, Harry. I choose you. I'd do anything for you."

This. I can't lose *this*. Not when the world hasn't allowed us our chance yet.

Before I do anything foolish, such as kiss her too hard while she's in the depths of her recovery, I lean to the side of the bed. "I've got something for you."

She asks, surprised, "For me?"

I reach into the bag, shifting through it until my hand wraps round the cold metal. When I turn back to her, Gigi looks eagerly into my palms. She freezes for a split second, then she blinks.

"How ... how did you get this?"

I hand over her Glock. She takes it, twisting it in her palm.

"I had Poppy find it for me. She's not completely useless."

She runs her thumb over the neck of the gun, "G+H" still ingrained into the handle, slightly faded now, but still there. Despite the tilt of her lips at the memory, I see the slight twitch. She might have to embrace the darkest parts of her to survive tomorrow, and the gun is a memory of that.

"I've believed in you from the very beginning." I brush a piece of hair back from Gigi's forehead. "Even while you were watching Greg, I was always watching you, fighting heartbreak for the woman who didn't know I existed. I have loved you since the moment I first saw you nine years ago, and if our forever is only twenty-four hours in a hospital room, it was still worth it."

Her eyes meet mine, tearful and full of something far stronger.

“I loved you then, and I love you still, Gigi, and I swear to fucking Christ, I’ll do everything in my power to bring you home tomorrow.”

Her mouth crashes into mine. “I love you,” she breathes. “God, I love you so much.”

Her confessions are mumbled against my mouth, her tongue tasting like nothing short of heaven. She shifts to straddle my lap. I bite back a moan, my hands curling round her breasts through her gown, my thumbs brushing over her nipples until they harden.

“I love you,” she says again, her hot breath fanning my ear as desire floods through her. A low groan rumbles in my chest as she brings her hips down against my straining cock.

The bed creaks under us, and Gigi freezes, her eyes darting towards Hudson and Poppy. She hesitates but turns back, screwing the consequences. My fingers dip between her thighs, finding her already wet despite the risk. Her chin tilts up on a breathless moan.

“I’m not doing anything your body isn’t comfortable with,” I say. “If I have my way with you, I’ll only end up hurting you.”

Despite how much I want to worship her, she’s still recovering. I’m not jeopardising that, even if I want to express my undying love for her. My aching cock wholeheartedly agrees.

“I don’t want you to hold back.”

Voice strained, I warn, “Gigi ...”

She’s already kissing the underside of my jaw. “Harry ...” she mocks tauntingly.

I glance at Hudson and Poppy through the darkness. Their eyes are closed, chests rising and falling in the rhythm of sleep.

I take her wrist gently, guiding her towards the nest of wires dangling beside the bed. Oxygen lines, IV cords, a charging lead. I loop one of them loosely round my throat, pressing her knuckles over it.

“The second it gets too much, you pull.”

She swallows hesitantly.

“Tell me you understand.”

“I-I understand.”

“Good girl.”

I unzip my jeans, pushing my cock free, and then lift her hips. She guides me, her wet cunt swallowing the tip slowly. My hands slide up her thighs, pausing at the juncture where they meet her hips, and I buck mine

impatiently. Then my hands travel further, sliding up the curves of her waist, curling round her shoulders, forcing her down completely onto my cock.

“Sit. The fuck. Down,” I order. “Now—”

She meets me halfway, snapping my sentence in half and burying herself to the hilt. I’m completely incapable of forming words. My head kicks back, forcing the restraint of the wire, and my hands tighten on her skin.

The stretch makes her thighs quake round me. “*F-fuck.*”

“Quiet,” I growl, leaning up and nipping her chin. “Don’t make a sound.”

Balancing her weight on my stomach, she works my cock inside her, tilting her head back as if she wants to cry out, but she doesn’t dare. Lost in the haze of euphoria, her fingers tighten round the wire. But it’s her desire for control, taking back the memories that robbed her, that makes her knuckles clench.

“*Tighter, Gigi.*”

Her next squeeze steals my breath. Each time she slams herself down, my vision spasms at the edges from my crushed windpipe, and I tremble beneath her.

Grabbing her waist, I guide her, forcing her down deeper. The deprivation makes me drunk, the desperation ratcheting higher. Her pussy clenches like a fist round my cock as she loses control of herself.

“Who do you belong to?”

“You,” she rasps.

“Say my name.”

“Harry—”

Her breath comes in short, ragged gasps as the pleasure builds.

“St. James.”

My thumb finds her clit, circling with pressure. A muffled noise slips through her lips, but she’s too deep in ecstasy to care. Her eyes roll as she swivels her hips.

Her fingers flex. Stars squeeze the edges of my vision, my entire world collapsing into her. The way her gown pools round her waist, perked nipples underneath begging for my mouth.

I’m fading beneath her.

She tilts down her chin, realising I’m letting her kill me; realising I’d die for her without hesitation.

She unloops my neck fast, her movements erratic. Then she's smashing her lips down onto mine with an urgency even I struggle to match. Her orgasm floods her hard, and I hold her down, grinding, fucking her as she shakes, her nails shredding my shoulders. My lungs fight to draw in air, sucking it in hard.

I squeeze her hips, shoving her down further and using her like she's mine. Because she is. Her kiss, full of lust, desire, and unmistakable love, pushes me over the edge.

I groan low into her hair, the thick pulse of my release filling her. My hands clutch her ass, holding her still as I spill every part of myself into her trembling body.

The air rattles out of me. Her cunt floods round my cock, her walls gripping me so hard it's almost impossible to move. My lips close over the spot where her neck meets her jaw, her body moulding into mine as we collapse together.

"You own me," I rasp through strangled breath. "You have every part of me."

She's breathless, damp hair sticking to her forehead as she brushes her parted lips over my mouth. I wrap my arms round her possessively.

"You're mine," she breathes.

"Yours."

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## FIFTY-SIX

*Gigi*

As I slip my Glock into my waistband, a cold, familiar chill runs through me. I squeeze Harry's hand tightly, trying to calm my racing pulse. Despite the painkillers I've dosed up on, it's like I can feel every wound Jamie inflicted, knowing the potential of what we might walk into.

Poppy shifts on her feet. "We know the plan?"

"We meet at the safe house, switch vehicles, then head straight for the border," Harry confirms. "You two work to get the girls out."

Hudson shifts. "Right, let's—"

"Wait!" a voice calls from the hallway.

Harry pushes me back instinctively as the echo of footsteps gains on us. A mop of blonde hair rushes to the nurse's station.

"She's not gone yet, has she?"

My eyes widen. "Mia?"

I push Harry aside as she turns the corner, stopping in the entryway. Mia pauses, her breathing elevated from running. Her gaze flicks from me to Harry, the tears increasing to droplets down her cheeks.

In an instant I'm rushing towards her. Her arms engulf me so strongly I forget every essence of hurt. Wetness blurs my vision by the time she's pulled me back to arm's length.

"You saved me. I wouldn't have gotten out if you hadn't taken a chance on me again," I strangle out. "I'll never stop being sorry for betraying you back then. If I could, I'd take it all back. I swear I would."

"I know Richard forced you to stay away at the beginning," she says tearfully. "In case you don't make it out of this, I want you to know I forgive you."

I blow out a ragged breath. "Mia ..."

"You don't deserve for any of this to be happening to you. I hope you know that."

Hudson clears his throat. "We've got to go."

A tear slips from my eye, and she wipes it away, fighting to control her own. "If you make it out, we'll talk everything through, okay?"

I nod desperately. "Okay."

Mia turns to Harry as I pull back, straightening her spine just slightly. "I'm sorry for not telling you."

He lets slip a small smile, ducking his head respectfully. He forgives her.

Poppy's eyes flick to her phone screen. "There are men in reception. We have to get moving."

I meet her gaze, panicked, then turn to Harry. His eyes flare with a similar fear before he cups the back of my neck, pulling me against his mouth. We share one last kiss, desperate and hungry, like we're trying to memorise each other's taste. His tongue slips into my mouth, and for a second, everything fades.

But it's quick, a robbery of how I really want to kiss him.

He pulls back, his forehead meeting mine. "I love you in every lifetime," he says. "And I'll find you in this one."

"I'll come back to you."

"I'll hunt you down if you don't."

"I love you," I whisper. "Be safe, Harry. *Please.*"

He draws me into a final embrace, his hands roaming over my back. "No matter what happens, know I'll burn the world down to bring you back home." Then he pulls back, a final kiss lingering on my temple before he turns to Hudson fast. "Fucking look after her. You see what I did to Jamie?"

Hudson barely nods, his face void of colour.

"Don't think I won't do it again."

"Guys," Poppy stresses. "We need to go."

Harry holds my hand until the last second, but eventually, we're forced to let go.

I turn back to look at him one final time, meeting the magic of his forest-green eyes, before Hudson guides me into the hallway.

Then, suddenly, we're running.

My boots thud against the stairs, each step echoing down the stairwell. I breathe through the exhaustion. Now is not the time for my weakness to remind me of its power.

Harry takes the front entrance with Poppy, while Hudson and I take the back. We'll leave at the same time so Richard's vehicles are forced to split. When we reach the fire exit, Hudson peers his head out, keeping an eye out for Richard's notorious bodyguards.

"Were you the one to tell Mia?" I ask. "About today?"

He speaks quietly. "Harry must have done it."

*Perhaps.*

I don't have enough time to question it before Hudson nods tightly, pushing open the door fully.

I slip under his arm, pulling the baseball cap down on my head. His two-seater sports car sits a few metres from the door, and I rush to it, slipping into the passenger seat. Hudson enters the driver's side, the headlights cutting through the morning fog as the engine purrs.

The radio plays automatically, and I slam it off, holding my breath tight until we're slipping out of the hospital exit onto the main road.

I twist in my seat, watching the hospital disappear behind us in the fog.

No cars are tailing us.

We're clear.

For now.

"Do you think they bought it?" I ask.

Hudson balances one hand on the wheel, the other resting loosely by the gearshift, his knuckles pale. "Richard's smart," he mutters, more to himself than to me. "He'll have eyes everywhere."

My pulse runs rampant, droning out everything round me. Though there's no noise. No music. No talking. Just the thrum of tyres running down the A-roads into Central London.

Hudson drives fast but steady, weaving through traffic, taking the long route towards Harry's safe house out of fear we might be followed.

"Shit," he curses, glancing in the mirror. "We've got company."

My heart leaps into my throat. "Richard?"

He shakes his head. "I recognise the vehicle. It's one of his men."

I turn my head over my shoulder. Headlights are gaining on us in the rearview, closing in fast.

Fear for Harry comes through blindingly. Have they caught up to him yet? Did he manage to make it out? All questions disappear as Hudson floors the pedal, making the engine roar as we surge forwards.

Another car slips out from behind the tailing vehicle: a sleek black SUV, identical to the other one. *Shit.* It matches our speed, inching closer.

“Hold on.” Hudson swerves to avoid a slower vehicle.

The SUV speeds up, ramming us from behind – a jarring impact that lurches me forwards, forcing my hands to brace on the dash.

A growl races up Hudson’s throat. He fights the wheel, jerking it to the right.

As he straightens out, the second car gains momentum, slamming into the rear of our car again. Rain splatters the windows, blinding us of sight for a fearful second.

Everything’s moving too fast.

The wipers sweep over the windscreen, Tower Bridge appearing in the distance, a few hundred yards from where Hudson’s swerving through the sparse cars on the roads. The lights of the bridge flicker red in warning, the barricade starting to lower as a boat with high vessels comes closer.

Hudson doesn’t stop, the car now screaming as it reaches its max speed.

“Hudson ...”

But the cars are still on our tail, showing no signs of stopping.

The wheels shudder as we cross the threshold onto the bridge, the River Thames dark and ominous below us. Hudson lowers to second gear, throwing me back in my seat.

“W-wait!” I shout.

But it’s too late.

The car speeds up the ramp, and for a terrifying few seconds, we’re airborne.

I squeeze my eyes shut, the action lasting barely a moment before we’re descending, tyres screeching on the road as we slam down onto the tarmac.

I’ve barely inhaled a shredded breath before the landing car clips our bumper.

Hudson’s hands slip from the wheel, losing control, right at the minute the other car spins out from its landing, brutally slamming into our side.

We crash into the stone railing. Hudson’s head slams against the wheel, jolting back with a force that sends him out cold.

“NO!” I shake his shoulders. “Hudson, wake up! Wake up!”

I grab the wheel, but it's no use. The SUV drives full force into my passenger door, snapping my body sideways. I black out for a moment.

As I blink back to the present, the car whines.

We're teetering over the edge, suspended in mid-air.

The stone railing crumbles, the thick current of the River Thames below us howling through the crack in the car window.

*Oh ... oh fuck.* Any little movement will plunge us nose-first into the water.

Hudson grumbles, coming back to consciousness.

Rubble and stone splatter into the dark abyss below us, the car groaning deeply as we're suspended on the precipice. My hands reach out as if to help maintain the balance.

"Stay calm," I say slowly.

But it's no use. Panic sends an exaggerated jolt through his body, forcing his hands against the wheel.

Time slows as the car slides.

The world tilts.

Metal groans and buckles, and then we're plunging into the water. The car crashes down with an almighty *bang*. My head snaps back as we make impact.

The car wails with the weight of the water as it tips forwards, bubbling in front of the bonnet as we lower into the darkness.

We're sinking.

Water creeps in through the vents, through the doors, filling the car up fast. Hudson moans, one hand hovering over his bloodied head, the other thrashing against the water.

"That was my fault," he says.

"Apologies later." I grapple with my seatbelt, and it pops free. "We need to get out."

Forcing a calmness through him, he pulls his handle, slamming all his weight into the door. It slips open a fraction, only for a surge of water to come racing in.

It's freezing, filling the car deeper at a speed we're unprepared for.

"Close it!" I shout.

As I brace my hands against the roof, I look out the window, obstructed by the rising water submerging the windscreen. But I still see it. Up on the

bridge are the two SUVs, headlights shining bright on us. They're still alive.

And on the riverbank, another vehicle is parked up. I can just about make it out through the slosh of water.

A figure steps out, along with his notorious bodyguards.

*FUCK.*

“Richard’s here.”

Hudson doesn’t bother to look up, still desperately searching for a way out.

The water is up to my neck now, splattering my cheeks and spreading over my chin. I gasp, tilting my face towards the ceiling, fighting the panic that attempts to claw its way through.

A piercing *whoosh*, followed by a loud *crack*, sends the windows shattering.

I jolt from the sudden movement, swallowing a mouthful of water.

*Was that a gunshot?*

Hudson whips his head towards the jagged window, eyes widening. He forces himself round in the small space, clutching the edge of the windowpane, ready to pull himself through.

“Don’t you dare leave me down here,” I choke.

He takes my hand, clutching tight. “Hold your breath.”

The water submerges our heads, and we duck down, pushing out through the hole in the shattered window into the cold, relentless current of the Thames.

Everything disappears.

Hudson’s hand slips from mine, and panic claws at me. I reach out into the darkness, feeling for him, but nothing. Despite my efforts not to scream, I swallow a mouthful of river water, my lungs burning. I kick wildly towards where I think the surface is, fighting to reach through.

Something grabs me.

Fingers tangle in my jacket, yanking me out of the dark.

The cold air rips into my lungs. I gasp, choking, blind.

“You okay?” Hudson pants.

I nod barely, struggling to keep myself afloat through the rippling current. Searchlights slice through the night, voices shouting from the banks.

A boat cuts through the water, pulling up beside us.

Panic blazes through me as an arm reaches out. I kick the water frantically, but hands close round my biceps, dragging me aboard and flopping me onto the slick deck like a half-dead animal.

A figure stands over me, a predator watching a wounded deer. They're nothing but darkness, shielded through the sharp lights and the hammering rain.

"You always had a flair for theatrics," Richard mutters. "At what point will you understand your life is *mine*?"

I want to scream, but my throat is raw.

Another splash, followed by more hands. Hudson is pulled aboard, coughing, bleeding, soaked to the bone. He collapses beside me, too breathless to speak.

"I don't appreciate you damaging the merchandise. It makes for a cheaper sale." Richard narrows his gaze at me. "What? You thought I couldn't still profit from you now Jamie's dead?"

I try to push myself up, my limbs quaking with exhaustion. "Go to hell," I spit.

He smiles, turning his gaze to Hudson, the amusement in his expression dying as withdraws the gun from his inside pocket so quickly Hudson barely blinks before it's at his temple.

"You have three seconds to explain why you thought this betrayal wouldn't come with consequences ... Three ... two ..." The safety switches off with a *click*. "One—"

"She's here, isn't she?" His voice doesn't falter. "You said you needed her back."

Something inside me fractures.

No.

I sit up fully despite the pain screaming in every part of my body. "You tricked me to get me back?" My voice shakes, traitorous tears mixing with the rain. "You lied this *whole time*. I-I trusted you! We trust—"

"I had to make it real," he says softly, "or you wouldn't believe it."

"I should put a bullet in your skull." Richard straightens, pressing the barrel of the gun that slightest bit forward.

Hudson's eyes narrow, bracing for impact.

"But I'll let you live." Richards cocks his head to his men. "Get him off my boat. He's done here."

Hudson doesn't fight as the two bodyguards drag him up, my Glock glistening in his back pocket. My eyes flare, noticing the sudden loss. He's left me disarmed.

The boat rocks as he's thrown onto a smaller vessel tethered to the side. He turns, meeting my gaze one last time.

"I'm sorry," he says.

Then he's gone.

I collapse back against the deck, rain washing over me.

Richard crouches down, brushing wet hair from my face. "The Circle welcomes you home, sweetheart."

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## FIFTY-SEVEN

*Harry*

“I count three cars still behind us,” Poppy charts quickly, gazing over her shoulder. “One dropped off after the last turn.”

I glance in the mirror. She’s right. Same busted headlight. Same dent in the hood. Same driver – one of the two bodyguards who flank Richard’s side. A glimpse of the second vehicle tailing behind them confirms the second sighting. Shaved head, face like concrete, built like bodybuilders.

“Good.”

Though nothing about this is good. Not the sweat crawling down my spine, not the screech of tyres behind us, not the way my pulse is hammering in my neck.

We take a hard left, wheels shrieking against the pavement. One of the cars behind us clips the corner too wide and slams on the brakes, spiralling just enough to struggle righting the car.

“They’re getting closer,” she blurts.

The black SUV is less than twenty feet back, headlights glaring through the morning fog. I pedal the gas, the engine rising in pitch, and slam my foot to the floor.

I ease on the brake, lowering to third gear and taking a harsh right without signalling, burnt rubber staining the pavement. Poppy’s hands are colourless against her seat. The wheel fights me, but I force it through. One of the dark vehicles follows closely, nearly catching a lamppost. I allow myself a thin smile.

I straighten the car out, racing ahead with a force that throws me back into the leather. They gain speed simultaneously, engine fumes flooding through the window.

I whip my head back to the rearview mirror, watching the SUV gaining distance.

One by one, both the cars peel off. The vehicle closest to us slows, turning suddenly down a side street.

Another blacked-out car lingers behind us for a moment, then it drops away.

“What?” Poppy turns round and leans her hands on the dashboard. “Why are they backing off? We didn’t lose them.”

“No,” I whisper, ice sliding down my back. “They figured it out.”

I slam the brakes at the next corner, throwing the car into a reckless U-turn that makes the tyres scream and the seatbelt bite across my chest.

“Fuck!” Poppy curses, grabbing the handle above her window. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” I grit out. “If they’re not after us, they’re going after Gigi or—” Andy.

The name doesn’t leave my mouth.

I push the car harder, blowing through red lights, nearly clipping a bike. Its rider screams at me as I swerve. My brain is running ahead of itself, heart climbing up my throat, pulling up scenarios I can’t shut down.

Have Richard’s men caught up to Gigi yet? Have they already been in my home and stolen Andy from the one place he’s supposed to be guaranteed safety? I swore – I fucking *swore* – I’d never let Richard touch either of them again—

“Call him,” I bark.

Poppy’s already fumbling with her phone. “I’m trying.”

The line rings for a full minute. No answer.

“No,” she whispers. “No, no, no ...”

We turn the last street, the apartment finally in view. I kill the engine, the car barely stopping before we’ve both jumped out. Poppy’s right behind me, her phone still to her ear.

I rush up the staircase, striding three steps at a time.

The door meets me, already open, swinging with a lone gust of wind. I rush in and shout, “Andy! Are you in here?”

I check the living room. Empty. The kitchen. Untouched. A half-drunk cup of coffee still on the counter, gone cold. I throw open the bedroom door with a force that smacks the wood against the wall. The sheets are crumpled on the floor as if he was ripped right out of bed.

“His phone is on the table.” Poppy’s panicked voice comes from the hall.  
“Why would he leave without it?”

“He wouldn’t.”

They’ve taken him.

I step into the living room, turning my gaze over the apartment, every nerve ending in my body screaming. I sink down on the arm of the sofa, trying to breathe, trying to think. Poppy sits across from me, her expression unyielding, waiting for me to make the next call.

The walls feel like they’re closing in. My breath shortens. Something thick crawls up my throat – rage, panic, and guilt. Everything strangles me at once, threatening to tear me down.

But I’m not failing her again. And I’m not failing him.

I’m on my feet, charging for the open door, when Poppy calls, “Where are you going?”

“To burn it down.”

## FIFTY-EIGHT

*Gigi*

I sit huddled in the dim cellar, my back pressed against the cold, damp wall, the scent of wet sewage potent in the air. A shiver courses down my spine, and I pull my knees to my chest, trying to conserve warmth.

The women round me are tucked in tight corners, bodies frail and shivering. They're dressed in white gowns, now faded grey, with dirt and mould clinging to the hems. I can feel my pulse in my throat, but I swallow it down, not allowing the panic or the rage to unleash.

They're all so ... normal.

Behind the terror in their expressions, they're no different from any other women. That's what makes it so terrifying. Men who entertain the biddings don't want particular women – not blonde or brunette, nor skinny or curvy – they just want them writhing in fear. They want a fight they know they're destined to win. They get off on that shit.

Hudson's probably upstairs counting his blood money, selling us off like cattle to the highest bidder. I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood, fighting my wrath.

I glance round at the faces illuminated by the faint sliver of light from the barred window. There are nine of us crammed in here. The youngest can't be much older than fourteen, a girl with freckles dusting her nose, auburn hair nearly identical to Poppy's. She's been crying quietly for hours, her sobs echoing off the stone walls.

They're all so vulnerable. So fucking fragile.

The chains round my ankles jingle as I move, a mocking reminder of our captivity.

“Everybody okay?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

The auburn girl’s head snaps up, her tear-streaked face pale in the darkness. “Th-they’re going to sell us … a-aren’t they?”

“No.” I kneel beside her. “I won’t let them touch you.”

A blonde girl moves to her side, holding her hand, and turns her gaze to me. “You’ll get us home, won’t you?”

“I will.”

The auburn girl smiles softly through her falling tears, leaning into the touch of the stranger. I settle back against the wall opposite, feeling an aching need to shield her.

Time drags on endlessly, everyone drifting in and out of sleep. Every creak of the floorboards above us sends my heart into overdrive, imagining the traffickers coming down to drag them away one by one. I won’t give them the chance.

Then, suddenly, there’s a noise – a heavy thud from upstairs. My body tenses, every muscle coiling like a spring.

“What’s happening?” someone mutters.

“I don’t know.” My hand instinctively reaches for a loose chunk of concrete on the floor. “Stay low.”

I breathe in deeply, the new scent burning my nose. Training my gaze through the darkness, I watch the drift of smoke move slowly down the stairwell. I cough, my hand flying to my mouth.

“Is that fire?” one girl screeches. “Are we going to die?”

“Cover your faces!” I order. “Get on the ground!”

A door above us rattles, the air stalling in my lungs. Heavy footsteps pound down the steps. I brace myself, ready to fight.

The door bursts open, and light floods in. A figure stands in the doorway, silhouetted against the glare.

I blink. “Harry—?”

No.

Hudson steps closer, and I instinctively step back, bracing my arms round me as if it will protect the girls. Gunfire rips through the halls, echoing down the stairwell, and I glance to the open door before looking back at him.

My heart stops, then it slams back into rhythm with a furious beat. He's holding a gun, his face set in a grim line, and behind him, I hear more commotion. One hand raised in mercy, he places the weapon on the floor, kicking it over to me.

I crouch, taking it in my hands. My Glock.

Steady in my palms, I point it right at his fucking face.

For a moment, I stare, disbelief crashing over me.

"You can shoot me," he says slowly, hands still raised. "But I need to tell you where to go first."

I turn off the safety, the gun groaning as I cock it at him, tears brimming in my eyes. "Why the fuck should I trust a word you say?"

He pulls out a set of bolt cutters from his jacket, laying them down on the floor. The blonde girl looks to me cautiously. I nod at her, my gun still trained on Hudson, prepared to shoot. He doesn't move an inch as the girl takes them, snapping the chain from her ankles. I hear the clatter of metal as the others are freed of their restraints.

I feel movement at my feet and peer down, watching as the cuff clinks to the floor. It's a rush of freedom even as my mind reels.

The other girls are staring, slowly rising to their feet.

"There's a fault in the fence. It's behind the outbuildings, near the lake. It'll be hard to know where to go if I don't go with you." Hudson's gaze narrows at me. "*Trust me, Gigi.*"

"W-we're going home?" a soft voice asks. "You're helping us?"

*Fuck.*

My limbs are trembling on the gun, watching him over the neck of it. There's practically a whole forest we have to navigate to get to the fence.

"I ..." I can't speak.

"Gigi." He snaps his head to the hall, the smoke thicker now. "You need to go!"

A hand clasps the back of my T-shirt, jolting me to my senses. I clasp the girl's small palm behind my back. "You'd better not betray us."

I slip the gun into my trousers, keeping the safety off despite the risk. Hudson leads us up the stairs, looking down the corridors. My heart lurches. There's so much commotion, people running for their lives from the fire's wrath. The hallway's thick with orange and red, the smoke elevated to a thickness we can barely see through.

Hudson stands guard as he nods towards the courtyard doors. I count every girl as they slip out, struggling to take my eyes off him.

He meets my stare only briefly. "I hope you can forgive me."

"If the girls get out, I'll think about it."

He nods, seeming to accept that.

The group huddles outside the doors, the fire violent and hungry and the distraction we need. Alarms shriek, wailing down the halls, mere background noise through the panic.

"Poppy's waiting at the barrier," Hudson says, his quick footsteps leading us to the tree line. "She'll get you all out."

I pause my steps. "And Harry?"

I catch the glimmer of a smile. "Do you think he'd act rationally, knowing you were taken?"

A smile graces my mouth. It's *him*. I turn over my shoulder, looking at the destruction and the dark smoke curling into the clouds. The Circle headquarters is crumbling, shattered windows and blazing flames of nothing below the rainfall.

My eyes descend the building, and I freeze.

Richard is standing on the doorstep, his bodyguards flanking him at his sides, more of his men spilling out from the entrance behind him. There are ... dozens of them.

I spin round with urgency.

The air whooshes out of me.

"Run."

We all break into a sprint.

Wind whips at my cheeks, branches snapping under my feet as my steps pound into the ground, charging as fast as my legs will carry me. There are echoes all round us. Orders beckoning, the barks of dogs I didn't even know we had, charging male footsteps gaining closer.

A girl running beside me whimpers at the sound of a vicious bark. I grab her hand, pulling her into stride with me. I don't have time to look behind me, nor to check if we're going the right way. I need to get the girls to Poppy. Nothing matters beyond that.

My heart pounds with the ferocious effort of trying to stay in my chest.

We will not die today.

I break out faster, shielding my face from low-hanging trees with my forearm. With a tight chest, I demand, "Keep going!"

A wail of pain echoes through the night, and my feet skid against the dirt, kicking up crisp leaves and bark. My arms flail from trying to regain my balance from the sudden brake.

“GO!” Hudson yells. “I’ve got her – get the girls to the gate!” He lifts a girl up from the floor, bringing her arm round his neck, and jerks his chin ahead. “Gigi, the girls!”

She clutches to Hudson, wailing at her attempt to step on her foot. I struggle to turn, but I persist, making a move for the gate again.

As we near the perimeter fence, my gaze turns back and forth, searching for the fault Hudson mentioned. But I ran aimlessly, nothing other than desperation lining my steps.

“W-we’re trapped!” someone panics.

“No, we’re not,” I say. “You’ve got to climb it.”

Richard’s roared order echoes through the canopy of trees.

I crouch, cupping my hands together. “Hurry!”

A girl steps to the front, holding onto my shoulders as I stagger forwards, raising her closer to the top of the railing. She grunts with the effort of pulling herself up, swinging her leg over.

Other girls follow closely. Some are weaker than others, sobbing with the effort. I rush over, assisting one girl until her body tumbles to the floor, an open wound gushing blood down her calf.

The first girl falls to the ground with a wail, rolling sideways. Behind the gate, a figure crouches down, forcefully bringing her to her feet.

“Don’t hurt them—”

Poppy whips her head up at me.

Relief seizes my lungs, but there’s no time to think, nor to question where Harry is.

Another girl falls, and Poppy clasps her palm with her opposite hand. “Tell the others to head for the river!” she shouts.

“Go!” I rush out, grunting with the effort of pushing another girl to the top of the railing. “You can’t let Richard see you.”

She’s merely a blip in the distance by the time I’m helping the next person over.

The barks are getting closer, deep voices closing in. One girl lands on the other side, brushing leaves away from her gown.

She asks worriedly, “Are you not coming?”

“I’ll be right behind you – just go!”

I wait anxiously by the railing as the final two figures approach. Hudson is holding the auburn-haired girl in his arms, and he lowers her beside me. I help to aid her over the gate. She's weeping, blubbering from the blinding pain as she puts pressure on her leg. I grimace, pushing her over the fence. She shrieks on her landing.

The girl behind the fence helps her to her feet. "We're almost there!"

*Almost.*

They don't waste another moment, stumbling and disappearing into the darkness in the direction Poppy exited.

I turn to Hudson quickly. "Is that everyone?"

He catches his breath, panting. "That's all of them." He crouches to offer me a hand.

As I swing my leg over, a sudden blinding light forces me to wince, shielding myself from the flare.

"GO!" Hudson shouts. He steps closer, trying to encourage my foot over the railing.

I struggle to move, making out the figures charging through the trees. Richard and his guards must be part of that group somewhere. I hear his voice in the chaos.

*Fuck.* There are so many of them.

"You need to climb!" I shout at Hudson.

"I will – now get over, Gigi!"

I swing my leg over begrudgingly, readying my limbs as I drop to the ground. I turn quickly, clutching onto the small holes through the fence.

"You need to—"

He turns round slowly, neutral and void of fear.

"No," I say assertively, clinging desperately to the wired gate, my knuckles white. "Don't do this, Hudson. Please."

Hudson won't just die; he'll be *aching* for his life to end when Richard gets his hands on him. As I meet his brown eyes, tears well deeply in mine.

"I forgive you!" My voice shakes. "P-please!"

I try to climb the railing, but my foot slides down, open wire sharp enough to rip through my T-shirt and scrape my stomach. I try again, and he barks my name, demanding I stop.

"What are you doing?" I cry out.

"I'm letting you go."

Despite the danger that awaits, he smiles.

I peer through the gate, seeing the silhouettes of people closing in. They'll be here any minute. I feel the itch under my skin, tempted to unleash my outrage on Richard and give in to my insanity one final time.

"The day of your engagement party ... I found you with the hot poker, dying on the floor," he breathes. "I'm sorry for everything they put you through. I should never have let it happen."

Tears splinter my vision, and I squeeze the bars tighter with trembling fingertips.

"GIGI!" I hear Harry scream in the distance. "Where are you?"

"You saved my life," I tell Hudson.

"And I'll do it again." He smiles finally. "Go find your happily ever after, Gigi. Be free."

## FIFTY-NINE

*Harry*

My palms are red and tight, throbbing with their own heartbeat. Heat rushes up my arms, and I feel the blaze growing behind me. A sudden lick of fire kisses my hand, my flesh bubbling as I slam my shoulder into Richard's office door.

I growl through hissed teeth until, finally, it springs open in a blinding puff of smoke.

Through the dark, orange cloud of lingering fire, I see Andy strapped to the desk, shaken, exhaling fragile, broken breaths against the suffocating air. I'm at his side in an instant, scanning him for injury.

Bruises litter his skin, but seemingly nothing worse than what he's dealt with before. Though the act of being in Richard's clutches again has him shrinking into his usual state of terror. He didn't even attempt to escape.

Eyes half-lidded, he raises them to me and blinks hard. "Am I dead?"

"Not yet, mate," I say, slinging his arm over my shoulder and steadyng him on his feet. "Can you walk?"

He nods stiffly.

The commotion from the fire gives us enough leeway to slip out undetected, the halls thick with screams and the wrath of arson. I avoid the fleeing recruits, helping Andy through the courtyard and into the back seat of the G-Wagon.

His knuckles whiten on the edges of the seat, a hiss slipping past his mouth.

I whip my head towards the tree line. I can hear Richard's voice through the clearing, screams, hundreds of footsteps, and people running. Gigi could be in that commotion, but Andy *needs* someone to ground him.

"Go," he demands, his voice shaky.

"I won't leave you."

"Harry." His face turns stern. "Go get her."

*Fuck.* My legs shake from the demand to find Gigi. "You'll be okay in here?"

"I'll be fine."

I retrieve my keys, closing them in his palm. "If anything happens, you fucking *drive* out of here. I'll find you, I promise."

He nods barely, and suddenly, I'm palming his neck, kissing his temple the way brothers do. When I pull back, there's a faint smile pulling at his lips.

"Don't do that again," he says.

"You liked it, and you know it."

His smile tilts the tiniest bit further.

After checking on him one final time, I run in the opposite direction. The night is dark, and I'm sprinting blind, the lights coming from within the headquarters too blinding for me to make out anything other than the stone fortress. Smoke reaches the sky, windows shattering in the far distance from the heat of the fire.

"GIGI!" I shout. "Where are you?"

The rattling fear has me running straight into something hard. The person falls to the ground with an *oomph* as I barely right my balance.

"Ouch," Gigi groans.

I pull her up quickly, not able to do anything but fucking kiss her. My mouth meets hers with a force so delirious, in my attempt to make sure this is real, that she's forced to back up as I keep striding towards her, cupping her cheeks.

She kisses me back fiercely, humming into my mouth, hands palming the sides of my neck. I groan against her lips, pushing my chest against hers just to feel her beating heart, even if it means she's forced to crane her neck.

She separates our mouths, breathless.

"Hudson," is all she says.

I draw my head back, because I know she didn't just kiss me and have that fucker's name be the first thing to leave her mouth.

“Respectfully, my love, you have three seconds to explain yourself before  
\_\_\_”

“Hudson,” she says again. “Richard’s taken him.”

I blink, bewildered, then shake my head. We barely survived today as it is. I’m not risking hers or Andy’s life again. Hudson could die a long, painful death and I wouldn’t bat an eyelid.

“Gigi, no.”

“They’ll torture him.”

I shrug. “So be it.”

I start retreating to the car, holding onto her hand.

She digs her heels in.

I turn round. Her hands on my chest push me away just enough that she can look into my eyes.

“He helped me get out. We can’t just leave him there – it makes us no better than Richard and his men.”

I circle her wrists with my palms, holding her still. “The stuff he witnessed, and the torment he let you suffer – leave him.”

“He saved my life.” She twists her captured wrist enough to wrap her fingers round my arm. “Richard will still live. He’ll make a new trafficking ring if we don’t put an end to this.”

“I. Choose. You.”

“Harry ...”

“I can’t lose you again.”

But the effort to get through to her is useless. I vowed to never fail her again, and this is no different. She’s already made up her mind.

“I want you in every lifetime, Harry, but I can’t find peace in this one knowing there are still things I need to fix. I love you. God, I love you so much, but we have to do what’s right.”

“I fucking hate you.”

She smiles. “No, you don’t.”

I turn my head over my shoulders slowly, looking back at the Circle headquarters, taking a moment to take it all in. Could we really do it? Could we end it together?

I turn back to Gigi. Her brown eyes are wide, fixed on the chaos of the fire and what lies inside. Her chest rises and falls fast, as if Richard is already inside her lungs, choking her. Her fingers tremble against her Glock as she draws it from her trousers.

Behind her eyes, I catch a glimpse of something veiled and black. Memories of her insanity she's buried.

"They deserve every shred of the monster you're afraid of."

She meets my eye, and I tuck a loose strand behind her ear.

"Don't forget what you're capable of," I say. "I'll bring you back from the darkness."

I press my forehead to hers, our war raging just a breath apart, her body leaning into me. After a moment, she lets out a long breath, cracking her neck like she's waking something up inside of her.

"Let's go," she says.

We head back to the perimeter fence, and I help Gigi over it. She lands, peering back at me. I'm tall enough to run up and grip the top, clutching the biting wires. My weight strains my biceps as I pull myself over, landing beside her.

A relieved breath falls from her throat, as if she thought I might stay behind. Stupid, stupid girl.

We run through the woods, back into the belly of the Circle headquarters. An outer wall is crumbling from the heat, a chunk of the north wing spread across the courtyard. Rubble lines the ground, pavements burning to a crisp. We crawl through a shattered service corridor, ducking low.

Alarms scream in every direction, but the fire gives us cover. While everyone else is running out, we're rushing in. I hover to a crouch, pulling Gigi through the remainder of the way, hearing merciless gunfire echo deep in the halls.

She turns to me. "Was that not you?"

I shake my head. "The recruits must be fighting back."

We move down the blackened hallway, the firelight casting hellish shapes on the walls. Smoke clings to my throat, my shirt sticking to my back with sweat, still drenched with the smell of petrol.

We duck into the shadows as a patrol sprints past. I can feel the heat from the fire licking my back, beading my neck with moisture.

Gigi swipes sweat from her forehead. "Did you really have to set the whole place on fire?"

"I had my reasons."

A figure bursts from a side room. I barely see the glimmer of metal before I'm snapping my hand out sideways, curling it round a knife mid-air, inches

from Gigi's face. Blood seeps down my forearm, venomous anger coursing through my body.

The man, dressed in security uniform, is already staggering backwards, fear drenching his every feature. I launch the knife. It wails as it cuts through air, impaling his arm with a precision that pins him to the wall.

He lets out a helpless yelp as I get closer, drawing my own dagger from its sheath. I flip it once in my hand, a darkness washing over me.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"No, no, no – wait, please—"

His plea abruptly ends as I drive the knife directly into the side of his neck. It protrudes through his skin, coming out the other side. He chokes on the metal, blood staining his teeth.

An echo of footsteps has me spinning round.

Two guards charge at Gigi. I step forward to help and then ... stop.

She's pure instinct, violence and beauty wrapped in a ribbon, as she fights ruthlessly.

I move, taking out a man to her right, but I can't stop watching her. She's graceful. Brutal. She doesn't flinch; she relishes in it.

Where I'd drag the knife down, she drives it deeper, twisting.

A blade appears in her hand, vanishing into a man's throat. Blood splatters the concrete, the walls, her jaw. She doesn't flinch.

One man gets a grip on her arm. She twists under it, her elbow plunging into his throat so hard I hear the cartilage crush.

Christ, I'm so turned on right now.

She draws out her gun, aiming it straight at me. The bullet whooshes past me sideways, clipping my ear, that desire suddenly spindling low as every breath loosens from my body. Slowly, I turn as another man bucks to his knees before tumbling sideways.

I exhale an exaggerated breath, turning back round.

"I'd happily take a bullet for you, baby," I say, "but warn me next time, yeah?"

She smiles, slipping the gun back into her trousers.

She takes the lead, guiding me down the hall. We reach a lone metal door at the end of the hall – a heavy, disastrous thing that definitely wasn't erected when I was here last. It's raised slightly, enough for us to lower to the floor and army-crawl under it.

Hudson is bound to a steel beam in the centre of the open arena, shirtless, bleeding, bruised like Richard meant it. Even with his world collapsing round him, he still had enough time to exact his revenge.

“You go,” I tell Gigi.

She moves past me, straight to Hudson. His head jerks up, one eye swollen shut, blood crusting his mouth. His dark eyes move from Gigi to me, disbelieving.

I guard the door, adrenaline spiking my pulse. I dart my attention between the exit and them both as she undoes his restraints, sawing through them with her blade. With each second, I feel the thrum of danger in my veins.

How much time do we have?

Is Andy safe on his own?

Does Hudson fucking Anderson really need to take so long getting to his feet?

I growl, rushing over to him. Hudson collapses into me as he slips from Gigi. I catch him, feeling every tremor in his body as he sags against my chest.

“Th— Thanks … for coming … back.”

“Wasn’t my choice,” I say, hoisting him up further. “You’d be dead if it weren’t for her.”

He nods once, like he expected that, grimacing with each step. “It still … m-means something.”

Despite me holding the majority of his weight, we stumble closer to the exit. Gigi trails behind us, her gun still drawn tight, eyes moving over the room with quiet caution.

She meets my eye. “Keep your guard up.”

I want to grab and shield her. Her eyes darken at my unspoken truth, and she shakes her head. We need to work on getting out. Her words quicken my steps, my urgency earning sharp hisses from Hudson.

“Can you crawl?”

He nods barely.

The door starts to groan, reverberating the grinding of metal as it rises higher.

*Shit.*

I retreat a few steps, tightening my grip on Hudson’s arm to make sure he doesn’t slip.

Before I can take a breath, a door slams open and two figures burst from it.

Gigi spins round, intercepting the man straight away, pulling the trigger of her Glock and sending a bullet straight between his eyes. The second man charges her from the side, but she's fast, brutal. Her dagger finds flesh. Metal against bone. He drops with a clean slice across his neck.

She pulls back, flustered, hand hovering against her cheek where a blade cut her.

Seething hatred boils within me that he touched her, but it's quickly overcome by unmistakable relief.

Then, suddenly, someone charges her out of nowhere, tackling her to the ground with a thud that echoes the room.

“NO!” I roar.

I push Hudson off. He's barely able to catch himself on the wall before I'm striding over, shoving the man off her. My teeth are bared, and I drive my blade into the soft part on the top of his head.

I turn towards Gigi, barely able to catch a glimpse of her, before a punch lands square in my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. Another cracks against my jaw, pain exploding in my head.

A fist tangles in her hair, bringing her forcefully to the ground. She's on her back, Richard's bodyguard on top of her, his massive hands wrapping round her throat. Christ, he's five times the size of her.

The second guard slams his fist into my side, knocking me to the floor. The bitter taste of blood spills into my mouth. I try to stand, but something metallic slams across the side of my head.

“No!” I manage through gritted teeth, spitting blood onto the floor.

Gigi's kicking and scratching at him, drawing blood across his arms. She gasps – choking noises that tear at my soul. The guard's fingers dig into her neck, his thumbs pressing hard against her windpipe. He's too strong. Her face turns red, then purple, veins bulging. She bucks her hips, trying to throw him off, but he's got her pinned, his weight crushing her.

And then something ... cracks.

The insanity snaps, morphing into a panic that falters her rhythm. She's slipping between fighting back and the horror clawing through her insides. Hands close round her throat in the way Jamie almost brought her to death.

“GIGI! GET THE FUCK OFF HER!”

I break free for a second, red distorting my vision, lunging towards them.

A boot drives into my knee, the metal slamming against my spine with a force that bounces my face against the floor, rattling my teeth.

I hear Hudson yell mid-fight behind me.

The guard tightens his grip, and I see Gigi's body jerk, her hands trying to pry his fingers away. Her legs kick out, but it barely fazes him. His eyes are gleaming as he watches the life drain from her. She spits at him even as her strength fades.

"Fuck you," she manages to wheeze.

I can see the bruises forming, dark purple marks blooming under his fingers. She's gasping for air that isn't there, her chest heaving with futile effort.

"No – please don't!" I shout. "Don't hurt her, please!"

I grapple for the dagger in my pocket, closing my hand round the blade and swinging blindly. Blood soaks my palms, slicing deeper as the person above me falters. They yell, staggering.

I'm on my feet, making it a few strides.

A bullet whooshes through the air, and I roar as it sinks into my shoulder.

Another in my calf sends me tripping to the ground, my arms immediately pinned behind my back.

We're supposed to win this. We've fought so hard.

Gigi's hand falls limp for a moment, but then she rallies, raking her nails across his cheek, drawing deep gouges that bleed. The man roars in pain and anger, slamming her head back against the concrete floor. The thud makes my stomach lurch, and I see her eyes flutter, her body going slack for a terrifying second.

Tears mix with the blood on my face as I watch.

I watch helplessly as her eyes meet mine through the madness. There's fear there, but also surrender, knowing she'd be sacrificing herself for the people she loves most.

"Stay with me. Look at me, Gigi. Look at me!"

Peace echoes through her whole body.

She smiles – or at least, I think she does.

"I love you," she mouths.

I thrash violently against the men holding me, landing a solid punch. A hand grabs my hair, slamming my face into the floor. Dizziness washes over me.

I can't leave her alone. I can't fail her.

But she's slipping away.

I cry out, "NO! No. Please! Let her go!"

Then, out of nowhere, a shot cracks through the air like thunder.

The guard straddling my back jerks violently. A bullet tears through his back, exploding out of his chest. Another shot rings out. A hole blooms in his forehead, blood and brain matter spraying across my face. He slumps over, dead weight collapsing onto me, and I shove him off, coughing and disorientated.

I grapple for the metal pipe on ground, stumbling to my feet. I hurl myself forwards, swinging it violently. It connects with the side of guard's head with a *crunch*, splitting his skull open.

He reels back, blood pouring from the gash. I don't stop, hammering with abandon, striking my elbows down with ice-cold fury until his grip loosens. He tumbles sideways, eyes rolling into the back of his head.

Gigi sputters for air, coughing up raw blood as she clutches her throat. Her eyes are screwed tight, muffled cries barely about to leave her mouth.

I fall to my knees, wrapping my arms round her, feeling her tremble against me. "Y-you're okay," I stutter. "I-I've got you. You're safe. I'm here, baby."

Her breath is raspy, and she clutches desperately onto each inhale with a shakiness that barely satisfies her lungs. I press my face into her hair, breathing deeply with her, encouraging those needed breaths.

She lifts her head slowly, lips still stained purple from where I nearly lost her. I barely think, pressing my mouth against hers with a neediness that makes her whimper.

When I pull back, her head falls against my chest, her quivering fingertips tightening against my T-shirt. I lift my chin, turning round to the figure with his gun still raised.

"I ..." Andy pants, smiling. "I thought you might need a hand."

Relief swirls my chest. I laugh – I actually laugh – and I feel Gigi do the same, though hers teeters on the precipice of broken. A soft, hoarse sound vibrates from her, shaking her body with lingering tremors. Even Hudson smiles from the corner – barely. I think he's missing a few teeth.

Andy pockets his gun, running his shaking hand over his jaw.

"You ... could've come ... a b-bit earlier," Gigi manages between gritted teeth.

"I like to make an entrance."

We'll all survive this. Battered, bruised, and scarred, we'll make it out.

I'm smiling, the pain a numb, distant thing as I look into the eyes of my best friend. He meets my gaze, and I duck my head in respect.

Movement in the corner of my eye has me glancing sideways. Richard steps out from the shadows, a familiar haunting smirk reaching his mouth, blinding me to the raised pistol in his hands.

He fires.

The shot lands in Andy's chest, a wet thud that sends him staggering back. Blood erupts from the wound, spraying across the concrete.

I whip towards him, feeling the very essence of life dwindle from my chest.

"H ... Harry ..." he chokes out.

He clutches the hole in his shirt, his knees buckling before he hits the ground.

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# SIXTY

## *Harry*

My chest feels like it's caving in, a black hole sucking up every bit of air, every memory. Gigi kneels beside me, her hand on my shoulder. She's whispering something, trying to comfort me, but her words are just noise, muffled by the roar in my ears. I can feel her breath on my neck, her body pressed close.

"*Harry.*" Her croaked voice comes through the fog.

I feel her other hand on my cheek, turning my face towards her. Her eyes are red from crying, tears mixing with the grime on her face.

I want to lose myself in her, to let her pull me back from the edge, but the anger is too consuming.

Richard did this.

Andy is more than my best friend – he's the brother I never had. And now ... now his warm blood is seeping through my fingers as I keep pressure on his chest. His back arches, and he grits his teeth through the pain, pupils still fully blown.

I look at my bloodied hands, Hudson the opposite side of me, his face in tatters, and Gigi ... her brown hair matted to her temple, her throat stained purple with fingerprints again like a terrifying nightmare. She's weak, her breathing ragged. That wound on her waist has reopened, seeping blood onto her clothes.

I can't just sit here.

I turn to Gigi slowly, the dark thought bottling in my chest. She kisses me knowingly, short and deep, pulling back to look into my eyes.

“Come back to me.”

Her voice is desperate, laced with that mix of fear and love that makes my gut twist.

She takes over, pressing her weight into the hands pressed on his chest. Andy cries out, eyes screwed shut, as the blood spills through her fingertips.

My legs are shaky as I stand, but the adrenaline kicks in, evaporating the pain of every wound.

I charge up the stairs in the direction Richard exited. Rain pours relentlessly as I burst through the door to the roof. The floor is slick, puddles forming in the craters of the concrete, the city lights blurring in the distance.

Richard stands at the edge of the roof.

He turns slowly, a smile toying on his lips as rain streams down his face. His eyes gleam with something twisted. He’s panting, his expensive suit soaked through, clinging to his frame.

Thunder cracks overhead.

Years of watching him tear apart everything good in our lives – the pain, the grief, every bruise Gigi was forced to hide ... it all comes down to this. The man who pulled me from the edge; who taught me everything.

One of us isn’t making it off this roof.

“You think you can get away with this?”

“You really want to do this, Harry?” he calls out.

I can see the gun still in his hand, but he hasn’t raised it yet. Maybe he’s waiting for me to move first, or maybe he’s just buying time. I don’t give him the chance. I lunge at him, fist aimed at his face. He steps back, swinging his arm up and clipping me with an elbow to the side of the head. He follows with a shove that sends me stumbling on the slippery floor.

My shoes slide on the wet concrete, and I catch myself against the low wall to keep from going over. Richard laughs mockingly.

“You’re fast, kid, but all that anger’s gonna get you killed.”

I lunge at him before he can say another word, my fist connecting with his jaw in a crack that echoes through the storm. He staggers, the gun flying from his hand, skidding across the concrete.

“You think you’re tough?” he snarls, flashes of lightning illuminating his face. “I’ve been in fights like this since before you were born.”

I don't answer – I just get to my feet and kick at him, aiming for his knee. He dodges, grabbing my leg, yanking hard to pull me off-balance. My back hits the roof, and he's on me in a flash, his hands clamping round my throat.

"Always so emotional, just like you were back then. Weak, useless." His fingers press to cut off my air, using his weight to keep me pinned. He's not strong, but he's experienced, trying to wrap his legs round my arms in an attempt to pin me. "*I fixed you.*"

I grunt, swinging blindly through the rain. My knuckles graze his cheek, splitting skin and forcing his head back. Blood pours down my face, and I taste the coppery tang as I shove him off. We're both on our knees now, breathing hard, the storm roaring round us. Richard's grinning through the blood on his lip.

We go down together in a tangle, rolling across the roof, fists flying. I land a solid hit to his ribs, feeling something crack under my knuckles. He gasps, his face contorting, but he fights back, wrapping his arm round my neck in a chokehold.

He hisses in my ear, "That little slut deserved so much worse than what she got—"

A rush of fury hits me in the chest, and I sink my teeth into his thigh, ripping out flesh. He bellows.

With a surge of strength, I bring my elbow down into his side, breaking from his grip. I gasp for air, the rain filling my lungs. I limp with the effort to stand, the soaring pain of every wound biting me with force.

I spit blood and flesh onto the floor. "You're going to fucking die."

Memories flood back – me as a scrawny kid, working endlessly to survive, trying to provide my brother with a home.

I charge again, grabbing Richard by the collar, slamming him against the low wall at the edge of the roof. His head snaps back, hitting the concrete with a thud.

We grapple, his hands clawing at my face, nails raking across my cheek. I drive my knee into his stomach, wrapping my hands round his throat and squeezing with all my fury. His eyes bulge, veins popping as he claws at my wrists. I press harder, feeling the life drain from him, his struggles weakening.

Images of Andy flicker in my head, his body bleeding only a few floors below us.

Greg buried six feet under by Richard's hands.

Gigi and every essence of sanity he took from her.

Christ, Poppy and even Hudson.

With a final surge, Richard twists violently, and we topple sideways. We scramble to our feet, both of us battered and bleeding. I sidestep as he charges, grabbing his arm, using his momentum to swing him towards the edge. His feet slip on the wet surface, and for a split second, he's teetering on the edge.

"I gave you everything!" Richard howls, righting his balance, wiping the blood from his lip. "Pulled you out of that shithole, and this is how you repay me?"

"No," I say, blinking hard through the rain. "You deserve so much worse."

A shadow stretches from the corner of the roof, bringing my attention over my shoulder to the figure standing there.

Jack steps forward slowly, casually, hands pressed deep into his jacket pockets. Even Richard turns, eyes widening in real, honest surprise – the first human emotion I've seen from him in years.

"J-Jack ...?" he breathes.

Jack steps into the light, his face masked with a glacial hatred I know he's half holding in.

"You're ..." Richard steps back, mere inches from plummeting to his death. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Yeah," Jack says quietly. "You would've liked that."

And then, without warning, without another word, he steps forward and presses his foot into Richard's stomach. Jack shoves hard, putting all his weight behind the kick.

Time slows. Richard's face is nothing but a blank sheet as realisation hits too late.

He topples over the low wall, his scream cut short as he plunges into the void below.

The sickening thud of his body splattering the concrete forces a shudder through me. I stride to the edge, looking over the low wall and seeing the remnants of his vile body spread out in a mass across the floor. Jack drags a gun from his waistband, drilling Richard with a round of shots just to be absolutely sure.

*Holy fucking shit.*

I stagger back, my knees giving out as I collapse onto the wet concrete. The storm rages on, but inside, the anger fades with his absence, leaving a hollow ache in my chest.

We finally killed him.

I turn my head over my shoulder slowly.

Jack turns to me, a faint smile touching his mouth as he tilts his head.  
“Still gonna kill me?”

“I’m thinking about it.” I look over at him, still reeling in shock. “You actually came.”

He shrugs. “I was in the neighbourhood.”

I cough a laugh, shaking my head, blood spatter marring the concrete.  
“And that was you? Your men were behind the gunfire?”

He lifts his shoulders again, a smirk forming fully.

We stand in the aftermath, taking it all in.

Fucking hell, we actually did it. I can actually breathe.

*Barely.*

But the girls are safe with Poppy. Gigi survived by the skin of her teeth. Hudson was breathing, the last I checked. Richard and his guards are dead. And Andy—

Alarms start to blare. Not the screeches from the fire but deeper, like a heavy beat.

Confusion washes over me as I rise to my feet, cold, dark realisation stopping me halfway as it settles in my bones.

Jack’s eyes meet mine with the same dawning fear, the unspoken truth lingering in the tense quiet.

Someone stronger is being brought in to take Richard’s place.

# SIXTY-ONE

## *Harry*

The door slams behind me as we descend the stairs. The fire has dwindled to a light smoke that fills the hallways, thin enough to breathe through.

Gigi whips her head up as we reach the ground floor, eyes searching my face for any signs of injury. Hudson takes over on Andy as she stands and runs towards me. I pull her into my arms, holding her tight against the rain-soaked fabric of my T-shirt.

“It’s over,” I say, my voice hoarse. “He’s gone.”

She buries her face in my chest and sobs against my shoulder, her body shaking from the adrenaline, years of pent-up terror and the throbbing pain finally settling in. I hold her tight, whispering that it’s over. But it’s not – not with the alarms continuing their torment, blaring above us.

We always knew Richard’s death would come with consequences – someone darker, stronger, looking to fill the void. But now it’s here, now we’re faced with the truth, I can’t fathom going through this again.

The darkness isn’t gone, but I refuse to not find a way through it.

Jack hovers over Andy’s body, coated in the thick crimson. Teeth clenched, he barks orders to no one in particular. I blink as a flurry of men come racing in from the hall, weapons drawn. I’ll never quite get used to that.

Andy blinks, looking up at Jack.

“Hi, brother,” he says. “You missed me?”

Andy laughs barely, tainted with a sob, as one of Jack's men starts wrapping bandages round his chest. Jack pulls out a syringe from a first-aid kit, pulling the cap from his teeth, because, apparently, he has a walking medical team as well as constant security.

Mouth obstructed, he starts, "This is going to hurt—"

Andy's hiss pierces the air as the syringe is embedded into his chest cavity.

*Fuuckkk.* I wince, the tightness of my joints suddenly reminding me of every punch, blade, and bullet I've withstood this evening. I force it away despite how much my body screams with resistance.

The team takes over from Jack. He sits back on his heels.

"There's not a lot of time."

Silence descends, plagued with the thrumming beat, Andy's occasional groan, and the tearing of gauze as the bleeding is brought to a minimum.

Soon, Jack will scurry off to whatever corner of the planet he's hiding in, and Hudson will make peace with his Mafia connections, but Gigi, Andy and me? It's only a matter of time before we face the consequences of our retaliation. They'll want justice for Richard's death.

"I can get you out."

Andy's eyes flick open a little wider. "W-what?"

"You want out?" Jack places a firm hand on his shoulder. "I can get you out of here. Set you up with a whole new life where you'll never have to look over your shoulder again."

I stare at Jack. This is permanent. He's got the connections to give Andy the freedom he needs.

"I can't have your society bosses knowing I'm alive yet," he says. "It's a one-time offer, but we have to move now. The jet is prepped to leave in thirty minutes."

I hear Andy's hesitation in the silence.

"You deserve to live," Gigi wheezes. "You deserve to choose yourself."

Andy peers at Jack, at Hudson, and then at me as if looking for permission. I want him to stay and find peace in London, but after everything he's suffered, Gigi's right. He deserves to make this choice for himself.

Even if it means saying goodbye.



Jack keeps checking the time, pacing like a man being hunted. If they don't leave in three minutes, the risk of his appearance will border on too risky.

I stand on the tarmac at the bottom of the steps, my fingers twitching. My shirt sticks to my spine with sweat, the night air thick with the smell of jet fuel. Gigi stands beside me, her fingers laced tightly through mine as if she's scared I'll vanish.

Jack's medical team dedicated time to ensuring our wounds were cleaned and dressed before we left, even bleaching my mouth free of Richard's flesh. I only spent ten minutes away from Gigi, and even that felt like too much. They performed an ultrasound on the arteries on her neck, finding temporary vocal cord damage. With voice therapy, she should make a full recovery. For now, they've dosed her up on enough medicine for this final goodbye. She's suffered so fucking much.

Hudson's crouching on the floor, cradling his battered face in his hands. Poppy leans against his car, her arms crossed over her chest, one boot tapping a slow rhythm. She meets my eye and nods once.

She got all the girls out. They're being treated by the doctor Hudson knows before being returned to their homes. Every family has been contacted, and Poppy has assured them she'll personally drive each girl home safely.

I nod back at her, turning back to the plane.

The engine rumbles patiently.

"We have to go now." Jack's face is pale, smeared with blood. "She's not coming. If we wait any longer—"

"She'll ... come," Gigi whispers, her voice steady. "Mia wouldn't let him go ... without saying goodbye."

Andy's leaning against the edge of the stairs, wrapped in a dark jacket two sizes too big, blood still soaking his shirt. He's fading but standing. He'd rather risk treatment or capture again than not say goodbye.

The cold night wind whips our faces, blowing Gigi's hair behind her and drawing my attention to her wounds and the bruises on her neck. We've

fought through so much.

She meets my eye, and as if she's thinking the same, she squeezes our joined hands.

I hear the car before I see it.

The low growl of an engine cuts through the silence, headlights slashing across the floor. Brakes screech, and the door flies open. Mia runs, her long purple coat flying out behind her. Her mascara is ruined. Her eyes, even from here, look red and stained with tears.

She sprints towards Andy as if she already knows this is the last time she'll ever see him. He tries to move but collapses to his knees from the pain.

Jack presses a hand to his shoulder. "You'll hurt yourself."

Mia drops beside him as if her whole body's giving up. Her hands tremble as she carefully cups his face like he'll shatter under her touch.

"You idiot," she breathes, a mixture of a sob and a declaration of love. "You absolute fucking idiot."

He doesn't say anything at first, just buries himself deeper into her touch. "You're gorgeous when you're angry."

She laughs through falling tears. Leaning her forehead against his, she says, "You're not coming back."

He shakes his head. "I won't last much longer under their control. You're the only reason I'd ever want to stay, and that's why I must let you go." He brushes his thumb over a fallen tear. "I love every colourful part of you."

She kisses him, slow and heavy.

He mumbles against her mouth, "Unless you come with me."

She shakes her head, tears wetting her cheeks. Mia has a life here, a family back home, friends, a well-paid city job, normality. She'd be sacrificing it all to be with Andy, and although I can tell her heart is begging to leave with him, she bravely steps backwards.

"I'm giving permission for you to go. Live. You deserve it."

Jack shifts on his feet and coughs. "We have to go."

Mia and Andy share a final lingering kiss. Gigi doesn't say anything, just leans her head against my shoulder like she has done before. But it's different now. There's a weight to it, like we're bracing for something bigger than what we've already lost.

Jack peers up at us both, impatience limited to a tick in his jaw. "I really shouldn't be making more trouble for myself," he says, "but what about you

two?"

I look down at Gigi as she tilts her head up from my shoulder. There's nothing for us in Paris. And I'm not particularly fond of prancing round in some small European town together pretending we're different people. Eventually, our past will come to find us.

"Not for us," I say.

Jack tips his head once, a goodbye, though something tells me it won't be the last time we see him.

Mia sniffls, wiping her eyes, as she steps up to Gigi's side.

The jet doors close with a whine.

A statement more than a question, Mia says, "Gigi ... your brother's alive."

"Long story," she mutters.

The engine growls as it starts to charge the runway. A cry catches in Mia's throat, echoing in the air, as the jet lifts off into the sky. I peer over, watching as she cries into Gigi's chest, melting into her. She buries her head in her hair, and I bring the two of them into my arms.

I stand there cradling them both, eyes locked on the shrinking silhouette of the plane carrying some of the only people I still trust in this world off to safety. Everyone's head is tilted up at the sky, but Mia stares with an intensity, like she's trying to memorise it.

Then, finally, it disappears into the night.

Mia's cries vibrate through her as Gigi rubs her back soothingly. Through the echo, my ears prick with awareness. Sirens wail in the distance, faint but gaining on us, moving fast.

"They're coming." Poppy lifts her head then says with quiet emphasis, "For you both."

Whether it's tonight, in a week, or a month from now, they'll catch up to us.

There's probably a boss already manning the Circle headquarters, worse than the last and preparing for the rebuild.

Hudson says quietly, "They won't let either of you rest. It'll be their job to track you down."

We've been through everything, but this? This is different. This is the crime we won't come back from. Our penalty for killing Richard will be death.

Mia steps out from my arms. Gigi tilts her head up, eyes searching. She's close enough that I can still smell the faint scent of roses in her hair.

"We can't fight?"

"No, baby," I say. "Not this time."

"Then it's always going to be this ... isn't it?"

"You know how long I've waited for you," I say, my voice thick. "And that I would've waited longer."

She looks at me like I'm the only thing that matters. "Would you?" she asks softly, her throat catching. "Run with me?"

I don't even blink. "Always."

She stares at me for a long second as if she needs to be absolutely sure. Her eyes meet mine – eyes I've followed into hell and back – and something unspoken passes between us. She nods once. No panic, just certainty.

"I don't care where we go," she says, her voice scratching with the effort to speak. "I don't care if we sleep in bus stations or abandoned barns ... or eat out of cans for the rest of our lives. It all means nothing if I can't h-have you." Her breath catches, then she leans in until her forehead is pressed to mine.

The sirens are louder now, a high scream bouncing over the tarmac. Still, I don't move.

"If we have to spend our life running, I'll run with you," she whispers. "Until they kill us, Harry ... or until we disappear." She buries her face in my chest, and my arms cage her in, protecting her.

"I'll do whatever you want," I murmur into the top of her head. "Just as long as I finally have you."

"Even if there's no peace at the end of it?"

"There's you. That's enough."

And just like that, she kisses me with a desperation as if trying to pour everything she can't say into my mouth. I kiss her back, wrapping my arms round her middle, as if the world might end in the next second – and maybe it will.

We break apart when Hudson barks our names.

"They're coming fast. You've got three minutes!"

I look over them all, finally pausing on Poppy. "What will you do while we're gone?"

"Survive." She shrugs, uninterested. "It's what I always do."

I'd hug her under different circumstances, but I imagine it'd end with no less than a fist across my jaw. Her gaze narrows as if she's telling me not to even think about it. I raise my hands in mercy, backing off as I look at them all together one last time.

Our strange, dysfunctional family.

Even Hudson fucking Anderson. The minute I saw him take Gigi's hand in Pixies, I could've sworn his life would end with me slicing him open.

Mia raises a hand, almost like a question. "Since you deleted my boyfriend from the planet, I think it's only right you drop me home first. I drove on a flat tyre all the way here."

I nod, stiff. "Fine."

She claps her hands.

I grab the duffel bag from the floor and sling it over my shoulder. Gigi's already pulling a hoodie over her head, fingers brushing mine again as we rush towards the G-Wagon.

She climbs into the passenger seat, Mia behind her, as the engine growls to life.

And then we're flying down the tarmac.

I reach over, taking Gigi's hand again. "Where to now?"

"There's one thing I need to do first," she says. "I made a promise to someone."

"And after that?"

"After that, we run."

# SIXTY-TWO

*Gigi*

*Ten days later*

I readjust the scarf round my neck, the late-evening wind whipping the edges. The sun is setting, casting an ambient glow over the small corner shop.

I push open the glass door, the bell giving off a tinny chime as I step inside. The smell of steam mixed with a faint trace of lavender fills my nose. I cough, trying to clear the lingering hoarseness of my throat. The distraction sends my boot slipping a little on the tiled floor before I spot the “wet floor” sign.

“Careful.” The man behind the counter smiles kindly to mask his light snickering.

“I’m here to pick up my dry cleaning,” I say, forcing a swallow. “It should be under ... Gigi Thomas.” I push the crumpled slip of blue paper over the counter.

The man peers over the glasses perched on the end of his nose and nods, disappearing in the racks of items, all wrapped neatly in thick plastic.

A distant radio plays, barely audible from where I’m standing. Signs litter the front of the desk, all stuck down with tape. “Tips welcome” and “cash only”—

*Shit.*

I’m digging through my purse, hunting for the cash, when I hear the man’s voice between the rails.

“Normally, your mother is the one to pick up the orders.” He reappears round the mountain of dry cleaning, the rug resting on his shoulder, crinkling loudly as he sets it down. “Come to think of it, I haven’t seen her in a while. How is she?”

My lips part, my heart skipping in my chest. The disastrous truth is the first response on the tip of my tongue.

*She’s dead.*

The man tilts his head to the side, and as I watch his brows pull into a frown over innocent green eyes that haven’t witnessed death to the extent that I have. He doesn’t know the destruction grief can cause.

“She’s fine.” I smile, my eyes creasing. “Just thought I’d help her out today.”

Relief washes over him, and he taps a few buttons, making the old register clink. “Tell her I said hello.”

“I will.”

“That’ll be thirty-three pounds, please.”

I nod. “Right.”

“It’s strange, really,” the shopkeeper muses as I pull the change from the bottom of my bag, setting it on the counter. “I’d never seen a wine stain so dark. It was a tough job getting it out.”

“Oh, you know what Mum’s like.” I shake my head dismissively, fighting the heat gathering on my skin. “She only settles for the best.”

“I see.” His eyes are lidded, watching me with scepticism. He recovers quickly, putting the cash in the drawer. “I’ll be seeing you, Miss Thomas.”

I smile, repositioning the bag on my shoulder and tucking the rug under my arm. I’m careful with my feet, narrowly avoiding the hazardous floor.

“Baking soda and dish soap.”

I splay my hand out against the ajar door, the gust of wind slipping into the shop. “Come again?”

“For the wine.” He smiles knowingly. “In case you need to clear the stain again.”

A blush rises to my cheeks. “Good to know.”



If I'd have known how much of a struggle it'd be to return home with a dry-cleaned rug, I would never have agreed to my mother's dying wish. I settle for hanging it over the back seat, the roof down, a major hazard for any vehicles nearby.

As I pull up outside my family's home, the door swings open. Harry leaves it ajar, jogging down the path to help me lift the rug from the seats.

"Is now a bad time to say I never liked this rug?"

He's not wrong.

Heaving with the effort as we slip it from the car and through the entryway, I exhale, "Not my style either."

"Did anyone follow you?"

We set the rug down in the middle of the living room. "There's a black Ford parked at the end of the street, but it could be nothing."

"We'll get a move on soon, just to be safe." He kisses my temple, nodding towards the stairs. "I'll get the last few pieces together."

While Harry's footsteps echo up the stairs, I kneel on the floor, ripping open the sheet with a pair of scissors. The rug tumbles out, and I straighten it, sitting back on my heels to admire the faultless fabric, blinking back the images of that night.

The blood. The death. All of it.

One of the most horrific nights that make up our story. We've dealt with so much tragedy I don't think life could have thrown us much worse.

I rise to my feet, dusting off the scent of starch from my clothing, and pull away the scarf concealing the bruises on my neck. When I reach the top of the staircase, I find Harry packing last-minute essentials into a duffle bag. We don't have much, only the necessities to last us a few days before we make camp on the road.

I watch him silently, leaning against the doorframe of my brother's room. It's strange how life has brought us full circle back here. I guess a part of me knew it was always Harry.

Harry who sealed my fate on the dark side.

Harry who snuck into my brother's room when I was at my lowest.

Harry who loved me at times when no one else did.

He turns round, a smile spreading over his gorgeous mouth. He approaches me in a couple of strides, his palm cradling my cheek. His eyes flick to my neck, then back up to my eyes.

It still hurts him, but he doesn't say it – not anymore. He knows I'd go through it all again, every second with Jamie, to protect his life. I'd do anything for him.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

"You. Us."

"I wish things played out differently," he confesses, his arms circling my waist. "I wish I could've given you a ring before another man got there first. I wish I could've asked your mother for her blessing."

There was a time when I would have ached to live a different life – one where I could start over and search for Harry first just to find him sooner.

But I don't think like that anymore.

Everything that's happened, every memory of Harry's I was once oblivious to, is part of our story. While I may not like our beginning, I love our end. And I guess, in a way, when you love someone, that's all that matters. Throughout everything, you'll find your way back to each other.

You'll find them, and they'll find you.

As long as it's taken us to get here, Harry and I got our ending. And if things had played out differently, I know he would've torn the world apart to get me back.

And I realise now, there are no circumstances life could've thrown at us where we wouldn't have found each other in the end. I'll walk by his side throughout everything, for as long as life may allow us – because even if my story didn't start with Harry, it ends with him.

His fingers tilt my chin up, forcing me to meet his green eyes. "Right now, I'd probably get down on one knee and ask you to marry me, but I can't promise you a happily ever after when I'm not sure what lies ahead. So I promise to give you all of me. I'll give you anything, Gigi. You want a diamond? I'll give you a thousand. You want a family? I'll give you a home and children inside of it one day. I'm asking for forever with you, for us to be permanent in the same way my scars will never leave, and I promise to be indebted to you for the rest of my life."

"God, I love you so much," I breathe.

I barely have time to finish my sentence before he's cupping the sides of my face just as strongly as I've grabbed him, kissing him with every ounce of strength I have. I love him. Fuck, I love this man with every bone in my body.

This is my happily ever after.

I want to scream to the world that this man is finally mine.

Through the pounding heartbeat swarming my ears, I hear vehicles pulling up outside, their tyres screeching against the pavement.

“Harry ...”

“Mm?” he muses as if he’s got all the time in the world.

I pull back, breathless. “We have company.”

We reach the window overlooking the driveway. Three SUVs are pulled haphazardly across the street. Men slip out of the doors, guns drawn, heading straight for the entrance. The front door groans as it’s bashed in, footsteps echoing downstairs as they look from room to room.

Harry gestures to the window and pushes it open, just like the night I confronted the shadow in this room. The gaze so strong I was bound to spend the rest of my life chasing it.

A smile tilts his lips up. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

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# EPILOGUE

*Harry*

*Three months later*

Tourists flood the city, laughing, sweating, and fanning themselves with brochures of dead emperors and fallen empires. The Sistine Chapel is a furnace in this heat, and if Gigi wasn't so desperate to visit, I'd have screwed the plan entirely.

Sightseeing somewhere so densely popular is a risky move, but we've had a recent bout of luck. A couple of weeks with no trailing cars or shady men following us down the street.

Still, we don't linger.

We take our steps slowly, the crowd not allowing us to move faster anyway. Gigi's blue summer dress flutters in the wind, her hair clipped up hastily to keep her cool, drawing my eyes to her deliciously exposed skin. From the minute I walked into her life, I should've braced myself for her to rip the oxygen straight out of me. The hem of her dress gathers mid-thigh, exposing a sneak of our Glock in her garter. Not quite the leg holster she's used to, but it'll suffice. It's battered and worn, but so are we.

I throw death glares at the men passing her sideways glances. They snap their heads away. But I've already stored their appearances to memory; already imagined how they'll look strung up by their insides—

"No way," Gigi says, her voice faintly scratching. "Best behaviour, remember?"

My teeth nip her ear. "That's boring."

And she knows it.

She hums, half dismissive, half contemplating the idea. My pulse is already thrumming with the impending high of carrying out a murder, and I feel the goose bumps rising under the path of my lips across her bare shoulders.

But it's one of our non-negotiables. No deaths unless absolutely necessary.

Although the psychopath in me needily counters that their crudeness makes it necessary, we can't afford to leave bodies in our path. Even if we do miss the thrill of the chase.

Another rule is that we don't steal, but with the way the diamond Cartier necklace sparkles round my princess's throat, it was worth every risk.

We have passports – fake, of course, but expensive – access to cash, and safe houses across Europe. Gigi could have had that necklace in fifteen minutes if she wanted to, and she knew it, even after sending Richard's inheritance elsewhere. She wants nothing to do with his money, and I don't blame her. But when she spotted that necklace in the window, she looked at me like the troublesome thing she is, pupils blown with a familiar intensity as if we were entering a heist.

It would have been rude of us to live in denial about what we do best.

Blue lights flare on the curved walls of the Vatican behind us, the distant wail of a siren closing in.

"Don't run," I say, my voice low. "Not until I say."

I see the intrigue in our eyes and her eager nod as Gigi's hand slides into mine. We quicken our steps, turning the corner just as the first of them shout.

"Now," she whispers.

*The little devil.*

We run.

The pavement blurs under our feet as we sprint through the streets of Rome, cutting through crevices and paths barely meant for two people. We dart through passages of old buildings, someone's washing still hanging above us, dozens of white sheets strung between windows.

I shove the first sheet aside, senses invaded by the scent of detergent and dust.

I don't dare look back. I only look at Gigi – her bare legs flashing under her dress, the glint in her eye. Her fingers find mine even as we run,

clutching, pulling, laughing under her breath.

She turns down a small street before I can answer. I follow without hesitation.

“They’re close,” she gasps.

An officer goes to pass, and I pull her back suddenly. She stumbles a half-step as we duck into a dark, narrow alley. She laughs breathlessly despite the risk, the sound smothered by my hand over her mouth as I flatten her against the stone.

The man sprints past, another one close behind cursing, “*Ladra.*” *Thief.*

I feel Gigi’s chest rising and falling under my hand. Her skin is hot despite the cold wall at her back, hair messy from the sprint, lips wet and parted. I want her now. Not tomorrow, not when we’re safe. I want her here, with people aching to catch us.

Christ, I want her so badly my body vibrates with need.

The street is a chaos round us – sirens everywhere, the distant churn of engines – but here, in the mouth of this alleyway, it’s just us.

I push her deeper into the wall, her gasp making me ravenous. The stone scrapes her back, but her eyes stay locked on mine, pupils wide with hunger. I kiss her roughly, teeth clashing. She claws at my shirt, tearing it open.

I grab her ass and lift her. Her legs wrap round me instantly, her dress bunching at her hips. My cock strains against my trousers. She grinds into it, pulling a groan from my chest.

I press a kiss to her jaw, her ear, the place where her pulse hammers. My teeth toy with the diamonds at her throat.

“You’ll crawl to me later wearing nothing other than this necklace.”

She hums in satisfaction. Though for now, I’ll make do by pulling her pathetic excuse for panties aside, nearly losing my grip with her arousal.

I slam into her in one long thrust. The diamonds round her throat catch the glint of the streetlight as I retract then slam back into her, reaching the hilt.

I punctuate with each thrust: “Completely. Utterly. Mine.”

“O-oh, fuck!” she moans. “*Harry.*”

One hand brackets the wall behind her, the other gripping my hair with a pressure that draws my head back, ripping my mouth from hers. Wetness coats her lips, causing that hunger to tighten in my stomach again.

I squeeze her ass, fingers spreading her as I keep her pinned up, slamming into her with a force that jerks her against the brick with every thrust. Her nails rake across my back, dragging lines that make me groan into her mouth.

“Keep breathing for me,” I growl in her ear, lips brushing the sweat on her temple. “Don’t stop.”

I wrap my fingertip round the necklace and tug on it, pulling it tight enough that she chokes on the raspy whimper leaving her throat. The stone scrapes her shoulders, yet she clings to me still, her legs wrapped round my waist with a feral need that matches mine. Her Glock is confined to the garter on her thigh. I swear that fucking weapon is indestructible.

Lips swollen, Gigi urges, “Tighter.”

And fuck me, I do it. I tighten it until her breath stutters; until her body shudders round me; until I feel like I’m falling heavy into the abyss we built together. Her life hammers against the diamonds, pulsing into my fingers as I hold her breath, her soul, her everything, right in my palm.

And I see it in her eyes: through all the trauma she’s suffered, she trusts me entirely. Her tiny little throat is caged within this necklace, and with the slightest pull, I could end her.

She. Trusts. Me.

I don’t fail her.

I love this woman so fucking much.

My hand slides lower, thumb edging along her clit, coaxing her dangerously close. She gasps then melts round me.

“I’ve … been … thinking,” I murmur between thrusts.

“Mm?”

“I could marry you—”

She kisses me so hard I lose rhythm, getting lost in the feel of her mouth. I growl into it, the taste of copper spilling onto my tongue as I bite her lower lip. Her nails run over my shoulder, feral, fuelled by the excited squeal that vibrates my mouth.

She separates our mouths for barely a breath. “Who says what marriage is?” She slams her mouth onto mine then draws back again. “Who says this isn’t enough—?”

Her words are cut off as a particular deep thrust has her whimpering a broken version of my name. My hands grab her thighs so tightly my knuckles turn white.

“You don’t want a wedding?” I ask. “A trip to see old friends?”

“I just need you.”

She says it with such certainty I almost crumble. I kiss her so hard she forgets whose air she’s breathing, and she meets my mouth with an intensity that rivals mine.

I fuck her harder, slamming her against the graffiti-stained wall. My fingers rub her clit harder as I thrust in so deeply I hit the spot that makes her completely shatter. She unleashes with a cry, violent, uncontained, trembling in my arms. I keep going; keep holding her against the wall like she’ll dissolve if I let her go.

I empty myself inside her, teeth clenched, forehead against hers, my body shuddering until my knees threaten to give way.

I smile.

She smiles wider.

Then we laugh, spent, breathless, and high off adrenaline.

She declares, “I love you—”

“*Mani in alto!*” an Italian man shouts.

My cock is still buried inside Gigi, her dress still torn, barely covering her breasts. All of which is highlighted by the artificial lights pinning us in the darkness of the alley. I spot a police car at either end and the silhouette of no less than seven police officers.

I tap my ear. “English?”

“Hands up where we can see them!”

“Ah.” I nod. “A bit of privacy first, gentlemen? This is a celebratory moment.”

I release Gigi’s thighs, hissing through my teeth at the loss of her as she slides down my front—

“Don’t move!” they shout.

“Get ready, baby,” I whisper.

Her wide smile is her only response. I slip my cock into my jeans while Gigi repositions her dress, moving her panties back into place with eagerness. Her fingers twitch near her upper thigh—

“DON’T MOVE!”

The officers have now upped their weapons – a taser in one hand, a pistol in the other. One of them mumbles into their radio, requesting the need for backup.

And they *will* need backup.

I hear the click of Gigi's Glock as her back meets mine, her aim towards her side of the alley. I hum at the heat radiating from her, retrieving my knife from inside my shirt.

I fear for their life more than I fear for hers. I know what she's capable of.

This is where our third non-negotiable comes to play. If we must die, we die together. My girl always did have a fascination with *Romeo and Juliet*.

"If one of you even thinks about touching my wife," – I twirl the dagger along the back of my hand, catching the handle in my palm – "your death has just turned from relatively quick to incredibly gruesome."

In this small space, we're just us. We're not playing different characters; we're not hiding from ourselves. Right now, right here, we can just be ourselves.

Motherfucking criminals.

"Ready, baby?" I turn to Gigi over my shoulder.

She nods, a glimmer of mischief twinkling in her beautiful eyes. She tilts her chin and places a slow kiss to my mouth, as nonchalant as ever.

"Come back to me," she says.

I turn forward, my pulse picking up speed as I tighten my hold on the knife. "Always."

## EXTENDED EPILOGUE

*Poppy*

*Andy Davidson.*

*Beloved husband, friend, and son.*

*May your spirit rest in peace.*

People often forget he was once married – especially since he fell in love with a woman as striking as Mia Allen. It was in the first few months of meeting him that I discovered when Andy fell, he fell hard. Luckily, his wife was as in love with him as he was with her. Though I did enjoy giving them trouble.

A smile tugs at my lips at the memory, a laugh slipping out. I cough to mask the sound.

Fresh flowers have been laid on both his and his wife's graves, and I just know Mia was responsible. Though Andy could be a cocky son of a bitch, he still ended up with a gravestone as shiny as any. Dare I say, the little fucker deserved it after all he suffered through – not that he'll ever see it from his small corner of the world. I hope he's thriving in some European town, splurging Richard's inheritance, which Gigi so kindly gifted to him.

An anonymous source donated ten million pounds into my bank account. I never had confirmation, but I knew.

I place down the single tulip, retreating back to the worn dirt where other mourners have stood to pay their respects. The tulip sits beside a few roses signed “G + H” along with a heart. A subtle sign – the most we've heard in weeks. They'll both be out there somewhere.

A figure draws nearer, their shadow spreading over the top of the grave. Hudson stands to my left, ducking his head.

A silent, respectful minute passes.

“I could’ve sworn I heard you laugh.” A smile tilts his voice. “Didn’t think you were capable of such things.”

“Tell anyone, and I will make you regret it.”

“So,” he drawls, eager to change the topic, “what’s next then?”

“Next?” I purse my lips, tilting my head deeper to look over the graveyard. “Walk with me.”

Hudson tucks his hands into his front pockets. My gaze drifts over the other names mounted on the rows of stone. I slow my steps as we reach the column of L’s, laying down a single flower on the gravestone of Oliver Lark. A child’s yellow-crayon drawing billows in the wind, stuck down by a piece of tape. Three stick figures, his family, holding hands.

“Did you see the name on the flowers back there?”

I peer sideways. “I did.”

Hudson drops his voice even quieter. “Have you heard from them?”

I subtly shake my head.

We walk silently, crisp leaves crunching beneath our boots, a light hail getting carried on the wind. We both take a right down the column of S’s.

I stop at the St. James family, laying down my offering for Greg and his mother. Harry’s mum’s grave now reads “Beloved Mother. Always in Our Hearts.” No mention of her ex-husband. I wasn’t going to spend money on such a foul creature, but a cheap can of red spray paint I could spare.

*Here lies ... a cunt.*

Simple. Classy. Factual. “Michael” is barely distinguishable through the thick scarlet.

I snicker.

The groundsman will remove the vandalism within the next few days, but I planted enough nettles and poison ivy to contaminate the soil. Even nature is rejecting him. I’ll replant them enough times that they’ll have no other option but to move him.

Richard’s body lies hidden in a vault somewhere, otherwise I’d show him similar disrespect.

At Maria Thomas’s grave, I crouch down, placing another flower.

“Is it really safe to be doing this?”

“Why are you so paranoid?” I quip.

“Oh, *no reason* … It’s not like we have very powerful people grilling us *every damn day*. They know we’re hiding something about what happened to Richard.”

I shrug. “They can’t hurt me.”

All the important people in my life have either died or left me. Nothing they can do will harm me anymore – I’m desensitised to their presence.

“Besides …” I stand, dusting my hands on my coat. “My husband will beat them to the job of hurting me. I killed his father.”

Hudson gapes. “You *what*? ”

“Gigi thought she killed Paolo Ricci that day, but she only left him brain-dead, not *dead-dead*. I just finished the job.”

I scatter the remaining tulips over random headstones as we exit towards the car park.

“Enlighten me then,” he says. “What did you do?”

“I made a display of him.”

“Poppy …” Hudson drags out my name like I’m some insolent child.  
“Leo’s going to kill you.”

“Perhaps.” I smile wickedly at the thought. “But not if I kill him first.”

THE END

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I'm so proud of this story. In the years to come, I'll remember this book as 'one of the first'. With each book I publish, my writing will improve, and naturally this series will be at the bottom of the list. But right now, I'm reminding future me how proud you were when this story wrapped up, the late nights, and finally giving grace to these characters. YOU DID THAT through the chaos of 2 kids, giving birth, and recovering postpartum. No matter, how many bad reviews you read and end up believing a little more with each one, you love this story. **Don't let strangers on the internet tell you otherwise.**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie Grace lives in London with her fiancé and her babies (fur and human). Besides her family, her next love is crafting romance stories with morally grey men and strong and resilient heroines. When she's not behind her laptop writing, she's watching shark attack movies or reading fantasy novels.

To stay up to date with her latest book news and upcoming releases make sure to follow ...

**Instagram:** @sophiegraceauthor

**TikTok:** @sophiegraceauthor  
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