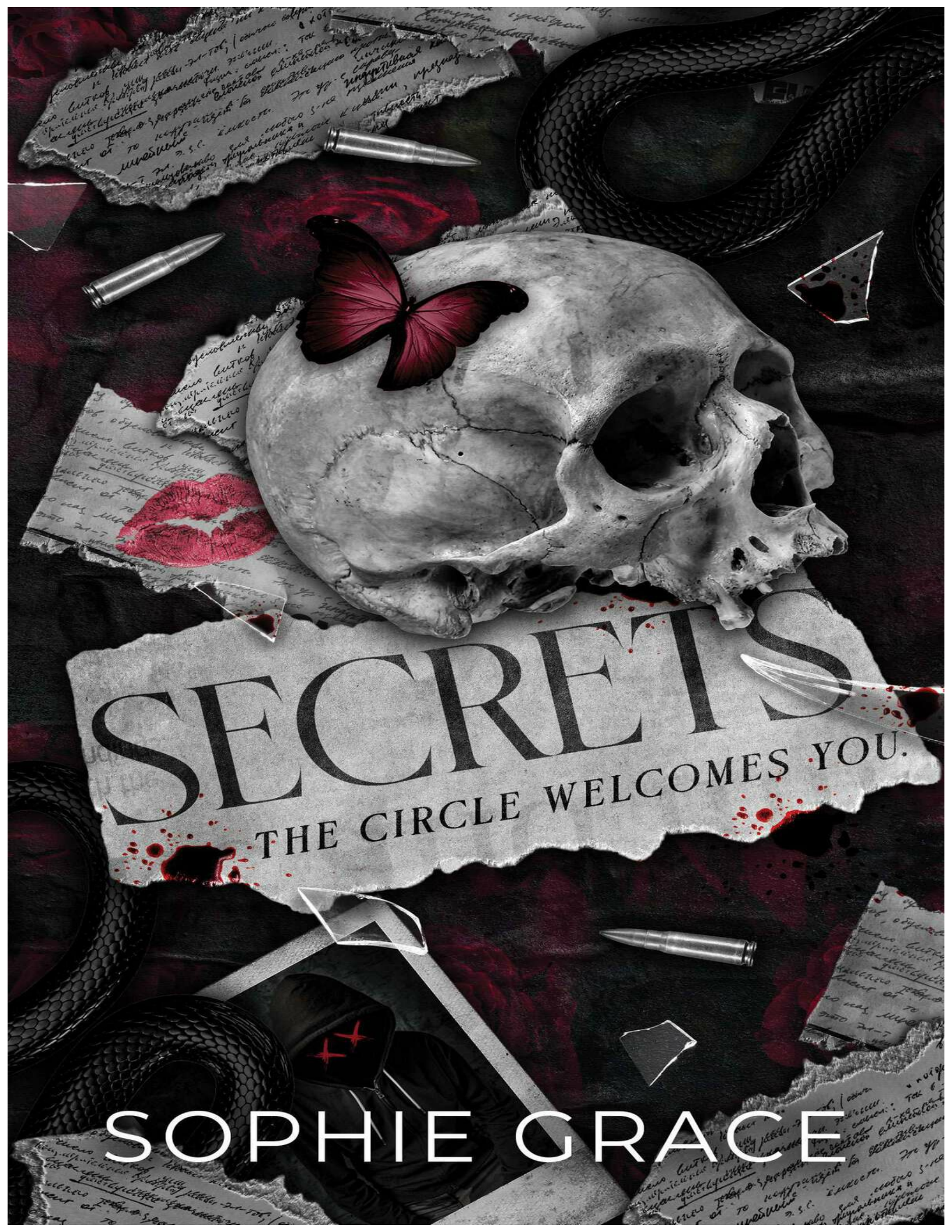


SECRETS

THE CIRCLE WELCOMES YOU.

SOPHIE GRACE



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TRIGGER WARNINGS

Torture, murder, blood, gore, dismemberment, graphic sexual scenes, orgasm denial, breath play, bondage, hate sex, forced proximity, attempted rape (not between main characters), kidnapping, human trafficking, drugging, blackmail, organised crime, gun violence, traumatic events, self-harm (mentioned), revenge, loss of a loved one, cheating (not between main characters), traumatic events, organised crime, PTSD and emotional turmoil.

This book is not for the girlies who read their epilogues hoping for marriage and babies. The story ends on a cliffhanger.

Please read the trigger warnings carefully.

Your mental health matters.

Love, Sophie

PLAYLIST

Paint It, Black – Ciara
Warriors – Imagine Dragons
PARANOID – Chase Atlantic
Shadow – Livingstone
Infinity – Jaymes Young
Love in the Dark – Adele
Game of Survival – Ruelle
U&I – The Neighbourhood
HEAVEN AND BACK – Chase Atlantic
you should see me in a crown – Billie Eilish
Heavy In Your Arms – Florence + The Machine

To the girlies who want a 6'4" bad boy to treat them like a princess but fuck them like a criminal.

Tell me, baby, is there enough room on your *book boyfriend* list for me?
Even if there is, I don't share.

Sincerely,
Harry St. James

*"Give me my sin again."
– William Shakespeare*

PROLOGUE

Harry

I've killed a man.
And there's blood ... *everywhere*.
It's pooling in my palms, soaking every digit, before it slips off my skin and onto the marble floor like spilled milk.
Why can't I stop staring at my fucking hands?
Come to think of it, they don't even look like my hands anymore. It's just skin tainted crimson.
I anchor my attention on the red liquid trickling off the end of each fingertip.
Drip. Drip. Drip.
I've killed an innocent man.
People are applauding as if it's something to celebrate. The grating noise of their clapping and high-pitched whistling has turned to a numb ringing in my ears.
I need to focus.
Appease them.
Appease them all—
So. Much. Blood.
Part of me is holding back from spewing my insides over the lifeless body at my feet. But there's also a dangerous foreign feeling, a stronger emotion, trying to claw its way to the surface ... an unmistakable sense of power.
Heavy footsteps drill into my brain, masking the deep ringing that's threatening to shatter my eardrums. With every step closer, the fear I've murdered a man starts to subside, replaced by a surge of adrenaline. It courses through my veins, burning everything in its wake and scorching every good deed I've ever done to ash. Every goodwill gesture. Everything I've ever taken for granted.
There's a small, taunting voice in the back of my head.
Embrace this, it says.
Two leather-clad shoes stop a few steps ahead of me.
He stands there, head cocked, mouth twitching in a grin, watching as the malice reaches the surface of my skin in the form of a merciless smile.
“Welcome to the Circle.”

ONE

Gigi

Seven Years Later

My intruder had piercing green eyes, as breath-taking as the finest emeralds, and hair as dark as the midnight sky. Yet I feign ignorance, shrugging as I reiterate, “I didn’t see them. They left by the time I’d realised anything was wrong.”

Police Officer Brady sighs and brings her attention to the walkie-talkie positioned right above her heart. Static interjects, and I drown out the noise, focusing on the flashing lights of police cars idling outside my home.

People vacate the premises as I sit on the ambulance floor, my legs swinging from the open truck doors. The lights turn to a dull blur, my brain forcing the colours to appear as flickers of bokeh – an action forced by the ever-growing migraine practically splitting my skull in half.

The paramedic presses a reassuring hand to my shoulder, instantly sharpening my focus, as she details her findings to the policewoman standing before me. There’s nothing to relay. Perhaps the aftermath of shock at best.

Despite the police desperately pressing me for information, I’ve rehashed the same story all night. The words “I didn’t see them” have become as easy as breathing at this point.

You’ve probably heard the story already, but in the rare case you haven’t ... someone managed to sneak through the security system and into our house without leaving so much as a crumb. If the nosy neighbours detailed the gossip to the local Sunday paper, you’d also know the house was eerily quiet since my parents were out of town. I wouldn’t have noticed anything out of line if it wasn’t for Jack’s door being ajar. That was how I knew something was wrong.

Nobody *ever* goes into my brother’s room. Not since—

I shake my head, ridding myself of the intrusive thoughts.

Too much misery for one night.

“Can I leave now?” I ask the women.

The blunt question forces the pair to pause their conversation, but I fail to feel remorse. I’ve been sitting in this ambulance for hours, and on top of knowing I’ll have to face the wrath of my mother and father, my exhaustion has increased tenfold. God knows how upset they’ll be that their trip was cut short. Not so upset that they’d fly home to London tonight though – that much I noticed.

“I was just telling Officer Brady that your vitals appear normal and I have no concerns.”

I nod at the paramedic.

“If anything changes, then I encourage you to make an appointment with your doctor.”

“So I’m free to go?” I clarify.

The officer sighs and digs into her front pocket, retrieving a crumpled business card, which she hands over. I’m reluctant to take it, but the thought of escaping sooner makes me stuff it deep in my pocket alongside crumpled receipts and discarded wrappers.

“We’ll be in touch, Miss Thomas. If you remember anything, please call.”

I’ve already lost the weighted tartan blanket and replaced it with my corduroy jacket before she’s finished speaking. I finger the buttons, all while feeling her pressing gaze.

The screech of tyres and a horrendous chugging engine steals our attention. The old banger trailing up the road leaves scorched rubber marks on the tarmac, but I smile and gesture towards Greg’s poor excuse for transport.

“And that’ll be my ride. I’ll let you know if I remember anything.”

I turn to leave, but my feet grind to a stop as I hear Officer Brady softly say, “Gigi, wait.”

Fuck. I was so close to getting away.

I crane my neck to meet her gaze. Her expression softens, and I see the fight unleashing within the depths of her blue eyes. Immediately sensing what she’s about to ask, I save her the misery and turn to her fully.

“I don’t need your sympathy,” I tell her, my words lacking conviction. “I’m doing better, I swear. Every day is a little easier – just like everybody said it would be.”

I want to kick myself for being so short with her since it was her knocking on our door five years ago to explain Jack’s vehicle had been found at the site of a fatal collision. She was the one who escorted us to the hospital to identify the burnt remains that barely resembled a body.

I don’t tell Officer Brady that I cry myself to sleep every night.

I don’t dare tell her I’ve been struggling to feel an inkling of human emotion – except grief – for months.

Not until tonight, that is ...

My footsteps are practically silent against the plush cream carpet as I tread closer towards Jack’s door. My fingers move round the doorknob, daring to push it open.

A small nagging voice in the back of my brain tells me to put my senses on high alert, yet an even bigger part of me aches to chase the thrill and welcome the humanity of fear like an old friend.

Choosing the latter, I turn the doorknob, and a breath catches in my throat.

There’s someone in my house.

Not only are they in my home, but they’re standing directly in front of me.

Facing me.

I shake my head again, allowing the thought to pass, as I force a smile to mask any uncertainty. The officer’s tapping foot and stiff shoulders are a dead giveaway she doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. Despite everything, she steps back and says, “Have a good evening. Try to get some rest.”

“I will, thank you.”

As I finally approach Greg’s car, he leans over and pushes the door open to allow me into the passenger seat. The media console plays a late-night radio station with a gentle hum. His brown eyes barely spare me a glance as he waits for me to buckle my seatbelt. Once it’s secure, he pulls off from the side of the road, and I jerk in my seat at the erratic movement.

Each painfully silent minute that passes causes me to cringe until I say, “Whatever’s on your mind, just say it.”

His hands tighten on the wheel. He focuses on the road ahead. “If you’d just chosen to stay with me, it would never have happened.”

I sigh, wishing I didn’t ask. “Greg, not now. Please.”

There’s no denying things are more complicated between us than ever before – more so on his end. I’ve made it clear I don’t see a future between us. At one point in college I thought I did, but that thought vanished as quickly as it appeared. He was my first love, but that was all he was: a first. Unfortunately, he’s never let the idea of us go.

The complications have increased in the past few years, ever since Jack left us. I’ve been dying to feel something – anything – and Greg St. James has conveniently been there to provide that for me. While I’m doing nothing more than trying to experience life again, it’s evident he struggles to accept an intimate night together without fluffy aftereffects.

I guess it’s always been in me – selfishness, the ability to be brutal and risk others’ happiness to serve my own purpose. It’s perhaps the only gene I inherited from my parents that I’m thankful for.

We don’t utter another word for the remainder of the journey.

The house is in the same poor condition as always as we pull up on the street outside the front door. Post overflows the letterbox, weeds climb the front porch, and weeks of discarded newspapers litter the steps. As if sensing my silent judgement, Greg smiles apologetically as he turns the key in the lock.

We both step inside from the cold, and he takes my jacket from my shoulders, slipping it onto the coat hook to his right. Like clockwork I force a smile, offer out my hand, and catch his problematic frown before he presses his palm into mine.

I need this, I think to myself.

Once we reach his bedroom, I tread over to his bed and press my back against the mattress, pulling him down onto me as I wrap my thighs round his waist. He’ll never outright tell me no, but his eyes say everything that words can’t ...

Pain.

After a moment’s hesitation, he lowers his head to my neck and peppers delicate kisses against the skin. My eyelashes flutter, and I feel the moment my mind claws at the events of this evening – just hours earlier. I fully shut my eyes, welcoming the flashback into my thoughts with ease.

There’s an intruder in my home, and they’re standing directly in front of me.

Facing me.

Their body is concealed by a dark shadow, but the moonlight licks at their skin, illuminating their strong jaw, enticing height, and piercing green eyes that hold my body captive.

There’s something ... unspoken between us. It’s electric, like invisible bands tying us together at the chest, stretched to maximum capacity, threatening to snap and pull us together by force.

His presence is as intoxicating as a drug, and I fear I’ll be chasing this euphoric sensation for the rest of my life.

When the intruder climbs out of the window with the grace and confidence of a criminal, I make a promise I’m destined

to fulfil.

I promise you, stranger, I will find you again.

Pulling me from my mind, Greg's lips travel over my jaw and towards my mouth, leaving kisses in his path. I tilt my head away.

Lost in the motion between a dream and reality, I plead into the night, "Just make me feel something."

TWO

Bigi

The chill in the spring air is harsh against my skin throughout my gut-wrenchingly boring work shift. It isn't as fun as it's made out to be, working at one of these department stores that sells ... well ... pretty much everything.

Same job. Same shitty commute. Same crappy hours. Every day at 5.10 p.m. I throw a right onto Regent Street, pass the likes of *Ted Baker* and *All Saints*, and catch the tube from Oxford Circus, either via the Bakerloo or Victoria line, to Surrey.

But alas, as if confronting my intruder in the middle of the night screwed all my morals, today I turn the opposite way and opt for the long route towards Tottenham Court Road station. That'll add a bit more oomph to my day.

My best friend Mia Allen would say I'm heading back to work too quickly after the incident.

Are you out of your goddamn mind? she'd say.

And if the strain on my back from sleeping on Greg's mattress the past few nights is an indication of anything, maybe she's right.

You'd have thought I would have figured out my life by now, but here I am, stuck in a dead-end job – the last thing I expected to be doing at twenty-four. I'm still waiting for my big break. Nothing quite sparks my interest more than fear, but what do I put on my CV? *Thrill-seeker*? They'll think I'm some kind of cliff-jumper, and that's most certainly not the kind of adrenaline I'm after.

What I'm trying to say is ... my life lacks purpose. For a while I thought my calling could be in criminology. God knows I've spent more time around the Metropolitan Police than anyone. I'm practically on a first-name basis with them, but not from petty crimes. That was Jack's doing. He was always a naughty kid. Time has seemed to slow since he died. The past four years have dragged on me like nothing else. People say time is the greatest healer; I say it's fucking bullshit.

What's holding me back from fully grieving is the fact his death was so insanely suspicious it sets my teeth on edge. I have this bone-rattling feeling someone's withholding dark secrets. You're telling me there was a fatal collision and no eyewitnesses? Yeah, right.

My parents complain I'm holding onto the past, but there's no past to hold onto when you don't even know if you buried the right person. I'm not saying my parents are hiding something from me ... but I'm not *not* saying that.

The thought of Jack makes me release a long sigh and hug my jacket a little closer to my chest as I approach the train station. Whether it's to conceal myself from the cool London chill or to prepare myself for the meeting with my parents, I have no clue. The shared Google Calendar alerted me to a "family meeting" tonight, courtesy of my mother. Tea will no doubt be accompanied by side glances and awkward conversations.

I need to move out, but there are two issues. The first is that as soon as I have nothing holding me to that house, my parents will keep it that way. They're pushing me away with age, and I'll be damned if I allow them to kick me out before I've sought justice for my brother. The second – and possibly most important – reason ... I don't have the money. Sure, my parents could easily lend it to me – and trust me, they've offered it plenty of times – but it isn't mine. I didn't earn it. But a part-time job at a department store isn't forgiving on London prices—

For fuck's sake.

Bright yellow caution tape blocks my path to the tube station. The sight causes hair to rise on my arms and a shiver to race down my spine. A small crowd has gathered round a shop front that's been broken into. The red-and-blue lights of police cars flicker against the shattered glass fragments decorating the pavement.

It's as if the danger can't escape me recently. *How damn predictable.*

Orders are bellowed for onlookers to pass since they're interrupting an active crime scene.

"These fucking gangs," some Nosy Nelly mutters, walking past. "They should be ashamed of themselves."

"How'd you know it's a gang?" another asks.

"This isn't a one-man job," one man says. "The crime rate is getting out of hand nowadays."

“I heard they hit that fancy-ass jewellery shop last week. Cleared the place bare, apparently ...”

I bow my head and walk on past the entrance to the station, which the crowd is now blocking.

Once I finally manage to catch a train elsewhere, it takes me just short of an hour to arrive at the red-brick detached house that holds many haunting memories, and which I have the disadvantage of calling my home.

Sleeping on Greg’s uncomfortable mattress suddenly feels ten times more appealing.

When I enter the front door and turn the corner, my mother stands motionless, and I still my steps. I recognise myself instantly in her eyes, and it chills me every time, like it’s my own reflection staring back at me. Thick brown hair. Deep brown eyes. Olive skin. Jack and I always were the spitting image of her.

“Help set the table,” she says. “I’ll be dishing out tea in ten minutes.”

The dinnerware is already laid out on the dining-room table as I place down the cutlery and the placemats. My father sits in his usual seat, glasses positioned on the edge of his nose as he reads the morning paper. As I pass him, my eyes land on the front page of *The Telegraph*.

TERROR STRIKES AGAIN

London jewellery store ransacked as Britain’s most notorious crime group attacks Covent Garden branch. A victim details the shocking events of Tuesday’s tragedy ...

“How was work?”

Eyes still focused on the paper, I mumble, “Hmm?”

“How was work, Gigi?”

“Oh.” I stifle a laugh and tear my gaze away. “Same old, same old.”

“Any pay rises we should know about?”

“Not yet.” I grind my teeth.

My father looks up from his paper, acknowledges my presence, and then returns to his reading.

Placing down a fork, I ask, “How was Paris?”

“Ask your mother.”

It’s the first night I’ve been home since the break-in. Damn it, it’s the first time I’ve seen my parents since the incident, and their go-to topic of conversation is about work. I squeeze my eyes shut, crescent moons imprinting into my palms as an outlet for my anger.

“Gigi,” my mother sighs, carrying in a hot dish, “you didn’t finish laying the table.”

“Right, sorry.”

There’s lingering tension in the air once we’re seated. Every *chink* of cutlery catching against the porcelain plates grates at my resolve to stay calm.

“Paris was wonderful,” Mum speaks up. “Wasn’t it just fabulous, Husband? We saw the Eiffel Tower, you know. I’ve seen it plenty of times before, but it just feels so much better in spring.”

I nod along, unbothered, but still she persists to tell me about fucking France.

“There’s something about spring in Paris that I just adore.”

“Just a shame it had to be cut short,” I say.

“Yes.” Her lips tighten. “Such a pity.”

“I’m fine, by the way ... thanks for asking.”

Silence swarms the table as we continue to eat our food, but the tightness with which my mum holds her cutlery portrays the true emotion hiding behind her fake smile.

Deciding to test the waters, I say, “I think the person who broke in knew Jack.”

My mother’s face pales, and her shaking hands suggest she’s seen a ghost. “What would make you assume something so ridiculous?”

I laugh bitterly. “They were in his room ... They left the whole house untouched. There were no signs of a break-in. Why else would they want to be in there?”

She pulls herself together with poise, straightens her shoulders, and then says, “You and your theories again, sweetheart. You’re getting carried away. They weren’t in Jack’s roo—”

“They were! I saw them.”

The fire in her eyes dissipates as she regains composure, forcing her usual façade. My eyes flicker over to Dad as he digs into his food without bother. My mother’s jaw tightens.

“Did you tell these ... *strangers* what you saw?”

“You mean the police?”

She waves her hand dismissively. “Whatever they’re called.”

I stab at a piece of broccoli. “I didn’t.”

“Well then ...” She looks up at my father. “The intruder couldn’t have possibly been where you thought they were. Don’t you

think, William?"

"I swear—"

"Stop it now, Gigi." She rubs her thumb and forefinger against her temples. "I sense an oncoming migraine."

I screw my eyes shut, attempting to regain my composure "But—"

"I said stop."

"You can't keep acting as if he didn't exist." My eyes fly back open. "We need to talk about this. I really think something bad

—"

"ENOUGH!"

I drop my cutlery to my plate. Dad continues eating away at his tea, acting unfazed by the outburst, whereas Mum stills

completely, as if she's locked eyes with Medusa and turned to stone.

"Get out," she finally says.

My jaw drops. "I live here. You can't just kick me out."

"It's best if you stay away from me and your father for a while."

I sputter, "Where am I meant to go?"

"Greg's, no doubt. Aren't you there all the time anyway?"

"That's not the point." I sigh, lowering my gaze. "I can't just expect to stay there."

Speaking with his mouth full, Dad says, "Your mother's right. It's best if you leave."

I open my mouth, stammering on word vomit, but before I can do or say anything I'll regret, I stand, causing the wooden legs

of my chair to screech against the hardwood floor. I throw the napkin onto my plate, turn, and leave.

Tears blur my eyes as I drive in silence, causing the headlights of oncoming traffic to flicker like a kaleidoscope. I feel like

I'm going utterly insane. I'm racked with guilt over my brother's death, and aside from Mia, no one is fucking helping me. My

own family is convincing me I'm mad and forcing me to second-guess everything I see.

Amid my panic, the edges of my vision darken and my chest starts to heave unforgivingly. It's a miracle I'm making it to my

ex-boyfriend's house in one piece.

When Greg opens his door, his smile is full of sympathy.

"I'm so sorry to do this to you again," I say, hauling in my luggage.

"Don't apologise. I wouldn't want you to be anywhere else."

I hide my grimace since I'm no fool. My being here is giving him a false illusion about the two of us. The issues between us

can be resolved another night, but tonight I'm just happy I have a place to stay that isn't the back seat of my car.

"What happened?" he asks, taking a bag from my arm.

I follow him up the creaky wooden stairs, trudging after him as he places my belongings beside his bed. He sits down on the

edge of the mattress, patting the empty spot beside him. I take it reluctantly, wiping a hand down my face in frustration.

"They got all anal about Jack again."

He sighs, rubbing my back. "You know what they're like ... Why do you keep persevering?"

"You don't understand. They're keeping something from me, Greg. I know it." I grip the sides of my hair and pull at the root.

"I'm his only living relative who cares enough to find out the truth. I'm not giving up now."

He sighs, leaning his head down to mumble into the piece of hair I just abused. "Mia said she's gathered some more

information she wants to show you tomorrow."

Of course, it's Monday tomorrow. Mystery Monday. Mia and I have been looking into the circumstances of Jack's death for

the past five years, dedicating every single Monday to the cause. That means anything from meeting at a coffee shop to talking

on the phone – even if we discover nothing. We've never missed a day. Not once.

"You know you can always stay here," Greg says, brushing a stray piece of hair behind my ear. "With me."

His father is never around, so the house is empty. His mother died during childbirth, and he has no siblings to keep him

company. I should just accept the offer – he'd never charge rent, and I'm only a short drive from my family's house. But I'm not

prepared to rely on yet another person my whole life.

"I'll think about it, okay?" I try to make my smile look convincing. "I swear."

Whether he believes me or not is uncertain, but he smiles regardless. Leaning down slowly, Greg presses his lips to mine

and pushes at my chest. My back hits the mattress as he fits himself between my legs, grinding against my core.

"I'll give you a reason to stay."



It's been hours. My mind is awake, mentally reciting the conversation with my family. The scene auto-plays in my head, running a storm of images across my brain and keeping me far away from the comfort of sleep.

Greg's snoring echoes round the bedroom, vibrating off the walls. It would be stupid to wake him, and frankly, I quite like being alone. After little deliberation, I leave the bedroom in silence and head downstairs towards the kitchen. The room would be pitch-black, if not for the soft glow of the moon and the flickering light from the oven that reads 3.10 a.m.

After I pour myself a drink I rest against the counter with a heavy exhale. The marble countertop is cold against my back, and the glass frosts against my fingertips. Getting lost in thought, I brush my thumb across the condensation, wiping the wet residue away with the pad of my thumb.

Everything with Jack is starting to tear my family apart.

Maybe it's about time I stop living in the past—

Greg's front door swings open, rattling on its hinges. It smacks against the wall with a loud *thwack*, the harsh action making an imprint in the drywall as it threatens to swing shut again. A stranger barges through, throwing open the closing door while mumbling curses under their breath.

I rub my eyes with the heels of my palms until I start to see weird shapes, but I still come to the same conclusion. There's definitely a stranger standing in the middle of Greg's living room.

There's something oddly fascinating about the person who just stormed through the entryway. They walk and carry themselves with the confidence of someone who lives here. Throwing a duffel bag onto the kitchen table that sits partially in the living room, they start unpacking their belongings with a sense of urgency.

"Where the fuck is it?" a low, intimidating voice grumbles.

The voice definitely came from a man. As my vision focuses on the stranger, I notice, even from his hunched position, his size is extremely intimidating. He must be reaching at least, like, seven feet and a thousand inches, his wide shoulders blocking whatever's so important in that bag of his.

Peering up the stairs, I wonder how easily I can alert Greg. The likelihood of this man missing my attempt to escape is minuscule, but it's the only chance I have at avoiding confrontation with him. Before I have a chance to weigh up my decisions further, he turns round, and a gasp slips past my lips.

He snaps his head in my direction.

Moonlight shines across his face, lightening his features and highlighting tousled black hair and a lone strand hanging in the centre of his forehead as if it has a mind of its own. Piercing green eyes lock with mine, and under the light his chiselled jawline looks capable of slicing gold. Blood runs from a wound in his hairline, coating his cheek, his jaw, and the length of his throat. He looks rugged. Masculine. Godly. Like every man my parents ever warned me to stay away from.

He looks like every bad decision I have yet to make.

And I crave him desperately.

"Who the fuck are you?" he bellows, knocking me out of my trance.

I take back everything I said.

I *hate* this man.

"Who am I?" I scoff. "Who are *you*? Do you even know where you are right now?"

He glances at his surroundings and nods, then he turns towards me, his gaze stern. The man stalks over to me, pinning both his hands on the cabinet on either side of my hips and blocking my escape. As I'm forced to tilt my head up to meet his gaze, I realise he's so close I can smell the iron of the blood trickling down his face.

"Care to explain what you're doing in *my* house, princess?"

His smirk is cocky and distractingly handsome. It makes me want to punch him square in the face. It's intimidating enough to make me trip over my words. Hell, it's capable of eradicating every useless word that's ever left anyone's mouth – except his.

Mentally retracing my thoughts to what he just said, I rear back, hitting the counter behind me. "Your house?"

He nods, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smirk. "You should be nice to me," he says, leaning in closer. "I could evict you for trespassing."

Before I get sucked into his vortex, I shove at his chest. "Get the fuck off me."

He doesn't budge. He simply runs his tongue over his top row of teeth in amusement.

"What's going on here?" a familiar voice asks.

I break my gaze from the stranger to see Greg peering down from the upstairs railing. He's wrapping a dressing gown round himself urgently to hide his boxers. I turn back to the man in front of me, but he's staring, refusing to divert his attention from my face.

"Greg—!" I try to explain.

"Don't know where you happen to keep your first-aid kit," the man asks, keeping his eyes on mine.

Greg sighs. "Under the sink."

What the fuck?

"You know this man?"

Said man winks before pushing himself off the cabinet, leaving my hips feeling particularly cold. He heads over to the sink and pulls open the door in search of medicine. I take the opportunity to hurry towards where Greg is descending the last few steps.

“Greg!” I hiss. “What’s happening?”

He sighs and walks further into the kitchen. “Harry, this is Gigi. Gigi, this is my brother, Harry.”

“What!” Harry and I both ask in unison.

“You have a brother?” My voice is frantic.

Silence fills the room. Greg bows his head shamefully and drags a palm down his face, releasing a low grumble.

This is going to take a hell of a lot of explaining.

“Gigi ...” the man – Harry – repeats quietly in that lethal voice of his. He nods as if he’s piecing information together.

I turn to Greg. “Why would you never tell me that?”

Harry scoffs, but when I whip my head towards him, his focus is on that flimsy medical box. His long fingers fumble with the contents, pulling out some gauze and rubbing alcohol.

Greg takes my elbow, pulling me towards the stairs. “I’ll explain everything tomorrow. Let’s just go to bed.”

Hell no. I want answers *now*.

“Is this his house?” I ask as if Harry’s not standing just a few feet away, amusement spreading across his face even with his head dipped.

“Yes,” Greg sighs. “Come on, please. Let’s just head upstairs.”

I desperately want to refuse.

Weighing up my options, I realise I only have two. I can sit in the kitchen with this stranger, who may or may not kill me, or I can flee to the bedroom and survive another night.

I choose the latter.

THREE

Gigi

The following morning I'm awake before sunrise, but of course, the mysterious stranger from last night has long disappeared. I think I dreamed the whole scenario until I see the contents of the first-aid kit spread out across the kitchen counter, along with a few bloody gauzes littering the top of the bin. I eye them briefly while I pour myself a drink, wondering where Harry went. Then I pad back upstairs with the glass of water in hand, slipping carefully back into bed.

While Greg sleeps, I silently differentiate him from his brother. While Harry's hair is black, Greg is brunette. Harry's eyes are a piercing forest-green compared to Greg's brown.

Greg wakes, stretching his limbs above his head. When he spots me sitting up straight, waiting eagerly to pound him with questions, he groans and immediately turns the other way.

"We need to talk."

He grunts in response.

"Does he live here?"

"No," he mumbles into the pillow.

"Then why was he here?"

He sighs and finally turns to face me. "He pops in now and then. Technically, this is his house. It was left to him after our mother died. He's got his own home in the neighbourhood. Sometimes it's just more convenient that he drops in here."

I frown. "You look nothing alike."

He shrugs.

"And he takes your father's name too?"

Greg nods half-heartedly.

"How come you never told me?" I ask, having had the night to conclude I'm furious my friend hid his sibling's existence from me for almost a decade. "Why have Mia and I never met him before?"

"He's always moving around every couple of years, so I don't see him often. He's not a good person, Gigi. I choose not to think about him willingly."

Why would anyone leave their sibling to fend for themselves when they both have no other family? Surely, no person is that bad.

I pry further. "Why's he always travelling? Is it for his job?"

"Why are you so interested in finding out more about him?" he asks, sighing irritably. "He's a freelance photographer, if you must know."

I nod despite that making no sense whatsoever. What kind of freelance photographer can afford to own *two* properties near London? I also haven't forgotten he was clearly wounded yesterday. Unless he works for a news company with dangerous callouts and is prone to injury, nothing Greg has told me lines up.

"But last night—"

"I don't want to talk about him." Greg strokes his knuckles over my cheek. "I'm angry enough that he's stormed back into my life, let alone yours. Let's just drop it, okay?"

"Just tell me why you don't get on," I plead with my most flirtatious smile.

He drops his head back to the pillow with a sigh, running a hand through his hair and partially obstructing my view of his face. "He's twenty-nine. Seven years ago, he left in the middle of the night and did whatever guys do in their twenties ... You know how my mother died during my birth?"

I nod.

"All the assets were left to him since she hadn't updated the will. He left me with the house and nothing else, barely came to check on me. Kept the money to himself and blew it in months."

“That’s awful!”

“You’re telling me.”

For a moment he’s lost in thought, then he shakes his head to clear whatever’s clouding his brain. Greg grips my hips, pulling me on top of him, and running his palms up and down my sides as he says, “I’d rather talk about something else.”

I climb off him. “I have to get going somewhere. I’ll see you tomorrow though, okay?”

He assesses my features, trying to discover what I’m hiding behind the shield I’ve put up to barricade my emotions. He’s hesitant, and I force a larger smile.

I’m determined to find out more about Harry St. James.

Luckily, I know one of the only people who can help.



Mia is the only person in existence who can be my favourite and my least favourite person in one sitting. She has a way with men and women that leaves them swooning all over her. Whether it’s her horrendous flirting or her silky blonde hair that leaves them head over heels, I have no idea. She dabbles in a bit of everything, knows pretty much everyone in London, and has an awe-strikingly long list of contacts from her training as a reporter.

Sitting across from me in her living room, her jaw hangs open, inviting any wandering flies to fly in with ease. I push her mouth closed with my hand, but she drops it again instantly.

“What?” she asks, dumbfounded. “Like, a full-fledged human?”

I recite everything from memory, filling her in as best I can, from the conversation with my parents to bumping into the tall stranger in the early hours of the morning. Now I think about it, his height was more like six-foot-four.

“Greg said he left him to fend for himself. Let him have access to the house but barely came to visit.”

“That’s awful,” Mia says, yet her eyes tell another story. “Do you believe him?”

“Who – Greg?”

She nods.

“I have no reason not to. Besides, it explains why we’ve never heard of Harry before.”

“But why wouldn’t he have mentioned anything?”

I groan, running a frustrated hand through my hair. “I don’t know.”

She hums, rubbing her thumb and forefinger against her chin like a professor. “Maybe he isn’t a good guy. I’ll see if I can look into him.”

Mia has “a guy” for everything. She’s one of those rare people who knows *everything* about others – where they went to school, what car they drive, their favourite colour, or whether they’re right or left-handed – while they know very little about her.

“Was he hot?”

I sputter, unprepared for the question. “That’s not the point.”

“Oh. My. God.” I look up to see her staring at me. “He totally was!”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I bet Greg wouldn’t be too happy about you having a big schoolgirl crush on his brother.”

“Mia,” I warn.

“But you know what does matter ...” she says, finally gaining my interest. “I did some digging about the break-in at your house.” Rooting through her bag, she pulls out a selection of newspaper clippings, spreading them out across the coffee table.

Throughout the years, our meeting points for our Monday get-togethers have become pretty creative, but Mia’s family home is a firm favourite. It’s the only place in existence where we have privacy without people sharing their unwanted opinions. Mia’s parents welcome me with open arms and have always supported our search. They’re truly like the family I never had. They’re an older couple, the kind who’ve been together since they were teenagers but are still completely and utterly in love. Their home is modest and comforting all the same. It’s the kind that has “live, laugh, love” signs scattered along the walls. I even have my own moderately decorated bedroom here if I ever want a place to stay.

Mia says, “I had someone investigate all the burglaries in the area where nothing was stolen. Guess what I found?”

I lift a brow.

“Nothing!” She throws a few discarded papers at my chest. “Every single one had a motive. I hate to say it, but I think your house was specifically targeted, especially if you said they were in Jack’s room. They weren’t looking for money or goods to steal – this was personal.”

My mind wanders to the intruder and a chill runs down my spine. I don’t know who the person was, but my run-in with them

left a permanent scar on my brain that refuses to heal. I failed to mention that part to Mia since she'd probably spill her opinion about how foolish I was.

"You're right," I say, looking over the papers. "None of us have gone into his room in years."

"I bet if we find out who it was then we could find out more about how he died."

"There's no doubt whoever broke in wanted something of his. My parents are acting like he never even existed, and when I try to tell them about this they just shoot me down." I drop down onto the chair beside her, defeated. "They think I'm certifiably insane."

She sighs, looking over the papers again. "We'll go through these again to double-check I haven't missed anything. In the meantime I'll get in contact with my guy and see if he can dig up anything else on Harold."

"Harold?"

"Sounds more British. And I love a British man."

"He was covered in blood when I saw him—"

"Because that's not hot as fuck."

"Mia!"

She raises her hands innocently. "I've read enough dark romance novels to know shit like that isn't always a bad thing."

"Don't." I shake my head, retaining my laughter. "Maybe Greg really was telling the truth about him being a bad person."

She shrugs. "We'll get my guy to investigate. It'll take him about a week or so, but if he's hiding anything, we'll find it. Trust me."

FOUR

Gigi

It's strange. One minute you never knew of someone's existence, and the next you can't imagine life without them ...

Well, that's kind of a lie.

Harry tends to pop in at the most inconvenient times. It's as if he's trying to make being in his presence as uncomfortable as possible. Greg says he's got a property not too far from here, but he still pops in for some seriously bizarre reasons.

One night, Greg and I were sitting on the living room sofa – he'd been trying it on all evening – when Harry barged in through the front door as if he owned the property – I know he does, but I choose to forget that insignificant detail – asking if any eggs were going spare in the fridge. Without so much as looking in our direction or waiting for an answer, he took the carton and exited through the front door.

The next time he popped in he needed milk for coffee ... Strange. I always assumed someone like him would take their coffee black, but that's me stereotyping. It would've been ten times quicker for Harry to walk to his local corner shop, but alas, he took the pint of milk and retreated.

I reckon he's trying to assert his presence now he's back in town. Each time he visits, Greg grinds his teeth together so tightly I'm convinced I'll hear a molar crack. And whenever I try to press further with questions, he shuts me down. I only ever get the same regurgitated story: he chooses not to associate with him, they fell out about seven years ago, and they hardly speak.

One day, however, the story finally cracks.

It's a random weekday when Harry strolls in asking for some rice and then leaves without another word. Greg's calm composure splits right at the seams, and he whips his head towards me.

"Remember when I said Harry and I don't get on?"

I nod, trying to hide how my body picks up with interest.

"He's involved with some fucked-up people. He's an awful person. I can't explain—"

My brow creases. "I thought you said he was a photographer."

"He is." He nods his head frantically. "Just promise me you'll keep your distance from him. I can see the look in your eye – you're intrigued by him – but as his *brother*, I know being around him is the last place you want to be."

"Just tell me. You can talk to me."

"No!" he huffs. "He fucked up my childhood, Gigi. Why don't you believe me?"

I sigh and bow my head. "Okay, okay. I trust you."

After that, I convince myself Harry isn't a good person to be around, yet my intrigue towards him still lingers. There's still this gravitational pull in his presence that forces me to look at him – even if he doesn't so much as gaze in my direction. Not that we're ever in the same room for long enough to have a full-on conversation. Thinking about it, I'm not sure we've been in the same room for more than two minutes at a time.

Each time I remember the trouble Greg went through as a child I sympathise with his suffering. But knowing such deep secrets were kept from you is a hard feeling to shake ...



After staying at Greg's house for a few more nights, and with the information Mia brought to light about the break-ins, I make the decision to return home to my parents. The longer I leave it, the harder I'll struggle with having to face them again.

It's on a Saturday afternoon, after another ball-aching shift at work, that I feel the tension at tea as I cautiously ask, "If I say

something, do you promise not to freak out?"

My mother's body stiffens. "If you must ..."

I sigh, preparing myself. "Mia looked into all the recent burglaries in the area. All of them had motive—"

"Your father and I found a wonderful flat in the area that's perfect for you, sweetheart. Didn't we, Husband?"

"Mm," he hums, taking a mouthful of food.

"The rent is a little on the higher end, but we don't mind topping you up. It's more of a maisonette than a flat, really. It's situated in Blackheath, two bedrooms, right near that cute little rugby club—"

My eyes squint to slits, Mum's voice dulling to silence in my ears. The edges of my vision darken and her face becomes my primary focus, her words ringing in my eardrums like white noise until all I can see is her mouth moving. My hatred grows with each passing second, and I look her dead in the eye, imagining blood pouring from her hairline, trickling down her face, with an eerie similarity to the first time I laid eyes on Harry St. James.

My head tilts as I envision impaling her with the knife resting in the middle of the dining-room table, pushed deep into the succulent chicken. My fists clench at my sides as I imagine what it would be like to feel the pulse of her throat vibrating against my palm with each thrash—

I throw my cutlery to the table as if it's scalded my palms.

What the fuck is wrong with me!

"Gigi!" Mum tuts. "Where are your table manners?"

Manners? I just imagined killing my own mother!

"I ... I have to go."

I jump to my feet, ignoring the way they beckon my name to clean up my dishes. My only thought is that I need to get out of here, and fast. Since it's pretty much my second home at this point, I drive to Greg's house and storm up the front steps. Digging under the mat for the key, I unlock the front door and step inside.

"Greg?" I call out.

No answer.

I slump down on the bar-stool in the kitchen and let the contents of my bag spill out onto the counter. I open my laptop and anxiously wait for the screen to turn on – until the turning lock distracts my thoughts.

"I was wondering when you'd be home," I say, meeting silence.

From their presence alone, I know it's not Greg.

Looking like a cliché bad boy, Harry pulls a dark helmet off his head and shakes out his hair. Standing just a few metres away from me with the protective gear tucked under his bicep, we make eye contact, and no matter how quick it is, the action amps my heart rate.

He walks to the fridge, his back to me as he opens the door and scans the contents inside. "Thought I was your boyfriend?"

I clench my jaw. "Greg's not my boyfriend. Not that it's any of your business."

The bastard laughs, but the sound lacks humour.

I grit my teeth as the cruel sound seeps into my bones. Every story Greg has fed me about Harry in recent weeks rises to the surface. My fingers twitch, the lingering argument with my parents threatening to unleash through me.

Before I know it, I shoot to my feet and argue, "You know, it's pretty sick to leave a young child to fend for themselves. I'm not sure what happened between you two, but you've done some fucked-up shit by the sound of things."

He turns round slowly, his eyes roaming over me. "Is that what he told you?"

I stare back. "That's what I know."

He cocks his head to the side and then walks forwards leisurely. I stand my ground as he gets close enough that I can smell the mint on his breath and the burnt rubber from his jacket.

He practically smells like trouble.

We stand toe-to-toe, and I tilt up my chin, keeping my eyes on him. He leans his head down, amusement tickling his mouth. "You should get your facts straight before you start spreading lies, princess."

"I'm no princess."

"Are you not?"

He stares directly into my eyes, but he's not looking at the colour – he's looking deeper, straight into my soul. I cringe inwardly, like I'm exposing every deep-rooted secret to him. A chill races up my spine. I feel him everywhere. But not physically. *Never* physically, come to think of it. A peculiar look passes over his face as if he's seen something he didn't expect. Silence stretches between us, and it's in this moment I realise I despise this man.

Finally, he breaks the tension and takes a step back, turning his head towards the door.

"You didn't get what you were looking for," I say.

His hand wraps round the doorknob, and he cranes his head over his shoulder. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about that."

He closes the door and leaves.

Throughout the entire interaction he didn't lay a finger on me, always remaining at a distance so I couldn't touch him, no matter how close he stepped.

Something must've altered his brain chemistry the first night I saw him. At hearing my name, something rattled him. And I'm determined to find out why.

FIVE

Sigi

“Thank you,” I tell the barrister as I pick up my coffee.

There’s something quintessentially British about Neil’s Bakery. The one in Surrey is my favourite, so I thank my lucky stars every day it’s within walking distance of Greg’s home.

Welcoming the bitter taste of coffee on my tongue, I practically salivate. It’s a pleasant distraction from the burden weighing heavily on my mind.

Mia and I take a leisurely stroll through town, making use of the spare day before work catches up with the two of us. My attention strays to a large boarded-up jewellery store and my frown deepens. I’m starting to lose count of the suspicious activities that have been going on in the neighbourhood recently. London, sure, but no less than an hour’s commute from the city, Surrey seems like a peculiar target.

“... case has gone cold.”

I turn to Mia, suddenly aware I wasn’t paying attention. “Did you say something?”

She gives me a look – one that says, *You definitely weren’t listening.*

“I wasn’t able to pull any more information about the break-in at your house. It seems the case has gone cold.”

“Oh ... right.”

My mind has completely drifted from the break-in lately. It’s also the first time in my life that Jack hasn’t been at the forefront of my brain. The more I think about it, it’s been this way since Harry walked into my life. He’s been taking over every spare thought, and his presence alone is stronger than anything I felt with the intruder. To make matters worse, the thought of murdering my own mother is having a rather damning effect.

“I imagined stabbing my mum,” I tell Mia, hoping the confession will ease the weight on my shoulders.

She shrugs, seemingly unfazed. “Don’t we all at times?”

“I’m being serious,” I stress.

“So am I,” she assures me. “It’s not a crime to have a thought. Just don’t start saying that sort of thing too loud.”

Deciding I need a distraction, I turn to her and ask, “I was wondering ... did you ever dig up anything on Harry?”

She shakes her head, taking a sip of her drink. “Nope. Record was squeaky-clean.”

“Are you sure?” I make eye contact with her. “Guys like him are practically asking for trouble. I told you the night I first saw him he was covered in blood, right? That’s not the kind of person who has a clean record.”

My mind is busy with possibilities as we walk the remaining distance to Greg’s house. He’s busy at work for the day, so I doubt we’ll see him until the evening. Mia and I take a seat on the modest brown leather sofa across from his outdated television set.

“Don’t you get it? The most dirt I found was a speeding fine,” she says, placing her coffee down. “The only plausible explanation is he’s involved with people who have the ability to wipe his record clean – especially if he didn’t want a hospital knowing about a wound that significant.”

I sit back for a moment, debating the idea. It’s plausible, sure. My eyes are firm in disgust, but the relaxed posture of my shoulders portrays my true feelings ...

I’m intrigued.

“That’s if he even gets caught for a crime. A crime we don’t even know he’s committed,” I clarify.

“I reckon that man has some dark secrets no matter what the record says.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

She shakes her head. “What did you say he does for a living?”

“He’s a photographer, according to Greg.”

“Something just doesn’t match up ...” She’s silent until a plan forms in her mind. “You can be our guinea pig! Get close to

him and find out what he's hiding underneath all that rough, bad-boy exterior."

I shake my head even though the idea intrigues me more than I'd like to admit. Yet when I remind myself of all the reasons I'm supposed to despise this guy, I feel nothing short of a fool.

"You're mad." I chuckle, tossing my empty coffee cup in the bin beside the sofa. "How do you even know this sort of stuff? Surely, it's illegal just to look up someone's record."

She shrugs her shoulders, hiding a smirk. "I have a guy."

The lock turns, and muttered chatter echoes through the front door. Harry has brought a friend.

"Speak of the devil ..." I mumble under my breath.

When I turn to Mia, her eyes light up in amusement, and it suddenly dawns on me that she hasn't had the pleasure of his company yet.

"Fresh meat!" she hisses.

"Mia! Stop."

I can't grab her fast enough before she's skidding towards the front door. She charges into the kitchen as I try to grab her, but she slips free. With impressive speed, she pulls her composure together and leans against the doorframe.

"Hey!" she says as the two men walk in.

As if my eyes can't help themselves, they're pulled towards Harry immediately. He's dressed in all-black – black jeans and a long-sleeve black T-shirt with the sleeves pushed up to the forearms.

Their conversation comes to a halt as they turn to the two of us. I conceal the sting when Harry tears his gaze away from me, a strange look crossing his eyes.

His friend is of similar height. They have pretty much the same body shape – muscular, broad, and bloody attractive – yet there's a dissimilarity all the while. The friend's posture is more relaxed, with dirty-blond hair framing onyx eyes. And I watch the moment they sparkle with intrigue as he spots Mia.

The man steps forwards, introducing himself. "I'm Andy."

"I'm Mia, and that's Gigi," she tosses over her shoulder. When her gaze shifts to Harry, she cocks her head. "And what do I call you, stranger?"

He lifts his head, laughing softly. "Harry ... You can call me Harry."

"If the two of you are free Saturday night, we're heading out for a few drinks," Mia says, surprising me.

"We are?" I ask, and she shoots daggers over her shoulder, signalling for me to be quiet.

I shake my head instantly.

Nope.

No way.

Bad idea.

"It's about time we got to know the man Greg's been hiding his whole life," she adds tauntingly. "Dig up all those secrets. I imagine you must have plenty."

"Mia," I hiss under my breath.

"I'm up for it." Andy shrugs. "What do you say, Harry?"

I turn my attention towards him, taken aback when I see his eyes boring into mine. Silence fills the room, and when I expect him to say nothing at all, he says the last thing I could anticipate.

"Will your *boyfriend* be going?"

Mia laughs so loud it's borderline hysterical. All eyes turn to her as she bends over in a fit of laughter, clutching her stomach and trying to regain composure.

"Boyfriend?" she cackles. "Hell no. Shagging him now and then, sure—"

"Mia!"

Andy thankfully saves us from the embarrassment of silence. "Come on, it'll be fun." He slaps Harry on the back, but the discomfort is evident in his eyes. "We'll be there."

"Great!" Mia cheers.

Not great.

Not great whatsoever.

This could possibly be the least great idea she's ever come up with – and trust me, she's had several.

SIX

Sigi

The next few days proceed at a slow pace, and by the time we start getting ready to head out for the evening, I'm already wishing the night were over. We're heading to Chequers in Soho with Harry and Andy.

Harry's existence in my life is becoming an issue. He consumes my every thought, and while I should hate him, he's incredibly captivating. Hatred for the man I barely know runs deep in my veins, yet there's a bigger fixation to discover how deep his secrets lie.

"You're not going to catch anyone's wandering eye – especially Harry's – wearing that bin bag," Mia says, spoiling my thoughts.

She throws a dress at my chest. I catch it, holding the garment between my fingers. "How can you even call this a dress?" This dress would definitely capture the male gaze, but with that, I'd also be attracting a lot of unwanted attention. The entire garment is made of mesh, so I need to be particularly careful about what I choose to wear underneath it.

"What do you think is his problem anyway?" Mia queries.
I cock an eyebrow at her, and she pauses applying her lipstick.
"He can barely stand to look at you. I know you've noticed."
I bow my head. I'd hoped I was merely reading too deeply into the situation, but it's as plain as day to the people around me.
"Maybe he wants to fuck your brains out and can't contain himself around you."
"Mia!"

She giggles and then focuses back on her reflection. It only takes a fraction of a second for her expression to turn serious. Silence stretches between us before she asks, "Do you think Greg is telling us the whole truth?"
I sigh. "I really don't know."



Mia and Andy are a sight for sore eyes. And I'd be lying if I said the sight doesn't upset me. He's so welcome to let her in – to open his arms to her and cover her with affection. The burden would weigh less if Harry would even bother looking my way.

Not that I'd want that.
No matter how attractive he is.
I'll have to question Andy about him at some point, because I'm sure as hell not going to Greg with my query. When I think too strongly about it I always circle back to the same question.

What is it about me that he despises so much?
He's been sitting at the bar all night, failing to even glance in my direction. And as I predicted, the dress has caused a fair number of wandering eyes even under the low nightclub lighting. I thank my childhood with Jack for allowing me to protect myself in uncomfortable situations more than the average person.

This is depressing.
Now I'm thinking about my dead brother.
I need another drink.
I weave through the pile of sweaty bodies to approach the bar, dry-heaving as I feel a few wandering hands touching my hips before I'm finally able to push through to safety.

"Vodka and cranberry, please. Double," I say once I've got the bartender's attention.

As I'm digging in my purse for my debit card, an obnoxious and incredibly girly giggle grates against my ears. As if my night couldn't be any more miserable, I lay eyes on something far worse than Mia and Andy.

A woman standing directly at my side, resembling a contemporary Barbie, skates her nails down Harry's shirt-clad chest. I manage to catch his eye for a fraction of a second over the woman's shoulder, but he looks away just as quickly.

"Who are you with?" she purrs, fisting a button between her acrylics.

"Just with my friend, Andy."

What the fuck?

I scoff.

This gets Harry's attention – and Barbie's, apparently.

She strains her gaze over her shoulder, frowning and running her eyes down my body. "Do you have a problem?"

"None at all." I raise my glass to my lips. "Just enjoying my drink."

By the time she's turned back I've almost finished the glass. The cranberry is sweet against my lips, and it isn't long before the slightly fuzzy feeling coaxes my brain.

That's much better.

She turns back to Harry and says, "God, what a freak."

Before I can do anything I'll regret, like rip out her hair extensions, I gulp down the remainder of the spirit, slam the glass, and make a beeline for the exit.

When I reach the entrance doors, I throw them open and suck in mouthfuls of fresh air, welcoming the bitter breeze against my skin.

Fuck that guy. He didn't even bother defending you.

I turn round the corner of the nightclub, pacing up and down the dark alleyway.

London's barely alive at this time of night. Red buses have decreased to a skeletal service, lights are dimmed, and all the stores are dark and quiet – except for the few bars and clubs with extended hours. There are plenty of places I could go to and plenty of men I could speak with, but I hate myself for thinking about the man who seems to hate me more than anyone. Despite everything, I want to find out more about Harry before he riddles me senseless.

My chest tightens with each shallow breath.

He's not like this with anyone else. Hell, for a second, I convinced myself he was afraid of the female presence, but that theory was proved wrong by him eye-fucking the blonde at the bar.

I kick the dustbin, watching as it tumbles to the side.

"What did that bin ever do to you?" someone slurs.

My heartbeat triples in speed as I whip my head round to the stranger who followed me out. I squint my eyes, focusing better on the man in the dark lighting.

His hair is slicked back from his forehead, highlighting deep green eyes – not as piercing as Harry's, but we're not thinking about him. I recall seeing this guy working behind the bar at Chequers. He's not my usual type, but perhaps he might offer a quick distraction from my misery.

I shrug. "It looked at me funny."

He laughs and takes a few steps towards me. Even through the dark I can see his gaze running havoc over the length of my body. The action has an ominous feel to it, and I contain my shiver, knowing I'll need to embrace this man if I want to sleep tonight without feeling utterly rejected. Before he takes his final step into my bubble, I look towards the end of the street, and it's only then that I notice how far away from civilisation we are.

"I'm going to kiss you now," he says, bringing his hand to my hip and pulling me forwards.

The statement is cringey, but I'm drunk and I allow it because I'm an idiot.

I limit the distance between us, pulling him forwards by his shoulders. When he places his lips to mine, my arms circle his neck and I sink into him. The kiss is sloppy and drunk and similar to experiencing my first kiss all over again.

But this time the taste of straight whiskey makes my skin crawl.

It makes me think of my dad – he always drinks whiskey.

The comparison clearly deters me, because I refuse to part my lips and let him in. The bartender releases his frustration onto my hip, gripping it hard. He presses his fingertips deep into the skin, making me gasp. Using the opportunity to his advantage, he slips his tongue into my mouth.

"That's better," he mumbles.

Clumsy footing leads us back against a brick wall, and he places a hand to the side of my head to catch himself. Meanwhile, the other hand, which had a death grip on my hipbone, slips to my thigh.

"Oopsies," he says, a drunken smirk on his lips.

My heart rate stops for a solid few seconds before it kicks into high gear.

"I think that's enough now," I say as his lips start to make their way down my neck.

His hand moves up my thigh, dangerously close to my underwear, while his kiss descends from my neck to my cleavage.

“What the hell!” I grunt, shoving him off. My attempt is weak, and I feel a reduced sense of control. “That’s enough! Couldn’t you hear me? Jesus!”

Once I push the man back, his body shifts, and he’s already storming forwards before I have a chance to react. He pushes his hand against my throat, smacking the back of my head against the brick wall and causing shapes to lick at the edges of my vision.

“What is it with sluts like you thinking you can dress like that and not suffer the consequences?” he spits. “You’re practically asking for it.”

“Get ... *off* me,” I mumble, my words slurring.

My vision is blurry.

Why is it so blurry?

Paranoia outweighs all my senses at the realisation.

My drink ... He must have spiked my drink!

My heart rate amps to catastrophic levels as I try to move, but whatever is in the liquid makes me go limp, and my body no longer feels like its own.

“It’s finally settling in.” He grins. Through my distorted vision I watch as his fingers fumble with his belt buckle. As I try to protest, he strokes my cheek, forcing my head to the side. “Shh, you’ll enjoy this.”

I screw my eyes shut. “N-no, please.”

This wasn’t the kind of danger I craved when Jack died.

This isn’t the thrill I was after.

Fear claws away at my insides as the man unzips his fly.

Maybe I’m going to die ... Maybe, just maybe, this man’s junk will be the last thing I see before he kills me. And there’s nothing I can do about it.

Forcing my eyes open, the man tugs at the waistband of his boxers. At my poor attempt at shoving his chest, he catches my wrist with his spare hand, distracting me from the person approaching behind us.

The drunk bartender’s body is ripped from mine, and the sudden loss of contact forces my body to the floor.

My knees and palms catch my fall, scraping against the dirty rubble on the ground and scorching the top layer of my skin, causing my bottom lip to wobble on a silent cry.

On top of the drug’s lingering effects, the rush of cold air makes my head spin and my ears ring. But when the noise starts to dissipate, I manage to separate the sounds that aren’t remotely close to the heavy bass from the nightclub vibrating through the brick walls.

Grunts.

Curses.

Punches.

Bones crushing.

By the time I’m able to see a flicker of clear vision, a large figure is hovering over the man on the floor. He hits with precision, throwing shots in quick succession. As if he’s hurt someone like this before.

His shoulders are so large I can barely see the man below them until he’s thrown to the cobblestone with a loud *whack*.

I jump on impact.

The bartender clutches his stomach, limbs flapping like a wailing fish, as he wraps his arms round himself. “M-my ribs!” he screeches. “You broke my fucking ribs!”

The mysterious figure grabs a fistful of hair on the top of the man’s head and then smashes him back against the ground. The crunch of his skull smacking the cold pavement is deafening. And the man’s cries silence on impact.

The figure slowly rises from him, fists clenched at his sides and dripping with blood. He wipes them against the pads of his jeans before finally turning round to face me.

I should be petrified. This man pummelled someone into oblivion.

He saved you, a voice in my head says, breaking through the haze. *He saved your life*.

He stalks closer, a strange aura about him. I blame the fact I don’t flee in fear on the effects of the drugs still coursing their way through my system. As he crouches down to my height his face becomes clearer.

There’s no denying it now.

The tousled black hair.

The lone strand dangling in the middle of his forehead.

The piercing green eyes.

Harry.

For fuck’s sake.

The realisation almost knocks me out cold. Finding out he’s my saviour is ten times more terrifying than watching him almost pummel a man to death.

This is all wrong. Harry hates me. He wouldn't save me. He wouldn't be my knight in shining armour.

"Come on, I've got you," he says, his voice sounding like pure velvet. It's the softest thing I've ever heard. "Can you stand?"

He aids me to my feet slowly, and it doesn't go unnoticed that he avoids as much of my exposed skin as possible. His grip tightens underneath my arms to help stabilise my wobbly legs, but it's practically useless. I'm like Bambi on ice.

"I ... I thought you hated me," I whisper.

My shaking legs threaten to send us both toppling to the ground, but he catches me like a startle reflex. His gaze feels like fire as he scans my body for injuries.

I save him the discomfort of asking, my voice breaking on the words, "H-he spiked me."

For a brief moment I think I see Harry's jaw tighten.

"May I?" he asks, looking down at me again.

When I nod he sweeps his elbows underneath my knees and pulls me into his chest as if I weigh no more than a baby bunny. The rush of leather and mint invades my senses, causing my brain to stir further.

He walks out of the alleyway and I don't question where we're going. With each step, my senses start to escape me, and my head pushes deeper into his chest. It's comforting, protecting me like a security blanket as the drugs spread through my veins like wildfire.

My eyes flutter, struggling to stay open. Before I slip into unconsciousness, I hear a quiet mumble. It's so quiet I barely register it. It could easily be a figment of my imagination, because I think it says, "I could never hate you, Gigi."

SEVEN

Sigi

I creep an eye open and immediately regret it when panic starts to obliterate all my senses. Once I see a room I'm not familiar with I dart up in bed, black silk bedding pooling around my lap.

I finger the oversized T-shirt and the familiar scent strangely eases my anxiety, while the gears in my brain kickstart into motion.

The club.

The drunk man in the alley.

Harry.

The thought of him makes my brain hurt. As if I can still feel the lingering aftereffects of the drugs, I bring my hand up to my forehead and curse at the pounding headache. When I draw it back, I notice there are two small pills sitting on the countertop beside a bottle of water.

No, thank you, sir.

I learnt a hard lesson last night to be more careful what I let into my mouth, and most definitely from someone who I'm convinced hates my guts. Harry would probably drug me just to rid the earth of my existence. He does seem kind of like the type who could hide a body, so dark and mysterious.

Unlike your usual bedroom, this room is void of personality – no family photos, no dirty laundry, not even a speck of colour. The whole room is full of dark greys and black.

FUCK.

This must be a guest room.

I'm in Harry's house.

In his guest room.

In a bed.

Now would be the prime opportunity to snoop.

Prying the sheets off my naked legs, I keep my footsteps as quiet as possible as I explore the room. I pull open a few drawers – clothes and nothing. I open the wardrobe doors, and except for a few shirts hanging up – nothing. Sinking to my knees, I pull back the covers to look underneath the bed.

A lone duffel bag lies in the centre of the floor. I crouch down further, ducking my head underneath the slats. My fingers stretch out and I wiggle the digits as if it'll help—

A cough breaks the silence.

Shit!

I bring my head up quickly, banging it on the bedframe. I sheepishly stand and turn towards Harry, facing the most embarrassing moment of my life. He's leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, with an amused look on his face as if catching women snooping through his belongings is second nature to him.

He fights a smirk. "I bet that didn't help your headache."

"Or my pride." I rub at the sore spot.

"You're not going to find any dead bodies under there. I hide those in another location."

I scoff. *Is he really making jokes right now?* This man is far from the same person who's done nothing but ignore me since I met him. I perch on the edge of the bed, fisting the sheets between my fingers to distract myself from opening my big mouth.

"Your phone. I charged it for you." He takes a step forwards, placing it on the bed. "I notice you didn't take the pills I left you ... Good. You're learning. There's an unopened packet in the drawer."

A frown forms between my brows and I scrutinise him with sharp eyes. "Why are you doing all this? You make it clear you don't like me. But for some reason, you saved me last night. You're offering me painkillers. You let me stay in your guest bed

—”

“In my bed.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re in my bed, Gigi. This is a one-bed house.”

I shoot up from the mattress as if it sparked me. “You’re wrong,” I say.

He cocks a single brow.

This isn’t his bedroom. It can’t be. I don’t even bother asking where he slept – he wouldn’t sleep in here with me. I imagine the sofa was rather uncomfortable last night.

Then I remind myself ... *His. Bed.*

A rather intrusive thought filters through my brain of all the women he must have slept with in this room, and I suddenly want to vomit.

“Where are all your photos?” I ask. “No artwork. What about some comfy pillows?”

“I move around a lot. There’s no need to unpack everything each time.”

“Are you an ex-convict or something?”

His laugh is low and disgustingly sexy. “Something like that.”

Thirst overcomes me suddenly, and I peer at the bottle of water in my peripheral vision. It sits beside the two untouched painkillers, but I don’t dare touch it.

“It isn’t drugged. I promise.”

Now we’re making drug jokes.

Hilarious.

Despite how bizarre the situation is, I reach over and uncap the bottle – making a mental note that it was sealed – and take a long gulp to quench my thirst, wiping the excess residue with the back of my hand.

“Did your dad teach you to be such a gentleman?” I ask.

“I’d rather not learn anything from my father.”

Tough subject. Gotcha.

It’s then I remember Greg shares the same hatred for his father, and I suddenly feel awful for being an asshole.

“Look, I’m sorry. I just don’t understand why you’re—”

“I have to head out and deal with some business, but I imagine the events of last night were a bit scarring. I can have someone stay here.” He types away at his phone screen without bothering to look up.

The comment is most definitely a backhanded way of saying I’m intruding.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, this is so embarrassing. He wants me to leave, but he’s being polite about it.

“Don’t be silly.” I shake my head. “I’ll just head back to my parents’.”

“Will they be home?” he asks, meeting my gaze finally. “The drugs are still wearing off.”

“Don’t be silly. I had an older brother – I know how to protect myself. He taught me not to be afraid of being alone.” I chuckle even though it’s really not that funny.

Harry pauses. “Had?”

“Lost him about five years ago.”

His jaw stiffens, and a peculiar emotion seems to drown him.

“I don’t need any sympathy, so please don’t tell me it gets better, because that’s the shittiest advice I’ve ever heard.”

There’s something unspoken behind his eyes, although I imagine he’s just contemplating whether or not to ask how he died. I save him the misery of asking.

“Police said it was a fatal collision and the body was obliterated in the blast. But if you were to ask what I think ... I have a theory he was murdered. He was always hanging around dodgy people. But my parents won’t let me talk about it.”

Harry nods, processing the information.

God, why did I even tell him that? He probably wasn’t even going to ask. Now I look like a sad little girl spilling her sad little life story he didn’t even ask for. He’s probably regretting the very moment he let me into his house.

“Do me a favour,” he says. “Don’t leave the house today.”

Excuse me?

That was most definitely not what I expected him to say.

“Honestly, I’m fine. I’ll call Mia on my way home.”

“No need,” he says, a devilish smile spreading across his lips. “She’s already on her way.”



Harry waits around for as long as he can. There are less than ten minutes between his departure and Mia's arrival, and his desperation to stick around until the last moment simply adds to my suspicions. Sucks for Harry, because as soon as he leaves I make a beeline for the duffel bag underneath his bed to continue snooping, but it's disappeared.

Mia walks into the house shortly after and consoles me about the creep last night. Thankfully, she isn't the type to hover, so after a brief pat on the back, a cry, and a big old explanation, she evades the sadness in the only way she knows how.

"Let me get this straight ... you slept in his bed, but you *didn't* shag him."

"He wasn't even in there." I shake my head. "He slept on the sofa."

Seemingly unimpressed about our sleeping arrangements, she strolls leisurely round the house. "Why's it so empty?" she asks, walking down the hall.

"He said he moves around a lot."

There's a pause, and for a moment I think she's going to share a revolutionary discovery. Instead she says, "I had sex with Andy."

I stifle a laugh. "Shocker."

Mia doesn't stop snooping, and I don't stop her either. You'd think a man's home would give you at least a little insight into his life, but Harry's does quite the opposite. There's nothing. It leaves me with more questions than I started with.

Mia returns to the kitchen, grabbing my attention. "Look at this!"

I trail behind her until she reaches a closed door in the hallway that escaped my attention until now. She turns the handle, but it doesn't budge.

"It's just a locked door," I say. "He's quite a reserved guy."

"You're saying to me it's normal to have a locked door in your own house. That's fucking weird, right?"

I step up beside her and try the door handle myself. It's locked.

"Huh." I shake the lock again. "Maybe it's jammed."

She shoots me a look that says, *You're kidding me, right?*

"What are you guys doing?" a voice cuts through the silence.

Mia and I shriek in unison, heart rates spiking, as we turn round to the intruder in the hall.

It's Greg, thank God.

Jesus, I feel like I'm in a goddamn horror film. Locked doors and jumpscare.

I place my palm on the wall, catching my breath. Meanwhile Greg stands at the entrance to the hallway. His arms are crossed tightly over his chest as he looks accusingly between the two of us. His gaze falters as it lingers on me.

"Whose shirt is that?" he asks.

What's he talking about?

Frowning, I look over my shoulder at Mia, but her eyes are boring into mine warily. When I drop my gaze I realise I'm still in the cotton T-shirt I woke up in. The hem brushes my upper thighs, and I suddenly feel incredibly exposed.

"It's not what you think."

He takes a step closer, his expression stone-cold. "Where did you sleep last night?"

I frown and start, "That's really none of your business—"

"My brother, Gigi ... my fucking *brother!*"

I jump at the sound of his voice rising, and Mia grips onto the back of my arm.

"I warned you to stay away from him."

Betrayal swirls in his eyes as I say, "It's really not what you're thinking."

Not even remotely close, might I add.

The front door opens, diverting his anger. I only have a second to consider what that means as Greg whips his head towards where Harry and Andy are entering.

"You!" he roars, pointing a finger at Harry, who barely raises a brow as his brother storms over in a fit of rage. "What do you think you're doing with her?"

"Greg ..." I step forwards, attempting to defuse the situation.

"Shut up for a second!" he throws over his shoulder.

My body recoils as if he physically slapped me, and I watch the moment the words register. Harry's eyes darken, and he looks a foot taller as he towers over Greg, staring down his nose at him. This side of Harry in the daylight is completely unrecognisable.

The darkness last night provided a camouflage over his actions, the precision and determination of hurting someone concealed in a dark alleyway. But during the day he looks untouchable. He looks like the devil in all forms of protective armour as his eyes darken, fists curling at his side.

"Talk to her like that again, brother. I fucking dare you."

My eyes dart to the size of saucers.

"Why are you protecting her all of a sudden?" Greg throws back.

“I’d rather not relive the events of last night, and I’m sure the woman you claim is yours wouldn’t want to either. But I’ll entertain you for this conversation ...” Harry steps forwards so they’re toe-to-toe. “I may not be a gentleman, but I don’t get off on seeing a helpless woman unable to defend herself.”

“You should have left her alone.” Greg shakes his head. “She’s not yours to protect.”

Mia gasps, her nails breaking the skin on the back of my arm, and then silence fills the air, ringing like painful white noise.

“Is that true? You told him we’re together?” I ask.

Greg turns to me slowly, his jaw clenched.

“Do you really think he shouldn’t have helped?”

“Yes,” he huffs. “Remember, I said—”

I slap him across the face. Hard. The sound of the impact echoes around the room. Someone sings a low whistle, but I’m not sure who.

“I was almost raped!” I screech, my voice cracking. “Thankfully, Harry was there in time. If he’d been just a minute later, then—” I force a swallow, watching his face become expressionless. “Or did you not realise that before you came in accusing me of something you know *nothing* about?”

“I ... I didn’t know.” He attempts to console me by taking a step forwards, but I take a step back on instinct.

My hands stretch out in front of me, keeping him at arm’s length. “Don’t come any closer.”

Andy cautiously approaches Greg, clutches his shoulder, and mutters something quietly in his ear. He follows reluctantly towards the door, bowing his head.

When I turn to Harry, my breath catches at finding his eyes on mine. They say everything words would struggle to.

“Thank you,” I mouth.

A sliver of a smile reaches his lips.

“It’s okay,” he says back silently.

EIGHT

Sigi

Once Greg leaves, the tension in the house instantly diffuses. Mia rambles on about how inappropriate he was, flailing her arms.

Someone approaches my side as I sit at the kitchen counter with my head in my hands. “Are you okay?”

I push the hair from my eyes, resting my chin against my shoulder as I turn to Harry. His eyes are on Mia, who’s still rambling away, but I know his focus is elsewhere.

“I’ve been better ...”

His hands flex. “He’s a cunt. Always has been.”

My gaze lingers on his face a little too long. Every time I’ve ever been this close to him, our interactions have been tainted with aggression. But as we stand beside each other I can only appreciate him. His green eyes are devastating, and despite not being on me, they flush my cheeks regardless.

My eyes flick from Mia, who’s now pacing the room, back to Harry. “What happened between the two of you anyway?” I ask, keeping my voice low. “Between you and Greg, I mean.”

His eyes meet mine. “Care to ask a less complicated question?”

My phone screen flashes, pulling my attention away. When I notice it’s Greg calling, I ignore it and turn the phone over. He’s the last person I want to speak to right now, just behind my parents. The thought of going home makes my shoulders sag, but the idea of invading Harry with my presence bothers me more.

“I’ll probably head home soon.”

His jaw tics, but he says nothing.

“Aren’t your parents out of town again?” Mia asks.

I turn to her, shocked she’s stopped ranting. “Hmm?”

“Isn’t it their annual trip to the Cotswolds?”

Silence descends over the room, and during the moment of clarity, it dawns on me the last time I spent a night at home alone was the night of the break-in. For a fleeting second I wonder if the mysterious stranger will visit again ... and suddenly, the idea of going home doesn’t seem so awful.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell her.

Andy looks between the two of us in curiosity. “Something wrong with your house?”

“Someone broke in a little while back. I haven’t been there alone since.”

“You can’t stay there!” Mia exclaims. “My family and I are in Covent Garden this evening, otherwise I’d stay with you.” She turns to the side, pleading with puppy-dog eyes. “Andy ...”

“My apartment isn’t really guest-friendly.” He grimaces, exchanging a glance with Harry. “But I guess she can stay here.”

“No,” Harry says through gritted teeth. “She can’t.”

Ouch.

“Honestly, it’s fine. I’ve already overstayed my welcome.”

I mentally pat myself on the back for failing to tell Mia about my run-in with the intruder. While I can trust her with most secrets, I feel that’s something she wouldn’t be willing to accept.

I stand up from the kitchen stool. “Would you mind if I use your shower before I head home?”

Harry nods, his mouth twitching into a smile that’s totally forced.

When I reach the bathroom, I make a point of quickly shutting the door behind me and avoiding my reflection in the mirror, afraid of what I’ll see. I shower and rinse my body clean of the touches plaguing my skin. I’m wrapping a towel round myself when a knock sounds on the door.

I pull it open slightly and poke my head out. Harry’s standing at the door, a pile of clothes in his arms. Not just any clothes.

Women's clothes.

"For you," he says, handing them out to me.

Right, because this isn't fucking weird.

He must have a girlfriend.

I smile my thanks, taking them from him. Once I've closed the door again, I dry myself off and change into some of the clothes, opting for a pair of jeans and a plain T-shirt. They're comfortable and simple, but the burden of who the clothes belong to sits heavily on my shoulders.

When I leave the bathroom, Harry is still standing at the door. He's leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his broad chest.

"I'm sorry about what I said."

"Honestly, it's fine. Don't worry about it."

"You can stay here."

"No. I'll go home."

"It wasn't a question."

Oh.



This is *not* how I expected my Saturday night to go.

Mia is spending the evening with her family, and Andy has other commitments that mean he can't linger, which means I'm alone with Harry. Although I'm confined to the four walls of his house like some dog on a leash, I've hardly seen him.

I sit on the sofa, twiddling my thumbs and feeling like an absolute idiot for imposing on his evening. In my silence I realise the lack of decoration extends to the rest of his house too. He has the basic essentials, of course. I'm sitting on a three-seater brown leather sofa, which matches the smaller one opposite it in the open living space. There's a dark rectangular rug beneath the coffee table, and a black media unit for the TV, but that's as far as furniture goes.

Harry's been occupying himself behind that bloody locked door down the hall, which actually *is* a creepy locked door. Apparently, it's one of those darkrooms where you process photos taken on film cameras. I'm under strict instruction not to go in there as exposure to light will hinder the process. Pretty convenient, if you ask me.

The noise of a sitcom echoes from the TV and creates a dull background noise, causing me to miss the door opening. When I turn to Harry, I hope to catch a glimpse of the room, but the door's already shut. He catches my wandering eyes as he walks to the refrigerator.

"Fancy a beer?" he asks.

The soft glow of the fridge illuminates his face in a gentle light. Taking him in, my eyes drop from his face to the sweatpants adorning his legs. Chancing my gaze lower, I can almost see the outline of his—

"Beer?" he repeats, cocking a brow.

I force a swallow. "No, thanks. The beer, I mean."

He joins me in the room and sits on the sofa opposite mine. Slouching back against the fabric, he spreads his legs wide to ease his large frame into the cushions.

I stare at the side of Harry's face as he watches TV, observing as he brings the beer bottle to his lips and takes a long sip. The action alone shouldn't be as attractive as it is. Alongside the spread of his legs, it makes me feel slightly queasy.

The only person I've had sex with in recent months is Greg, and it's been so vanilla it's practically flavourless.

Cursing my horniness for now thinking about sex when I'm sitting opposite Harry in an empty house, I tear my gaze away from him and say, "I'm going to head to my room."

He doesn't look in my direction as I leave, simply bringing the bottle to his lips again. My demand to take the sofa was rendered useless earlier, so I don't bother pushing the argument further as I step into Harry's room and close the door behind me. I don't plan on actually sleeping, of course. Since I reckon Harry would appreciate his own bed more and would rather be without my presence, it takes me less than a minute to decide I'm leaving.

I sit anxiously on the edge of his mattress until the light goes out in the hallway, then I wait an additional thirty minutes for good measure, to make sure he's asleep. Since I'm without a car, my options are limited, especially since I don't have the cash to pay for a taxi or any spare money for an Uber. Instead, when I climb out of his bedroom window and step onto the street, I decide to just walk the distance to my house.

Google Maps says it'll take me two hours.

Not great, but I refuse to entertain the alternative now I'm fairly certain he has a girlfriend.

I walk into the night, hugging my arms round my waist as I follow the directions on my phone.

NINE

Harry

This woman will be the death of me.

“I am not spending my evening chasing after some girl,” I grunt under my breath.

The beer is bitter on my tongue as my eyes bore into the wall. It tastes vile in my mouth, like it’s cursing me for refusing to run after her.

No.

I’m not doing it.

She made her peace – let her lie in it. I don’t care. I’m not the gentleman who’ll go save the damsel in distress. Look at the shit that landed me in the first place: another tally on my kill list and blood on my bike.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

My ears prick with awareness, the ticking of the clock forcing me to shudder inwardly.

I’m not sure why, in that moment of weakness, the mere thought of doe-brown eyes, silky brunette hair, and plump pink lips causes the back of my neck to bead with sweat. As if I want to torment myself further, my mind drifts to the image of Gigi in my T-shirt. Seeing her in my clothes was so damn toxic for my brain that I’m researching electroconvulsive therapy, for crying out loud.

On instinct, just as I’d analyse a typical scenario for threats, worst-case possibilities slip into my brain and refuse to leave, like an aggravating itch I can’t reach.

What if someone kidnaps her? What if some serial killer just happens to be on a rampage in Surrey?

I had a brother – I know how to protect myself, she said.

I tsk and grind my teeth.

She thought she was a sneaky little minx, waiting until I turned off the lights. She snuck out through my fucking window like some escapee. Her stealth needs some work, that’s for damn sure.

“I’m not doing it,” I say aloud in sheer desperation that it’ll solidify the decision.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

“Fuck my life.”

I rise to my feet, spitting the f-bomb as if it’s as easy as breathing. Storming out the front door, I slam it shut behind me and throw open the garage that houses my Harley. Tugging the helmet over my head, I start the engine, kick off the stabiliser of my bike, and fucking drive.

If, by some miracle, a serial killer hasn’t killed her, then I’ll save them the job and do it myself for her sheer stupidity. Thankfully, that fantasy arrives sooner than anticipated as I find the little fuckwit walking down the pavement, arms huddled close to her chest to protect herself from the nighttime chill.

The roar of the engine diverts her attention.

I pull up beside her, dragging my foot along the pavement to balance the bike. Her body goes rigid and she blinks multiple times, shock swirling deep in those pretty brown eyes before it’s quickly replaced by panic.

“I didn’t even make it two miles before I was kidnapped,” she mutters under her breath. “Great.”

“Get on the bike.”

Recognising my voice, her body stills and her emotions slowly coil into anger. Huffing like a child in a tantrum, she crosses her arms over her chest. “Leave me alone, Harry.”

Oh, she’s feisty.

You don’t have to tell me twice.

“Suit yourself.” I press my foot against the gas and pull off from the pavement, driving the bike back towards my house.

The bike’s engine growls as I push on the accelerator.

I saved her from that sick freak outside the nightclub, I offered her a place to stay in my home – which is a whole other issue – and she’s giving me shit for it? It’d make my life ten times easier if she hated me and stayed far, far away.

That’s why I’m eating up the distance back towards my house and leaving her there alone. Being around a woman like that is guaranteed to fuck you up a little bit inside. This needs to stop before she strings her web and we both get caught in something dark and twisted.

I don’t want to help her. I don’t. Fucking hell, but I do. I will.

And I hate her for it.

But not as much as I loathe myself for allowing it to happen.

I growl, turning the bike back round.

I’m no gentleman. And just to make sure she’s aware of that, I stop the bike less than a metre in front of her, cutting her off mid-step and causing her to stumble.

She trips over herself with clumsy footing. “Are you mad? You could have hit me!”

I really need to rein in my emotions before I lose my shit with her.

The words taste bitter on my tongue as I say, “This is not how I wanted to spend my Saturday night. Chasing after some *girl*.”

I climb off my bike, prepared to take her back to my house even if it means carrying her the rest of the way home and retrieving the Harley later.

“Please just leave,” she says, tearing her gaze away. “I’m not staying somewhere I’m not welcome.”

“I told you to stay, didn’t I?”

She huffs. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“No, I don’t, princess. Enlighten me.”

I pull off the helmet and tuck it underneath my bicep as I take a step forwards. The moment she sees the fury in my eyes her brave little exterior cracks. The front of her chest brushes mine as she’s forced to crane her neck to look up at me, releasing a panty little breath that does something to my cock I will never admit out loud.

“Don’t call me that,” she says.

“I have plenty of other things I can call you, Gigi. None of them nice.”

Silence stretches between us. A single streetlamp flickers above her head, and the dull bulb still manages to highlight the redness in her cheeks.

She shakes her head. “I’m happy to go home, and I’m far from a child that needs babysitting. I’m doing you a favour, so just let me leave.”

My composure cracks, ties severing. “Get on the fucking bike!”

Her hands tighten at her sides. “No.”

“Just get on the bike. We’ll talk about this at the house.”

She stops, seemingly pleased with herself. “My house?”

“Fuck no.”

Appearing exasperated, Gigi shakes her head and turns to look at something in the distance. Then I’m forced to say something that makes my insides fucking crawl and my body cringe.

“Please.”

It’s easy to see the moment her body starts to ease, muscles loosening. When you’ve read people like I have your whole life, these little signs are as evident as breathing.

She turns her head to me slowly then nods.

About damn time.

Walking back over to my bike, I swing my leg over it and hand the helmet out to her. “Don’t even try making up some shit that it’ll ruin your hair or something.”

“You really think too little of me.”

She pulls the helmet over her head without a fight. Yet once she’s climbed onto the bike she sits far back against the seat. Putting that much distance between us will either break her back or cause her to fall before we’ve even pulled off the pavement.

I turn the key and the engine roars to life. Her body stiffens behind me, and when I peer over my shoulder I notice her fingertips digging into the leather of the seat, knuckles whitening.

“Put your arms round me.”

“I’m fine,” she protests.

This. Fucking. Woman.

Clutching the brakes with a tight fist, I pump the clutch with my foot, deliberately stalling the engine. The action propels her body forwards, and she’s thrown against my back. I reach back and grab onto her forearms, pulling them round my middle.

“Don’t play smart. Just keep your hands round me.”

My body is pumping with adrenaline by the time we get back to the house. Before Harry even turned off the bike, I'd already climbed off, set the helmet aside, and run to the comfort of his room. I'd closed the door, hoping it would form some kind of barricade against my emotions.

That was ten minutes ago.

I press my forehead against the wood and inhale deeply.

Only ever having wanted to save him the bother of my company, I'm now cursing the consequences of my decision with the way the ache between my legs pulses with a heartbeat.

I can't be attracted to my ex-boyfriend's brother. The only man in existence who is untouchable beyond a shadow of a doubt. The idea is simply unfathomable. And bad.

So, so incredibly bad.

But he could give you everything you've ever wanted, that taunting voice in the back of my head says. *You want this.*

No, I don't.

Deciding to give him a piece of my mind and deadpan my emotions to oblivion, I throw open the door and storm forwards. My body collides with something hard, and I'm forced to take a step back.

Harry leans his weight against the top of the doorframe, directly above our heads. My eyes are like magnets, drawn to the muscles tightening on his forearms and biceps as he stares down at me.

"Thinking of running away from me again?" He smirks, tilting his head.

I want to slap the smirk right off his beautiful fucking face.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I remain composed despite how much his presence is tempting me to screw all my morals.

"I don't need a babysitter."

"I'd rather you not be around either." His eyes roam over my body, most likely in disgust. "But running out in the middle of the night – are you mad!"

Now, *that* comment sobers me like no tomorrow.

"I know how to protect myself."

The wood underneath his palms creaks with the pressure he's enforcing. His body tightens to the extent it looks painful, and the flare in his eyes is enough to tell me he's seething at the fact I ran away.

"What? Because you had a brother, right?" he practically spits.

My eyes flare. "I beg your pardon?"

He turns his head away, something running wild behind his eyes. "You don't know what's out there."

"And *you* do?"

His nostrils flare, and he pushes himself off from the doorframe, separating us by several steps. "Don't run away again."

"And if I do?"

He huffs and turns his back towards me, calling over his shoulder, "If you don't run away, then tomorrow night I promise to tell you what really happened between me and Greg."

"Why not tonight?"

He's silent for a beat. "Because it gives you a reason to stay."

TEN

Sigi

Harry and I choose to ignore whatever weird emotions were spiralling last night. After waking up, I head to the kitchen with clear intentions of staying far away from the man with emerald eyes and tousled black hair. Yet he leans back against the kitchen counter so nonchalantly, having the audacity to look like *that*.

My steps falter at the sight of him. Apparently, a businessman is my new type, because I'm struck for breath when I see the six-foot-four God of a man in a black suit and a crisp white shirt.

His eyes meet mine over the rim of the coffee cup, and he steps aside to let me further into the kitchen. I thank him quietly, hoping my voice won't betray me as I say, "I never knew photography could be so professional."

"There's a new studio opening in Kensington. It's a black-tie event, which usually means you wear something fancy. Would've thought you knew all about it."

My eyes narrow to slits.

A phone starts ringing, and according to the chill that creeps up my spine, I already know who the caller is. Yet when I spot Greg's name lighting up the screen a pang of hurt hits me deep in the stomach. Ignoring the call completely, I turn back to the coffee and catch the stiffness of Harry's jaw.

"I haven't spoken to him since," I say as if I need to explain myself.

He nods but says nothing.

By the time I get a good look at him, his cocky demeanour has disappeared.

Our eyes lock, and he opens his mouth several times to speak, but his lips keep closing. Then he visibly swallows and says, "I won't be back until this evening. Can I trust you won't sneak off again?"

"I—"

My head whips towards the front door as it swings open. Mia prances in, practically skipping, the satchel hanging from her shoulder bouncing with each step. Her skirt and T-shirt co-ord are a bright green and a harsh contrast against the dull colour scheme of the house.

Harry rubs at his temples. "Jesus fucking Christ."

"Lovely to see you too, Harold." She throws her bag onto the counter, fixing her butt onto the bar-stool.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

"Keeping my girl company." Her eyes run over the length of his body. "You don't mind, do you? It looks like you were just heading out anyway."

I don't hear what he says, but I do hear the not-so-subtle curse that comes afterwards. He heads towards the door, fumbling with his phone as he brings it to his ear. "Keep them company," he huffs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Make sure they don't get up to anything stupid. It was not on my agenda to babysit girls this week, Andy—" He slams the door shut without so much as a goodbye.

Mia turns back to me with a confident smile, triumphant. "That went well."

"What are you really doing here?"

She stops midway through retrieving a large sample of papers from her satchel, looking at me as if I've slapped her. "I thought we were looking into Jack's death – or has someone tall, dark, and handsome screwed more than just your morals?" She tilts her head, insinuating a lot more than the obvious.

Heat rises to my cheeks almost instantly. I bow my head, realisation hitting me. "It's Monday, isn't it?"

She nods. "Mystery Monday."

We've never missed a day. Not once.

"I'm so sorry. My head is just all over the place at the minute."

I need to pull myself together. And have a cool shower.

She reaches over, holding onto my wrist and running her thumb over my skin. Her smile is sympathetic, and her teasing has quickly evaporated. “Don’t apologise to me.”

“I love you,” I tell her. “I’m going to get in the shower and freshen up.”



Once I’ve exited the bathroom, freshly washed and in a clean set of clothes, I’m a little surprised to turn the corner and see Andy standing close to Mia’s side. She’s bashful around him, and it’s strange to see since no one ever gives her this kind of reaction.

Andy raises his head as I step into the kitchen. “Looks like you and H haven’t torn each other’s hair out yet.”

“There’s still time,” I say, sitting down on a stool beside Mia. “Did he tell you what happened last night?”

He takes an apple from the fruit bowl, tossing it between his hands. He meets my gaze, hiding his fully blossomed smirk in the bite of the fruit.

The answer is as clear as day.

He swallows his bite and says, “That you snuck out and he had to save you from being murdered?”

“That’s hardly what happened.”

Mia mumbles under her breath, reciting information she’s reading. I press into her side and lean over her shoulder to lock eyes on the police report she’s already analysed for the hundredth time.

“What are you both doing anyway?” Andy asks, circling the island and leaning his forearms on the surface directly across from us.

During my time in the shower, Mia spread out the documents against the countertop, and the kitchen has now been transformed into something fit for detectives. Newspaper clippings, police reports – pretty much everything we’ve ever set eyes on sits in front of us on full display.

“My brother died a while back. We look into his death every week. It’s kind of a thing that we do,” I tell Andy, waving him off dismissively.

He frowns. “Why would you do that?”

Mia continues mumbling under her breath. I turn to her and then back to the man in front of me. “The circumstances of his death were really peculiar. We think someone is lying to us about what happened, and since my family aren’t willing to help, we thought we’d take matters into our own hands.”

“What’s his name?” he asks, taking another bite.

“Jack Thomas,” I say, looking back at the content Mia is so focused on.

“I knew him,” Andy says, chewing on the chunk of apple. “Bit of a badass.”

Mine and Mia’s heads rise slowly.

What did he just say?

We exchange glances with each other and then turn back to Andy as if he’s completely alien.

“You knew him?” she asks.

He nods.

I clarify, “You knew Jack?”

He nods again.

Yet when he spots our pressing gazes, his expression morphs into something else entirely, seemingly perplexed. “Was it something I said?”

“Explain yourself!” Mia demands, pointing a ballpoint pen at his chest.

He raises his hands like he’s calling for mercy, looking like a deer in headlights. “I didn’t know him personally.”

“Then why’d you say it?” I ask.

“I knew *of him*. There’s a difference.”

“How can you hear *of him*? That’s weird, right?” Mia questions.

He drops his hands and leans against the counter, his expression morphing into a devilish smirk. “You’re gorgeous when you’re mad.”

Mia leans up on her chair, shoving at his chest with a huff. He grins, pleased with himself, as he takes another bite of his fruit and winks at her. Her shock outweighs her bashfulness, but the blush on her cheeks is a dead giveaway for her real feelings.

He talks mid-chew. “From what I know, a lot of people knew of him. Always out in London causing mischief ... I can’t really tell you more than that, I’m afraid.”

The mischief part is no surprise to me.

“Small word, eh?” he adds before throwing the discarded apple core in the bin and dismissing the conversation.

While Mia continues to act coy, I scan the documents in front of us with a new sense of direction. Yet all the while, something doesn’t match up. If Andy knew of Jack, and seemingly other people did, how would Harry not have heard of him too? Surely, he would have mentioned something when I brought the conversation up.

“Andy,” I call over my shoulder. “Did Harry?”

I hear the rattle of a beer bottle and then the fridge door close. “Hmm?”

“Did Harry know Jack?”

He pauses, appearing in thought. “Nah, I don’t think so.”

Mystery Monday lasts less than an hour before the papers are discarded against the countertop and we’re chatting like old friends. It’s the longest time I’ve ever spent with Andy, and I conclude he’s a really nice guy. Mia told me a while back he was widowed a couple of years ago. He was married by twenty-seven, and he became a widower just a few weeks later. She’s never detailed the circumstances of how it happened, but I imagine that’s most probably because she doesn’t know.

I admire him, really. You would never know he’s suffering on the inside, and I guess I kind of crave that. I’ve been so hung up on my brother’s death for the past five years that I’m struggling to grieve. A part of me still clings to him, refusing to leave it in the past.

It’s practically nightfall by the time the front door opens and Harry enters, looking every part the hot business broker. He walks in, places his jacket over the back of one of the occupied chairs, and heads straight to the fridge to grab a bottle of beer.

This whole situation is rather peculiar. Kind of like we’re playing house. Coming back after a day of work looking dishevelled – should he call me “honey” and declare he’s home? Should I have put tea on for him—?

“Uhh ... Gigi.”

I turn to Mia, lost in thought. “Hmm?”

Her eyes are wild with an emotion I can’t quite place as she references the TV humming quietly in the background. It’s impossible to make out anything they’re saying, but the tagline is as clear as day.

“Turn that up!” I tell her, my interest suddenly piqued.

She grabs the remote in a frenzy, turning the television up several notches as the news broadcaster’s voice filters in. “... *has been found dead. The body was pulled from the River Thames by the Metropolitan Police ...*”

“Gigi,” Mia starts, “isn’t that the guy who—?”

“Shh!”

“... *this afternoon. They are not claiming his death to be suspicious. We’re joining you with the latest, here on BBC News.*”

“Oh my God.” I let out a shaky breath. The sofa sinks beside me as Harry relaxes back against the cushions, looking the picture of composure. I tilt my head towards him and ask, “Have you seen this?”

I turn back to the screen as the woman continues.

“*Several women have come forward claiming the London bartender spiked them with what’s better referred to as ‘the date rape drug’.*”

“You don’t say ...” Andy says, looking between us from the sofa he occupies with Mia. “What a coincidence that they caught the *exact* same guy.”

“Is that the guy, Gigi?” she presses softly.

“I ...” My mouth turns dry as the man’s face flashes on the screen.

Harry brings the beer up to his lips, taking a sip as he confidently assures us, “That’s the guy.”

And suddenly, I’m staring at the man beside me, who I thought I knew – well, not really – like a total stranger.

A string of doubt slithers into the corner of my mind, and for a brief moment I entertain the idea that Harry is some cold-hearted killer. My eyes drop to his knuckles, noticing the cuts from Saturday night’s confrontation still tainting his otherwise perfect skin, and then back to his face.

Feeling the burn of my gaze, he turns to me slowly. He cocks a single brow, daring me to accuse him of the thoughts plaguing my brain. I tilt my head sideways, mimicking his expression, as our eyes say all the things our mouths can’t.

What secrets are you keeping from me, Harry?



Harry can’t be a murderer. The idea is just preposterous. I’m looking into things that aren’t there. Thinking about locked doors in a house. Thinking about a person drenched in blood the first time I saw them. Thinking about a man who was murdered in London after trying to assault me. And coming to conclusions that are too far-fetched to even voice.

Throughout the railroad of this evening's events, I don't forget Harry promised me an explanation about the situation between him and Greg. Sure, it's probably the last thing he wants to do after a hard day's work, but I also know that if I fail to bring it up now, I'll lose all hope of getting answers.

Regardless of how exhausted he must be after Andy and Mia leave, he's waiting on the living-room sofa by the time I round the corner from the hallway. He gestures for me to sit down like some kind of puppet master, dressed in nothing but dark sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt that clings to his torso.

"How was work?" I ask, sitting down on the opposite end of the sofa. "Get your hands dirty?"

"If you have something to ask me, then by all means, please say it."

This feels like a trap. While the insinuation is relatively broad, my line of questioning is miniscule.

"What happened the first night I met you?" I ask, deciding to test the waters.

"Accident at work."

"At 3 a.m.?"

"Next question."

"We've only just started—"

"Next question, princess. Don't make me ask again."

I huff in defeat. We've only just started and we're already hitting a wall.

Deciding to cut to the chase, I ask, "What happened between you and Greg?"

He presses his head back against the sofa cushions, staring up at the ceiling. "I'm not sure what lies he's fed you, but I can assure you, it's far from the truth."

"Enlighten me then."

He purses his lips and then lets out a breath. "Our mother died during childbirth. She didn't have time to update the will, and we had a deadbeat dad who didn't care for that kind of stuff. Once I was eighteen, he left all legal assets to me and fucked off. I was left with a mortgage to pay and a kid to take care of as if he was my own."

I blink once. Twice. Struggling to believe he's opening up to me so quickly. The rawness of his confessions tugs me close, captivating me further with each passing second.

He continues. "No life insurance or benefactors to help with that sort of thing. The best thing I could do for him was to let him stay, pay the bills with a job that involved me working away, and give Greg a home even if a family didn't come with it. He might hate me for what I did, but he had a roof over his head."

By the time he's finished his story, I've sunk comfortably into the cushions, my head propped up on my forearm on the back of the sofa. His and Greg's stories both resemble the truth but are told from two completely different points of view.

"You provided him with a home and acted like the dad he never had," I say. "How could he hate you?"

"If you knew ..." Harry rolls his head, bringing our faces close. "Then you wouldn't be sitting close enough that I could smell the roses on your skin."

The danger of his statement makes my head swim, yet it focuses him into perfect clarity. It's a warning for me to take a step back before I get sucked into the vortex. But isn't that exactly what I'm looking for?

For a fleeting moment my eyes drop to his lips and entertain the idea.

Harry notices the slight adjustment, and whatever trance we were in breaks instantly. He runs his hands through his hair and gets to his feet, retreating to the kitchen.

My cheeks flare with embarrassment, and I keep my head down as he calls from the other room, "Goodnight, Gigi."

I'm such an idiot. That's my *ex-boyfriend's brother*. God knows he's given me enough reasons to stay away, yet I just considered kissing him! I'm not about to become a victim of some kind of rescuer syndrome just because Harry saved me from some man outside a nightclub.

Tearing myself apart on whether I should apologise or not, I stand and trudge to his room in defeat without another word. As I walk into the hallway and pass that damn door that's always locked, I stop in my tracks and turn my attention towards it, watching it from over my shoulder.

"He's involved with some fucked-up people."

"He's not a good person, Gigi. I choose not to think about him willingly."

"I reckon that man has some dark secrets no matter what the record says."

My eyes linger on the wood until, finally, I backtrack a few steps. A quick scope of my surroundings tells me Harry's still in the kitchen and out of sight, allowing me the confidence to reach out and turn the door handle.

A breath falls from my chest as it moves with ease.

It's unlocked.

I grip the handle hard out of fear it might change its mind. Ready to yank it open and unveil everything I've wanted to know, consequences be damned, I recite a quick prayer.

"What are you doing?"

My head whips to the side. Harry's gaze is dark and ominous, looking far from the person who exposed all his truths just

seconds ago. Rage rises to the surface as he watches me with venom in his eyes.

“I’m sorry ... I ...”

My hand stays gripping the door handle, struggling to let the freedom slip from my fingers. But he grabs my wrist, enforcing a pressure that causes my fingers to give out and set the handle free. Kicking the door free with his foot, he tugs me closer to his chest.

“I think it’s best if you go home tomorrow.”

“Harry, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t—”

“I expect you to have left by the time I’m home.”

ELEVEN

Sigi

I haven't seen much of Harry. Allowing me into his home gave me a teeny-tiny insight into his life, but that was evidently too much. For a guy who doesn't seem to scare easily, the morning after our incident he'd up and left for work without so much as a goodbye. Mia begrudgingly dropped me back home even though my parents weren't due back for a few more days.

It's now been a full week since I was at his house, and all my morals are in shatters. Work has been grating on my last nerve so much that I find myself reluctant to even turn up. Mia is begging me to stay at hers, but I'm not even entertaining that idea. I'm sick of being someone's burden. Greg has been calling non-stop and I've ignored him with each ring, no matter the pang of guilt I've suffered with each rejected call. And still nothing from Harry – not that that I expected anything less.

When my parents do finally make it home from the Cotswolds, they're buzzing to speak despite my mood being far from chatty. For once Dad even looks up from his plate while we tuck into dinner.

"... and there was a beautiful little village in the countryside that we went to. It was stunning. Fields as far as the eye could see. Not like those busy London roads."

"Yeah," I say.

"All the villages were like that, really. Everything was so picturesque. We might move to the Cotswolds. We talked about it – didn't we, Husband? It would mean you'd have to find your own place, though, sweetheart. Couldn't expect you to suffer that commute to work."

"Right." I stab at my steak, struggling to find an appetite.

In my peripheral Mum's body stiffens, and she lifts her nose in a huff. Entertaining their relocation to the countryside isn't on my agenda today.

"So ..." she says, grating her steak knife into the plate. "Who else was in my home while we were away?"

"I didn't stay here." *Not completely a lie.*

"Oh," she huffs, surprised. "Where did you stay then?"

"Just with some guy." I chance a glance at her. She hides her true emotions behind the shredded piece of meat she's chewing on. "I did find out something interesting though."

"What's that?" she asks, the disinterest evident.

"His friend said he knew Jack ... before everything happened."

She stills.

Despite the uncertainty of her emotions, I add, "Said he was a bit of a badass."

Mum smashes her glass against the table, causing the piece to shatter. I persist and finally raise my head to meet hers.

"A lot of people knew about him, actually. Caused quite a lot of trouble in the city by the sound of things."

The slap echoes across the room before I feel the sting against my cheek. Clutching the sore part of my skin, tears dominate my vision as I watch my mother, her nostrils flaring.

She's never slapped me. Not once. Not ever. Not until today.

A tear threatens to fall, but not from pain. It's from my pure stupidity.

She stands, trying to evoke her authority by towering above me.

A bitter laugh slips from my lips as I drop my hand. "Touch me again and I promise you, you'll regret it," I say, the knife on the table suddenly looking very appealing.

"Get out," she says through gritted teeth.

"There's no going back from this," I warn her. "Not only have you lost one child, but now you've lost two."

Before she can think about upping one of the pieces of cutlery and throwing her weapon at my head, I leave the house and charge to my car in a fit of fury and adrenaline. As soon as the vicious cold air attacks my cheeks, panic engulfs me in hot flushes.

Hiding in the comfort of my car and letting the tears finally fall, I call Mia – my lifeline – instantly, but it goes straight to voice mail.

“Fuck!” My voice cracks as I slam my hand against the steering wheel.

I scroll through my contracts, hating the only option my mind spirals towards.

Then another name stalls me.

Harry St. James.

I’m not even sure when he would have had the time to put his number in my phone, but I’ve embarrassed myself enough tonight without running into his arms like some weak damsel in distress ...

Which leaves me with one option.

When I dial their number, they pick up on the second ring.

“I’m not ready to accept your apology yet, but I need you.” I choke back a sob. “Please.”



I walk through the front door with nothing more than my phone in one hand and my car keys in the other, so the only plausible idea is that I wear Greg’s T-shirt overnight. And the next night. And the night after. And the one after that.

It isn’t my favourite clothing option, but I’m limited in choice. I’m thankful for the fact the length covers my underwear since we’re forced to share a bed, afraid doing so could encourage more intimacy between me and him. That’s the last thing I want right now. Come to think of it, I haven’t been in the mood for anything since Harry arrived on the scene – not that we’d ever go there with one another anyway.

Greg pesters me to talk things out so we can go back to the way we were, but I’m not one to forgive easily, so I think it’s best to pretend the issue never happened. I soon lose track of how long I’ve been here, but one thing I’m certain of is that Harry has dropped off the face of the earth. No late-night visits. No pop-ins for groceries. Nothing.

The aftermath of my argument with my parents forces me to struggle with sleep. I stare at the ceiling unforgivingly from Greg’s bed, eyes boring into the cracked paint.

I let at least a couple of hours tick by tonight before I slip out from under the sheets and exit the room silently. My footing falters on the stairs as I feel the presence of someone incredibly intimidating yet ... strangely comforting.

My bare feet pad against the last few steps, and then my eyes clash with Harry’s. He’s pulled a wooden chair from the dining table and he’s sitting in it, resting his forearms on his thighs.

There’s silence between us – except for the dull hum of the refrigerator and the droplets inside the sink from the faulty tap. His gaze is overpowering, so intense I fail to notice the line of blood trailing from his upper chest down his stomach. My eyes dare to flicker to his naked torso, taking in the devastating sight.

While a part of me wants to help, I have the growing suspicion I’ll be rejected. And I’m not sure how much rejection I can take from Harry. Each time, it pushes me a little closer to the edge, and I’m scared I’m close to free-falling.

Instead I go to the sink, retrieve the first-aid kit, and hand him the box without a single question.

“Thanks,” he says, his voice low.

A volt of electricity shivers up my arm from where his skin brushes mine, and I try really hard to ignore it. His long fingers fumble with the contents of the box, but it’s evident he’s clueless about what he’s doing.

Fuck it.

Fighting against all morals, I decide this will be a huge testament to my character, and I pray I’ll remain composed. Walking over to the sink, I fill up a bowl of warm water and place it on the table beside the chair he’s occupying.

“Sit,” I tell him.

He spreads his legs wide, inviting me in. “Yes, ma’am.”

I walk closer and kick his legs closed with the inside of my knee. While I would love to embrace his heat, I’m not allowing myself to fall into that trap. Not after he rejected my advances the last night I saw him.

Taking the box out of his hands, I place it on the table and submerge the cloth in warm liquid. As I wring out the excess water, my eyes drop to the wound carved across his chest. It’s hard to see the extent of the damage with all the blood surrounding it.

“How’d this happen?” I ask, pressing the cloth against his skin.

“Work,” he says, not thinking twice about the answer.

I’m no fool. I know the photography business is a façade for something much darker.

“Do you want to know what’s funny?” I ask, retracting the cloth and leaning over to submerge it in the water again, rinsing it clean.

“I imagine you’re going to tell me anyway.”

The abruptness of his tone makes me frown. Purely out of spite, I return the cloth to his chest and push it directly into the wound, causing him to hiss.

“I never knew photography could be so dangerous.”

“Whatever you’re thinking – don’t.” He maintains eye contact, the pools of green like a trap to stop me from prying.

I jolt when I feel the pad of his thumb running gently over my thigh. Without realising I’ve sunk into his embrace, my legs now resting comfortably between his parted ones. With each stroke of his thumb, goose bumps trail down my legs, decorating my skin. White-knuckling the cloth to ground my emotions, I ignore the body heat radiating off him, enticing me in. Slowly, I bring the damp cloth back to his chest and wipe the affected area.

Forcing a swallow, I train my eyes elsewhere, and when I scan the art littering his skin, I say, “I never knew you had so many tattoos.” The markings and a mixture of symbols cover his chest, his toned torso, his shoulders, and his biceps, until they cut off dramatically at his elbows. “What do they all mean?”

“I’ll tell you one day,” he says.

“Is that a promise?”

He runs his tongue over his bottom lip, and I watch the motion slowly. “On my honour.”

Trapped in a lust-filled haze, I didn’t even realise I’d cleared the blood fully from his chest, giving way to a sore wound. While it’s clear of crimson, the gash looks extremely painful. Reaching over to grab a clean cloth to pat it dry, my eyes catch something prominent at the back of his neck. A distorted ring of skin encircles his otherwise smooth neck and shoulder blades.

Is that ... a burn?

It’s white, scarred, circular, and it has a terrifying amount of precision ... almost like it was deliberately placed there. My heart feels heavy at the realisation, and my throat grows thick with all the words I struggle to say. When I bring my body back a few steps to distract myself, I spot Harry scrutinising the mark on my cheek that’s still healing from my mother’s slap. A shadow of a cut remains, practically impossible to see unless you’re in my immediate vicinity.

“Who did this to you?” he asks, bringing his hand to my cheek.

The comfort of his touch instinctively makes me lean into him. When his eyes darken, demanding answers, I say, “Tell me about your wounds and I’ll tell you about mine.”

His jaw tightens. “I’m not asking again, princess.”

“Neither am I,” I reiterate. “Who branded you, Harry?”

The fury in his eyes is unforgiving.

“You can’t expect to protect my back if I can’t protect yours.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then let me in,” I plead.

He tears his eyes away. “No.”

This man will be the death of me. He is torturous and damning.

Yet ... perfectly imperfect.

As if the realisation impales me straight in the chest, I don’t want him to be the *death* of me. I want him to be the *making* of me.

TWELVE

Harry

A familiar sense of rage courses through my veins, but tonight might be my breaking point. We fucked up the job and someone paid the price. I wasn't far behind. As if I was being cursed for every sin I've ever committed, seeing *her* was just the icing on top of the irresistible fucking cake.

Standing there in the moonlight like an angel bestowed upon me, within arm's reach yet completely untouchable, wearing nothing but Greg's thin cotton fucking T-shirt. The material was so light I could see the outline of her nipples pebbling underneath it. Even the thought of what the two of them were doing before I stumbled in makes my fists clench.

What I would do to get my hands on her ... I'm so fucking attracted to her it hurts my every limb, to the point I might topple over in my lust and infatuation. If only she knew.

But even if she did, she's untouchable. To me. To most men.

I vowed that I wouldn't put my hands on her, but I almost broke that promise tonight after she ran her hands over my body. My gentleman instincts only exist in the presence of Gigi Thomas, but I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out. That woman – all five-foot-four of her, with the Bambi eyes and pink lips – pushes me to my fucking limits.

But I can't let her in.

I've seen and done things no man should ever do. I can't risk roping her into this dark, evil world I live in. She's too pure for this earth, and if I let her get too close to me, it's only a matter of time before I bleed her purity dry.

She doesn't know everything about me. And *when* she does – she'll hate me. More than she already does.

No matter how much I crave her, it doesn't surpass my urgency for her to live a normal life. That's why I've been so cruel to her. But my expiration date is wearing thin. For her sake, I hope she stays away, because the next time she's within my vicinity I won't be so forgiving.

I've been keeping things from her about her family. Dark secrets.

I know more about them than I'm letting on.

And if she finds out, she'll kill me.

THIRTEEN

Sigi

Why is it that whenever my emotions start going haywire I find myself in another damn nightclub? I'm not on my own either. Mia took it upon herself to invite Harry and Andy.

She's wandered off somewhere else again, leaving me alone, but I don't have it in me to care anymore. The drinks are flowing a little too easily, and with each one I can feel my body loosening up and sinking into the feeling of intoxication. You'd have thought I'd be more cautious after what happened the last time I was in a club, but knowing Harry is somewhere in the building eases my concerns despite how much I wish it didn't.

At the mere thought of him I chug down a few extra drinks for good measure. My footing is wonky as I make my way back to the dance floor, feeling the thump of the bass in my veins.

Someone approaches me from behind, and the warmth of their body relaxes my bones almost instantly. I lean into their front like an old friend, knowing they see me as nothing remotely close to that.

Mint and leather overflows my senses, adding to the sense of intoxication. A strong hand creeps up my stomach, over my chest, until their fingers spread across the length of my neck.

"You should really be careful ..." Harry's voice is quiet yet authoritative as he cups my jaw. "I could be a stranger trying to lure you down a dark alleyway."

"But you're not."

He pushes his hips forwards, and something hard beneath his jeans presses against my ass. My stomach curdles with butterflies. I tilt my head back against his chest to embrace his touch before our spell breaks.

"I'm worse. You don't have anyone to protect you from me."

I'm breathless as I say, "You'd protect me."

My body is like a magnet to his touch, and I press myself further against him in a desperate bid to ease the burning sensation in my core. My hand skates across the skin of his hand to encourage the demanding contact.

No man has ever touched me like this.

"You dancing like this is drawing a lot of attention." Harry places a delicate kiss on my cheek, his breath fanning against my lips. "Do you really want to be the cause of an innocent man's death?"

Maybe it's the drink I've consumed, or perhaps I'm slightly insane, but the possessiveness and the threat of death makes me whimper with desire.

"Harry," I plead, though I'm not sure what for.

After my name slips from his lips his entire body stiffens as if his mind just caught up with his words.

His hands fall from my body.

No, no, no.

"You should leave," he says.

He steps away, and I stumble back from his lack of touch. Strung in my own emotions, I debate whether to follow him. There's not enough time in the world to try to fix somebody else, but I simply can't help myself with Harry.

Having made my mind up, I exit the club and stumble onto the street, intoxicated and in an outfit that's definitely meant for a club's dimly lit atmosphere. Thankfully, Harry is standing directly outside, leaning back against the wall with a cigarette dangling between his lips. As soon as he sees me, his expression shifts, and he disposes of the cigarette on the floor, stomping it with his foot.

Focusing on his shoe, he says, "Have a bit of mercy on me and leave."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Do you not remember what happened the last time you were outside a nightclub?" He finally looks up. "Or are you just really fucking stupid?"

The statement sobers me quickly.

“You protected me last time,” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have done that. You’re not mine to protect.”

He’s trying to push my buttons. This isn’t him.

I shake my head and ask under my breath, “What is wrong with you?”

He scoffs. “You have no idea, baby.”

Finally losing my composure, I shout, “Stop calling me that! You keep calling me these stupid pet names. You need to stop messing with my feelings—”

“That’s your first mistake.” He takes a step forwards, pointing a finger at my face. “I’m not the kind of man who cares about feelings, Gigi. You need to leave me alone. You’re getting on my last nerve.”

Tears sting my eyes, threatening to spill.

“Have I done something wrong?” I ask, my voice almost breaking. “Is it the way I look?”

He retreats a step. “You’re fucking perfect, Gigi. Don’t think like that.”

“Then what is it?” I ask, a loose tear slipping down my cheek. “You only ever come near me when you’ve been drinking. It’s like you can’t even stand touching me. You struggle to look at me on a normal basis—”

“You slept in my bed! I’m the one who—”

“Because I was almost raped! For fuck’s sake, Harry, what is wrong with you?”

“Exactly! What is wrong with me? You don’t know half the story. And trust me, you don’t want to go down that road.”

“Then let me in!”

“NO!” he roars. “I can’t.”

Harry pants, heaving air into his lungs. Onlookers probably suspect we’re a couple arguing, but they’re so far from the truth it’s laughable. “I’m not arguing with you over this here.”

“Of course.” I nod slowly. “So then you’ll just go back to hating me tomorrow.”

Another beat of silence stretches between us. An odd mashup of sound comes from the low bass of club music, the signal of a traffic light, and a car racing past at an unnecessary speed. None of it is what I want to hear. I want to hear Harry scream that none of my accusations are true.

But actions speak louder than words, and we’re done talking.

I shake my head clear and start to walk past him towards the taxi rank.

He grabs my arm, stopping me. “Gigi ...”

“Don’t worry, I’m going home. I’ll get a cab.” I pull myself from his grasp. “Does that make you happy?”

I walk forwards, barely making it a few steps before I slam into a figure standing directly in my path. I mumble an apology and try to step round them, but they conveniently step the same way.

“Is everything okay here, miss?” the man asks.

“Yes. We’re just having a conversation. I’m just leaving.”

I throw a look over my shoulder at Harry to show who I’m referring to and to signal an end to our visit, but my action slows when I see the panic rising in his eyes. His whole body has seized, his expression stone-cold. The fear is unmistakable, and not an emotion I get to see regularly. Turning round, I take in the man standing before me to see what’s left Harry’s so spooked.

He reeks of authority, misfortune, and ... money. While it’s just shy of sunrise, this man is in a full business suit, not a crease in his attire and not a thread out of place. Even his handkerchief looks like it’s been recently pressed. He must be nearing sixty, which is evident through his salt-and-pepper hair. He’s no match for Harry’s height, so I’m not sure what he finds so intimidating.

“Is that true?” The man turns to Harry.

In my peripheral I notice his slow nod before he perks his shoulders, standing straighter.

“Completely,” I answer for him.

The man looks at me, cocking his head in intrigue.

“If you’ll excuse me, I was just heading home.” I bypass the stranger’s side and barely chance a second look at Harry as I scurry the other way, continuing on towards the taxi rank.

Who the fuck was that guy anyway? And what kind of business would involve wearing a full three-piece suit at this time in the morning ...? At a nightclub of all places.

My questions will have to wait until the morning when I have a clearer head.

As I approach the taxi rank, all prior thoughts of my destination are occupied by rumbling hatred. And now, as I stand beside the line of vehicles, I don’t know where I’m going to go. I still haven’t spoken to my parents since the incident. I’m not rushing back to Greg anytime soon. So that only leaves me with Mia and having to pry her hands off Andy.

I turn on my heel and stomp back towards the club with tunnel vision, ready to retrieve my friend and get the hell out of here. Yet when I turn the corner and see Harry and the suited man talking in hushed voices, I scurry backwards and hide behind the brick wall, the buzz of nightlife only allowing me to hear snippets of their conversation.

“Is that true?”

“She was just leaving.”

“... be a problem ... will it?”

“No.”

“... she better ... trusting you, Harry ... your life ... again ...”

So they do know each other.

“Hey, stranger. I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” someone says.

I slap a hand over my heart, turning to Mia. Her exaggerated grin is far too telling of the amount of alcohol she’s drunk.

She tries peering over my shoulder. “What are we looking at?”

“Nothing,” I tell her quietly.

“It must be something,” she retaliates.

A part of me feels slightly defensive at the sight. But when I turn back, the man has disappeared. Harry’s standing there alone with his head bowed, muttering under his breath.

I turn back to Mia. “Let’s go.”

“Huh?” she asks, confused. “Why?”

“We’re not wanted here.”

FOURTEEN

Harry

I've suffered a lot of shit throughout the years that's taken my anger to boiling point, but nothing has quite elated my fury like this moment, right now.

My hands are shaking with adrenaline, fists tightening as I attempt to conceal the outburst before it breaks out of me. I've trained for these sorts of situations a thousand times. I have to maintain my composure even when I'm pushed to the brink of self-destruction. Tell me why one single confrontation ruined everything, causing my molars to grind, preparing me to lash out at the next person who tries even speaking to me.

I warned Gigi to stay away in every way I knew how. But now *he* knows of her it's a losing game. Now he's got his venomous eyes on her, she'll be roped into this dark, twisted world, whether she likes it or not.

There's nothing I can do. No one fucks with *him* and lives to see another day.

She watched the whole conversation take shape from behind the brick wall. I knew to scope my surroundings before spilling my tongue, yet *he* and his big mouth couldn't help himself. I bet he knew she was watching, secretly spinning theories that'll only intrigue her, make her want to find out more.

It isn't until she finally disappears and I know for certain she's out of the area that I lash out.

"FUCK!"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I see red.

I picture *him*. I picture the guy I murdered in cold blood and dumped into the River Thames. I picture Greg – my own flesh and blood. I think of *her*.

Her.

Her.

Her.

My fist meets the wall. The skin on my hand splits, weathering into a mess of flesh as blood splatters over the brick until the colour stains the hard surface and becomes impossible to differentiate.

Someone tugs harshly at my shoulders, trying to pull me from the darkness, but my tunnel vision is too strong. The edges of my vision blur, but the wall is in perfect clarity.

"Harry." A voice breaks through the dark cloud. "Fucking hell, man. Stop!"

I swing my arm round, but Andy catches my forearm and hurries out, "Whoa. Whoa. Whoa."

My heart rate amps, the realisation dawning on me that I almost pummelled my best friend. Thank God he's my friend and he didn't try to attack me in the way he's capable of. The way we're *both* capable of.

He drops my arm, grips my shoulders, and forces me to focus. I pull myself free, forcing a step back.

"Don't touch me," I warn. "You really don't want to be around me right now."

I've never let my anger get the better of me. Not ever.

His face drops to my fists, hearing the echo of blood splattering on the pavement. "We'll take you to medical."

"And tell them what?" I scoff. "That I punched a wall because I'm a fucking twat?"

He pauses for a beat, realisation creeping in. "Where are the girls?"

"They just left."

He frowns, the prominent line sticking to the skin between his brows, as his mind wanders with the possibilities of why I lost my cool. He's been with me at my lowest, through the thick of it all, and not once have I acted like this.

It wouldn't take much thought for him to know the one line that was crossed. My only trigger that could cause such a reaction.

His expression turns cold. "He knows."

FIFTEEN

Gigi

No wonder England is known for being notoriously rainy, because that's all it ever does. The rain doesn't stop. The downpour thunders against Mia's bedroom window. I'd say it woke me up, but I've been staring at the glass for hours, watching each droplet splatter against the windowpane and run down the glass as if I can see my own reflection in it.

What's happening to me ...?

I'll tell you what's happening. Harry is getting under my skin. I'm not entirely sure how, since he's made it his life's mission to keep me away. But now I've had a taste of how he feels – how his body feels against mine – I don't think I can ever let him go.

I don't just crave his touch. I crave all of him.

I'm intrigued by the danger he exudes, and I ache to be pulled into the darkness alongside him. No matter what secrets he's keeping.

Mia rolls over in bed, and I feel her gaze on the side of my cheek for a long while before she finally asks, "Is everything okay?"

Three little words. One extremely loaded question. No simple answer.

My mind has reached maximum capacity with the number of questions running rampant through it, all down to a man who would give me everything I've ever wanted one minute and shatter it to pieces the next.

I turn back to her, huffing out a breath. "I'm not sure."

Mia's never been one to mope over her feelings, so she sits up with a sigh, shaking her head as if what I said was an utter travesty. After much deliberation, she insists we get out of the house and rid all male existence from my brain. While that sounds fairly straightforward, it takes more convincing than I'd like to admit.

"You are Gigi Thomas. You can do this."

"I can do this."

"He's just a man."

"Just a man," I deadpan.

A really fucking hot one.

It's Sunday and the local bakery is swarming with customers, causing the bell above their heads to constantly chime. Floor-to-ceiling windows cover the front of the property, giving way to the crowds eager to escape the heavy downpour. Mia and I stand in line to order, and I people-watch from afar, my eyes roaming over bystanders and their umbrellas.

But my attention is drawn to one man.

He pulls the hood of his black hoodie over his head, concealing his tousled dark hair. His shoulders are hunched, giving the false illusion he's much shorter than he is, but I only know one man who exhibits that kind of intimidation. Keeping his head down, he bypasses people on the street, eager to get to his destination.

He may be a stranger to others, but I'd recognise him instantly.

I whisper under my breath, "There's no way ..."

"Did you say something?"

My eyes chase the movement through the busy crowd of people, watching Harry weave through the flurry of oversized umbrellas.

I turn to Mia. "I think I've just seen someone I know ... rain check?"

She frowns quickly, her suspicion rising to the surface.

Shit.

Chancing a look over at the front door and back to me, she says, "Of course. Go and do what you need to do—"

I've already kissed her cheek and fled the bakery before there's time to finish the sentence. A heavy onslaught of wet wind

hits my cheeks, beading my face with raindrops. The crowd is heavy despite the weather, and I duck under the brollies to try and catch up to my target.

“Sorry ... sorry ... excuse me ... can I get past?” I mutter to people as I push through, following Harry at a close distance as he parts the crowd with a confidence only he could exude.

He ducks his head lower, takes a right, and walks into a small alleyway, under the cover of tall buildings that shelter us from the rain. I watch from afar as he continues forwards, hands pushed deep in his pockets, chancing a look around every few seconds.

Who’s he looking out for?

The rain pounds harder, and he jogs towards his G-Wagon. He climbs in the front seat and shuts the door, concealing himself from the weather. I duck between vehicles, keeping my body low, until I finally reach my own car, which is parked just a few rows back from his. When I unlock the door and climb in, the rain sounds far heavier as it pounds on the bonnet like thunder.

The red brake lights of his vehicle flash, and I quickly strap my seatbelt round me, prepared to follow him. But he doesn’t move.

The car stays idle.

As the rain falls unforgettingly, I can barely make out the outline of Harry’s car through the thick drops distorting my view through the windshield.

I never thought I had it in me to stalk someone, but here I am, nonetheless, feeling like a criminal.

I sit here for what feels like hours. Just watching.

The car continues to sit with its brake lights on, refusing to move. Harry hasn’t made any attempt to leave. Maybe he’s waiting for the rain to stop. Maybe he’s waiting for someone.

“What are you doing, Harry?” I whisper.

Fog builds up on the insides of the windows, and cars around us start to disappear as time ticks by with the weather showing no signs of calming down.

Wiping my jumper sleeve against the glass, I notice the brake lights of Harry’s car turn off and the door open. Quickly unbuckling my belt again, I wait briefly before I silently shut my door and follow him. Keeping my forearm raised above my eyes to shield myself from the rain, I trail after him towards the alleyway.

But when I reach the opening, I freeze.

He’s disappeared.

He just came through here ...

Fuck!

I toss my head back and forth, hair sticking to my skin and catching between my lips. This can’t be it. He couldn’t have just disappeared.

Right as I’m about to turn round, I’m forced back against the wall of the building beside me, and a hooded figure fills my vision. Emerald eyes are blinding through the dark shadow concealing his face.

Harry.

He pulls his hood down quickly, a frown etched between his brows, but it’s far from the stubborn look he always carries. This is something else.

“Are you following me?”

“No.” *Liar.* “I swear.”

My body shakes from the rain soaking my clothes, causing Harry’s body to feel like a furnace against my skin. Eager for some warmth – or perhaps simply wanting to touch him – I drop my hand to his shoulder and fist the material between my fingers.

Raindrops are thick against my eyelashes, and they flutter with the restraint of trying to stay open. Harry’s lips are wet from the rain, and my eyes focus on them for a second too long.

I watch his mouth move as he says, “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not,” I say, meeting his eye again.

He raises his hand to my face, the pad of his thumb stroking away raindrops from my cheekbone. “I’ll ask you again.” He attempts to distract me, his voice eerily calm. “Are you following me?”

“No.”

He lowers his thumb, swiping it across my lower lip and pulling it out from between my teeth.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?” he whispers, holding my cheek carefully as if he fears he’ll be the one to break me.

I shouldn’t be so affected by his touch, but having his mouth so close to mine is utterly addicting. I always thought I was the type of woman who would never need a man. And I don’t really ... I just need Harry.

“Go home, Gigi.”

He pulls away, heading in the other direction and causing me to stumble over my own feet at his brisk exit.

I’m getting whiplash from this constant back and forth.

These stolen touches, lustful glances ... and then fighting whatever's brewing underneath.

A roar of frustration races up my throat, and I notice his steps falter.

"You're so confusing!" I shout above the rainfall, my throat hoarse. "You feel inclined to protect me from other men, but I'm 'not yours to protect'. You threaten men who even look at me. You want me, and you know it!"

His back muscles tighten under his jumper, and I sense the moment he starts resisting his better instincts.

"Stop fighting it," I plead. "Let me in."

Silence stretches between us, and for a brief moment I convince myself he's going to storm over here and shake some sense into me. Whatever he does, it'll be better than this.

But of course, he doesn't move.

And I'm standing here like a fool.

This is it then.

Having made up my mind, I turn on my heel and head back towards my car, walking away from Harry with quickness in my step. Whether it's to get some shelter from the weather or so I can't backtrack on my actions, I'm not sure.

I reach the driver's side of my car and retrieve my keys from my pocket, but they fall from my grip when my body is spun round with urgency. Harry pushes me back against the car door, catching himself against the metal beside my head, the quick movement sucking the air from my chest.

I'm too breathless to even think straight as he brings his forehead down to mine. His other hand slides across the nape of my neck, cupping it in his palm as his eyes flicker down to my mouth.

"Is this what you want?" he asks, his voice strained.

"Y-yes."

He leans in closer, a hint of doubt dancing between his eyes.

"You enjoying pushing me to my fucking limit?"

I nod.

His eyes focus on my lips for another few seconds. He lowers his head down to my height slowly, torturously, until he *finally* meets my lips in a kiss.

Being kissed by Harry is everything I ever expected it to be and everything I didn't. The feeling explodes from the tips of my toes, rushing up my legs, pooling in my stomach, before it rises up my ribcage, coaxing my throat open and escaping my mouth with a hot gasp against his lips.

I let him into my mouth without hesitation, and his tongue strokes the side of mine. He pushes me further into the car, and I arch my back to bring him even closer to me. A groan slips free from his throat, causing my stomach to spiral. I tug his T-shirt in response, fingering the wet cotton fabric between my fingertips, craving more.

Craving all of him.

A moan drags out of my mouth, and he slides his hand to the back of my head, into the strands of my hair, as he tightens, forcing me to crane my neck so he can kiss me deeper, harder. It's ravenous.

Desperate for friction to ease the ache between my thighs, I grind my hips up against him.

"Gigi ..." he mumbles in warning, catching my bottom lip between his teeth.

I slip my hand down the front of his body to help release the pressure. But as soon as my fingers skim the tented fabric of his jeans, he captures both of my wrists and slams my hands above my head.

My hips buck in response, but he tears our lips apart. When he rests his forehead against mine, we stare at each other with bated breath. I pant for air, my mind spiralling with a million emotions, but one stands out further than the rest.

"You can't expect me to let you go now," I whisper.

SIXTEEN

Gigi

Harry has always had a tendency to run when shit gets real, but after our kiss, he insisted I head home. And not to my parent's house – to his. He had business to deal with first, but he said Mia and Andy would keep me company since they'd bumped into each other after I fled.

As I pull up outside his house and head inside, Mia watches me accusingly. Her eyes run over my body as if she's trying to unveil all my truths with one look.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "'Saw someone I knew.' Bullshit!"

I bow my head, fighting a blush.

Despite her prying, I deny everything. But she knows. Of course she knows. And I reckon Andy must do too from the way he smirks at my bashfulness.

I spend the remainder of the afternoon avoiding all their questions, meaning I'm thoroughly distracted when I pick up my ringing phone without bothering to check the caller ID.

"Hello?" I greet, propping the device between my shoulder and my chin.

A moment of total silence passes from the other end.

"Gigi?"

I pause for a solid few seconds before I sigh. "Greg."

"Is now a good time to talk?"

Through the chaos of everything with Harry, Greg's desperation to talk had completely slipped my mind.

Despite avoiding the night of the fall-out as much as possible, even throughout my stay at his house, it was boiling beneath the surface. And with what's happened between me and Harry, it's about ready to explode right in our faces.

Turning to Mia, I gnaw at my bottom lip, and she tilts her head.

"It's Greg," I mouth, causing her eyes to roll.

Puffing air into my cheeks, I let it out with a huff. "I'm not sure I'm ready ..."

"Where are you? Are you with Mia? I'm just round the corner. I really think it's time we talk about this." The plea in his voice is evident. "I miss you."

Those three words make me grimace.

A conversation is the least he deserves after everything that's occurred. But if he's expecting this will be a pleasant and forgiving chat, he's got another think coming. It's about time to pour salt on the wound.

"Sure. We can meet," I say, causing Mia's eyes to go wide. She starts to shake her head vigorously. "I'll meet you for a coffee in town."

"I'll leave soon."

He hangs up, and Mia explodes just as I end the call.

"Are you crazy!" she shouts.

"A lot of people have thought that about me recently," I groan. "I've got to tell him at some point. I'd rather him hear it from me than from Harry."

She lets out a low whistle. "You've got a death wish."

I shrug. *Maybe I do.*

She stands up and shrugs on her jacket. "I've got to go anyway. My guy said he's got some information he wants us to see."

After saying goodbye to Andy, Mia and I walk towards our cars. "Let me know if you hear anything useful."

She nods and steps forwards, rubbing both her hands up and down my arms. "Be careful."

I chuckle, prying her hands off me. "It's only Greg."



The bell chimes above my head as I enter. I scan the coffee shop and my eyes land on Greg sitting in a chair beside the window. He stares out into the abyss, dark clouds hovering up above, concealing more rainfall.

It looks about ready to storm.

I take a moment to watch him silently while I hover by the front door. I thought I'd feel more guilty for ignoring his persistent attempts to talk, but there's not an ounce of remorse.

"Excuse me, miss," someone says, attempting to get past.

I apologise and move out of the customer's way, losing sight of Greg for a split second. When I look back, his eyes are already on me, and his neutral expression has stretched into a wide grin, beckoning me over.

I walk over, smiling politely. He rises from his chair to place a kiss on my cheek, and I fight a grimace as I sit beside him.

"Was that too much?" he asks. "I never know where we stand nowadays, and it just feels right to kiss you."

Sitting down, I hang the jacket off the back of my chair only to give myself time to hide the uncomfortable look on my face. The gesture will make him assume I'm relaxed, but in reality I don't plan on staying for long. When I turn back, my smile threatens to slip as he curls his hand above mine on the table.

"How have you been?"

"Good ... good," I say, busying my hands by tucking a stray piece of hair behind my ear as a subtle way to unlink myself from him. "Yourself?"

"I've been better ..." He sighs. "I've been desperate to talk to you, and you've just been so busy. Have you been staying with your parents?"

I shake my head. I haven't stayed there since our most recent fight, and I definitely don't plan on reconciling anytime soon. "I've been staying with Mia," I say effortlessly, ignoring the partial lie.

He nods, eyes scanning my features as if he's trying to decipher the truth in the statement. I'm momentarily distracted as the server comes over to place our drinks on the table, guilt creasing the corners of my eyes as I realise Greg already ordered for me.

"Listen ..." he says, clutching my hand again. "I've missed you so much, Gigi. I've been tearing myself apart since you left my place. It just feels so natural when you're around. Like you're meant to always be in the family ..."

Oh God!

I'm forced to bite the tip of my tongue. It can't continue like this. I have to tell him about Harry, and a lot quicker than originally anticipated.

"... and with how your parents have been treating you, I've been meaning to ask you—"

"I have something to tell you."

"I know it might seem like I'm coming on too harsh—"

"Greg."

"... and I know we're not technically together and everything—"

"I need to tell you something."

"The argument was silly. Let's forget about it—"

"Excuse me!"

"Let's be adults about this."

"You're not going to like what—"

"I think you should move in permanently."

"I kissed Harry!"

Time slows to half-speed. The coffee shop stills for a few seconds, the silence insinuating every customer heard my dirty confession. Yet the reality is, I can only hear Greg's silence.

If it wasn't for the faint movement in his jaw, I might have thought my words paralysed him.

As if time catches up with him in an instant and the noise escalates to a piercing pitch, his expression drops. It's not cold; it's arctic. And it's nothing short of terrifying.

"Say something," I plead.

Nothing.

A ringing phone plagues the silence between us, making my body jolt far too dramatically for something as simple as a ringtone. Greg whips his head towards me, grinding his teeth.

"Is that him?"

“Wh-what? No,” I say, panicked.

I dig my hand through my bag in search of my phone, trying to find the device so I can shut it off stat. When I’m able to silence the call through the lock button, I don’t bother checking the caller ID.

I’m not sure who it is, but Harry is the least of my suspicions.

Before I can look up from my bag, Greg has leaned over the table and wrapped his arm round my bicep, forcing my attention directly onto him. His fingers pry into my skin over my T-shirt.

“You’re hurting me.”

“Don’t get involved with him. I mean it, Gigi,” he says, his expression stern and his voice declaring no argument. “Whether he’s my fucking brother or not, take the advice. You do not want to go down that road—”

My phone starts ringing again, the shrill sound piercing the air between us. I ignore the call and let it go to voice mail, warily looking between Greg’s eyes. Despite the pain he’s inflicting, he makes no attempt to loosen his grip.

My voice drops low. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Then unease hits me like a thunderstorm. I quickly backtrack my eagerness to pry for information and force my arm from his grip. He’s purposely trying to pollute the air between Harry and me out of pure bitterness. I don’t entirely blame him, but I wish I’d been smart enough to see it coming.

I laugh under my breath. “You’re ridiculous.”

He leans forwards suddenly, and I fight the instinct to lean back in my chair. “I’ve been telling you since the moment you met him to stay the fuck away—”

That fucking phone rings again. I grunt in frustration, pulling it from my bag with ease this time. The caller ID shows Mia’s name. She can wait.

I hang up and place the phone face up on the table.

“It was Mia,” I tell him.

This time there’s no break between calls, and the screen instantly alights with her name. I’m not sure what pressures me to answer this one, but it’s as if it suddenly dawns on me this is the fourth time she’s called within a matter of minutes.

“What is it?” I ask her.

Her voice is frantic. “Where exactly are you? I need to see you. Now!”

“I’m with Greg, remember?”

“I don’t care! I’m heading home now. Meet me at my house in twenty minutes,” she says, hanging up barely a second later.

My eyes widen in surprise as I slowly lower the phone from my ear. “I think I have to go,” I say, rising to my feet and taking the jacket from off my chair.

Greg jumps to his feet almost simultaneously. “You can’t leave! We’ve only just started talking.”

When I start shrugging on my jacket, he takes the opportunity to reach over and grab my bicep again. My expression turns cold, and I feel the fury running through my veins.

“Get off me.”

“You have to listen—”

“Release your hand from me right now, otherwise I’ll scream.”

Greg’s face drops completely. His expression is almost as frightening as it was the moment I confessed to kissing his brother. He’s losing me, and it’s obvious in the way his grip loosens.

“Listen to what I said,” he warns. “I mean it.”



I storm through Mia’s front door with the anger of a raging bull. Liquid heat is coursing through my veins, and when my fists curl I fear I’m going to punch something. I now understand why people take up sports as a way of releasing some steam.

My quick entrance has Mia jumping up from her spot on the sofa. Her eyes scan me in concern, but I put up a hand to keep her quiet. I only have room for one angry thought, and Greg is ripping that small space into tatters, tearing it straight through the middle.

I sit on the edge of the sofa, running my hands through the front of my hair and tugging so hard at the root I’m convinced the action will pull some hair loose.

“I have something you should see. You’re not going to like it ...”

“What is it?” I snarl. “Because whatever you’re about to show me can’t make me feel any worse than I already do.”

Mia steps closer, standing just in front of my bent knees, and hands something to me. In my peripheral I can see it’s a small piece of paper resembling a photograph.

Keeping my head down, I ask, “What’s that?”

“Take it,” she encourages.

I huff, pushing the hair from my eyes as I take the photo from her.

It takes me a while to look down at what’s resting in my palms. But when my eyes finally focus on the contents of the image, my entire world shifts on its axis.

I grip the photo so hard it starts to crease under my harsh grip.

“Wh-where did you find this?”

She bows her head in silence. There’s no need for her to answer. I know she got it from the guy she’s in contact with. My hands are shaking by the time I bring the image closer to my face.

It’s an image of Jack.

He’s beaming from ear to ear, and his happiness radiates through the photograph. Maybe if I wasn’t so taken aback I’d embrace the warm feeling. But it’s quickly eradicated by another feeling I can’t quite place.

He holds the person close to his side, both of their arms slung round each other’s shoulders. If a stranger were to look at this photo, they’d instantly assume these two people are best friends.

I continue to stare, my chest constricting with each passing second as reality hits me like a tidal wave.

I suddenly know what that feeling is ...

I’m an outsider.

The photograph makes the person I know feel like a stranger ... because it’s a picture of my brother.

With Harry.

SEVENTEEN

Sigi

I have tunnel vision, and I'm seeing red.

That lying piece of shit!

I'm going to wring my hands round his neck and enjoy the moment I watch the life drain from his eyes. He had every opportunity to tell me, and he left me clueless every single time.

"Where are you going?" Mia calls out.

I ignore her and rush to my car, stuffing the photo into my back pocket as I get behind the steering wheel and frantically pull onto the street.

The drive to Harry's house isn't long, especially not when I put my foot down and exceed the speed limit. When I reach the quiet cul-de-sac the screech of my tyres no doubt draws attention from people residing in the quiet neighbourhood, but I fail to feel empathy. Exiting the car, I storm towards his front door, slamming my fists against the wood and refusing to stop until he allows me entry.

"I'm not messing around, Harry. Let me in!"

No answer.

I continue to bang my fists, passing the point of pain even when my hand starts to numb, pins and needles sparking in my fingers and knuckles.

When the door finally opens, Andy's standing there with confusion etched across his face. He grips the edge of the door as if to prevent me from coming inside and unleashing my fury, but I shove past him, in search of my victim.

"Where is he?" I demand.

Andy stays silent.

The audacity makes me scoff. I whip round to him, shoving an accusing finger at his chest.

"You're a liar!" I throw up the photo between the two of us and his face drains like an off switch. If panic were a scent, he'd be reeking of it.

How have I been so oblivious?

"I can explain."

The moment he raises his hands in front of me like a white flag of surrender I notice his gaze flickering over my shoulder. The action is so subtle it almost goes unnoticed, but when you're standing toe-to-toe with someone, nothing goes amiss. I follow his gaze and see light creeping in through the slightly ajar door, the one that's always conveniently locked ...

"I wouldn't do that—"

I charge towards it, ready to throw the door open and confront Harry no matter what's behind it. But my pursuit is cut short when he exits at the same time.

Without restraint I start to pummel my fists against his chest.

"You're." *Hit.* "A." *Hit.* "Fucking." *Hit.* "Liar!" *Hit.*

His body becomes the ideal outlet for my rage, and I unleash every lie, every inch of hurt, through each beating. It only lasts for a moment before he catches my wrists in his large hands.

"I hate you," I whisper. "You made me feel like an idiot. All this time."

His nostrils flare and his hands flex round my wrists. "Slap me. Hit me. Fucking stab me in the back – I don't care. But do not blame yourself for the secrets I've kept from you."

Tears fill my waterline as if he literally backhanded me. A stray tear threatens to spill onto my cheek, and I watch the moment he fights whether or not to watch it fall.

I tear my hands from him. "Explain yourself. No more lies – I mean it."

He flinches. "I'll explain everything soon. Just not right now."

“Are you kidding me—? No. NO. You’re going to tell me everything. I’m not waiting a moment longer.”

“Get in the car. I’ll take you home,” he says, trying to steer me back to the front door.

I shake my head, grinding my feet into the ground. “I’ve got my own car, and I’m not staying at home.”

He steps closer, his height extremely intimidating. “Do you want this conversation or not?”

“I want you to explain yourself. Right now.”

“And I said I’m not doing it here.” His eyes flare. “Get. In. The car, Gigi.”

My chest falls with each heavy exhale, my heart seizing in the middle of it. I don’t want to back down first, but I know the longer I try to stand my ground, the longer I’ll be seeking answers. And I don’t know how much fight I have left in me.

Harry jerks his chin, waiting for me to move.

I storm out of the house past Andy, who stands sheepishly in the hallway. The breeze is unwelcome against my face as it pulls attention to the parts of my cheeks that are stained with tears. Harry’s G-Wagon is unlocked, so I climb inside. I tug the sleeves of my T-shirt over my fists to clear my eyes.

I’m getting answers today even if I hate what I hear.

No man will *ever* play me for a fool again.

I sit up straighter, lifting my chin, as Harry gets into the seat beside me. I try to act unbothered by his presence, but when the oh-so familiar scent washes over me, I almost find myself reliving the moment it clung to my skin with a deadly kiss.

He starts up the engine and pulls onto the road in silence. His fingers fist the steering wheel, taking the turning for the motorway.

“Where are you taking us?”

His eyes stay focused on the road. “You’ll see.”



I’m convinced this man may kill me ...

We’ve been driving for more than thirty minutes in silence, racing down the motorway. I suspect there’s no destination, but then he finally takes a turn down a quiet slip road.

“Harry?” I ask, concerned.

“We’re almost there.”

We drive for a few more minutes before he parks beside a service station on the same lot as an old-fashioned diner. A large woods stands adjacent to us, and that lick of doubt about death suddenly increases dramatically. I’m no criminal, but this would be the ideal place to hide a body.

He unbuckles his seatbelt and says, “Come on. Let’s go.”

I whip my head towards him. “How do I know you won’t kill me?”

He fights a smirk and shuts the door, saying nothing.

I watch from the comfort of the car as he heads towards the opening of the woods, hands pushed deep into his jeans pockets.

Fuck him. I know what he’s doing. My desperation for answers will outweigh any doubt I have, meaning I have no better choice but to follow him.

With a grunt, I unclip my seatbelt and get out of the car, falling into step beside him as he takes a leisurely stroll into the forest like some hitchhiker.

“Why couldn’t we have had this conversation at your house? Or in your car at least?” I ask, hating that I’m breaking the silence first.

“I didn’t think you’d want Andy hearing the moment everything you thought you ever knew was a total lie,” he says. “And as for the car ... I couldn’t risk it not being tapped.”

Tapped?

What, like, with a hearing device?

Doubt clawing at my insides, I ask hesitantly, “You were never a photographer, were you?”

He turns to me, a smile taunting his mouth. “What was it that gave me away?”

I’m not sure what gave it away first. It was probably the multiple wounds on his body ... or perhaps the burn mark on his neck. But alas, I say, “No photographer owns a Harley *and* a G-Wagon.”

“Money can’t buy happiness, but it does buy cars, princess.”

We walk deeper into the forest, nothing but the crunch of woodland beneath our feet and the trees far above us swaying in the wind. The peacefulness is welcoming against my mind, calming me momentarily – before Harry’s eyes find mine.

“Jack and I used to come here a lot,” he says. “I know you want to hear everything, and I’ll tell you what you want to know,

but you'll never look at me the same way again."

I force my face away.

Everything I thought I knew was a total lie ... and I'll never look at him the same way again ...? I can't possibly think of what would lead to such a drastic reaction.

Unless he was involved in Jack's death. That would be unforgivable.

Harry pauses, and I slow to a stop beside him, turning to him over my shoulder. We've stopped beside a picnic bench that's rotted over time, directly underneath a sunspot leaking light through the canopy of trees.

"Can I selfishly ask for one thing from you first before I tell you?"

"What's that?"

"A kiss."

I blink. "Why?"

"I want to kiss you one last time with innocence on your tongue. I want to feel you one last time without hatred polluting your lungs. I want to kiss you unforgivingly and selfishly," he says. "Because as soon as I tell you my secrets, you'll never want me to kiss you again."

My heart races.

Maybe I could entertain the idea. One last time.

I daringly take a few steps towards him, until the tips of my shoes touch the front of his. "That's very selfish," I murmur.

Without an ounce of hesitation, he cups the back of my neck in his strong palm and brings me forwards to eradicate the distance between us. My eyes squeeze closed as hot lips crash against mine with urgency. As if I've been memorising the feel of them my entire life, my own move against his with perfect precision.

Butterflies swarm in the pit of my stomach in their hundreds, and my fight to control the kiss is overpowered by his dominating tongue. He fists the back of my neck, his fingers weaving into the strands of my hair and tugging it back to arch my head further. It's hot and breathless, and he kisses with desperation, sharing his apology through his lips.

He kisses like it'll be our last.

I soak up the feel of him, clutching the front of his T-shirt in my palms and feeling his heart thump against his chest. It's strong and powerful, and I want to bottle the feeling, but before I let the emotion overwhelm me, I pull back.

His forehead meets mine and he runs his tongue over his lower lip, savouring the taste. My breathing stills, and I force myself to take a step back before I succumb to the feeling. The severity of the situation starts to pool in my chest with the afterglow of his kiss.

My hands jittery with nerves, I walk over to the picnic table, sitting on the edge of the rotting wooden bench and leaning back against my palms. I grip it hard beneath my hands, welcoming the splinters that prick my skin.

"How did he die?" I ask, diving in without restraint.

Keeping my head down, I focus on Harry's shoes, but he stands incredibly still.

"Are you sure ...?"

"Just tell me."

"He was shot. It was an accident that couldn't have been helped."

Breathe.

Just breathe.

"So, what, he was murdered by some freak with a gun? Became a target?"

"No."

I force my head up. "Then what?"

His jaw tightens, and he diverts his attention elsewhere momentarily as if he's trying to find the words. "He was caught in a crossfire."

A crossfire? Like a damn shoot-out? Surely, that's not possible. How on earth would Harry know—?

My heart stops.

"You were there ... weren't you?"

His throat constricts as he says, "No. I wasn't there."

"Then how do you know?"

"Because I know the people who were involved."

When I rear my head back, he says, "Call me selfish, but I wasn't prepared to exploit your innocence by inviting you into this world."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

He walks forwards, forcing my chin up with his thumb and forefinger. He tilts his head, the pain increasing across his features when he says, "The reality was that we were just two boys who sold our souls to provide for our families."

"Harry ..."

"Jack was part of the most notorious crime group in the city."

A ... crime group?

The idea seems ridiculous but completely believable all the same. Not only would that make him a criminal ... but it would also mean Harry is one too.

The realisation feels akin to being hit in the chest by a bullet, yet to suffer the pain.

One brooding thought overtakes my common sense. "Are you still part of this ... group?"

He pauses for a beat but finally nods. "It's more of a society. We all partake in organised crime."

My voice is quiet as I ask, "What kind of crime?"

His hand stays on my chin, fingers stretching to cup my cheek. "Everything you can think of."

"Everything?" My voice cracks.

"To a limit. We aren't involved in the skin trade or anything like that. We have some morals through the madness."

I don't even realise my jaw has dropped until Harry prompts it closed with a quick tilt of my chin. I shake my head, struggling to make sense of it all.

He pleads, "Tell me what you're thinking."

"Why would you want to do all that?"

He clears his throat audibly. "We all have our reasons for joining, but Jack and I were family-orientated more than anything."

I try to ignore the sting in my chest.

"I had to pay a mortgage. I had Greg to look after. Jack had his reasons, but money never seemed to be the end goal for him."

The ache in my heart is quickly overtaken by bitterness. "Were you never going to tell me? This only came about because I forced it out of you!"

"Forgive me for trying to protect you," he argues. "If I'm being real with you, princess, I would've probably fought to keep it a secret for your whole existence. Maybe I should've been more careful, but I'm certainly not fucking sorry for keeping this from you."

I force my gaze away from him, struggling to see the good in his statement.

Why do all the men in my life feel they can make my decisions for me? While Harry's statement has crumbs of good intentions, I should be the ruler of my own fate.

"Does my family know?" I ask.

He lowers his head and then shakes it.

"Then who covered it up?"

It's the first time Harry's calm exterior has cracked. His fingers flex against my cheek, and I pull his hand from my face, encouraging him to speak.

"Our boss."

I drop his hand like an electric shock and ask, "Why would he do that?"

"To avoid drawing suspicion."

This man ... this *stranger* covered up his death. My family and I were forced to bury and mourn a body that wasn't even my brother.

While I should be raging at the realisation, relief overpowers everything. The reality that my suspicions over the past few years were worthwhile sends tears to my eyes.

"How do I know everything you've just told me is the truth?"

Harry stuffs his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "You don't. But trust me when I say, I'm the only person alive who will give you the truth."

"Why have you been so open with me?"

"Something ... happened ... which meant you were destined to find out sooner or later."

"What something?"

"I think that's enough team-building for one day, don't you?"

I sigh, feeling as if a weight has been partially lifted off my shoulders ... but one part sticks. Something that suggests all of this is the beginning of something far greater.

"Will you tell me about him? About Jack ...?"

"One day."

EIGHTEEN

Sigi

Everything overwhelms me at once, and my heart rate amps like a rocket preparing for take-off.

Jack was killed in a crossfire. He and Harry were – *are* – criminals.

Everything starts to fit together in my brain like a jigsaw puzzle, all the unmatched pieces finally finding their place. All the crime. All the blood.

“How have I been so stupid?” I ask, dropping my head in my hands.

Through the thick of it all, certain factors stand out with perfect clarity in my brain ...

Partaking in crimes in exchange for being one of the most untouchable people in London.

Thriving off endless cash so you never have to work a retail job again.

Never having to be afraid you’re the victim as you’re the victimiser.

A question claws at me relentlessly, and I can barely restrain myself. “How do you join this society?”

Harry whips his head towards me. “Did you not listen to a word I told you?”

Right, the worry about the car being tapped. I forgot.

“I was just asking a question.”

His eyes narrow to slits. “What’s your fixation with it anyway?”

“It’s pretty damn important.” I scoff. “What is it with you still keeping secrets from me? What else are you hiding from me, Harry?”

He keeps his eyes fixed on the road ahead. But even from this angle I can see his body tensing up, his knuckles tightening on the steering wheel as he tries to pull himself back together.

“Listen. You just need—shit!” He ducks down in his seat as something in the rear-view mirror captures his attention.

A police car starts gaining speed alongside us. Their lights blare a fluorescent red-and-blue as they flash their hazards, signalling for Harry to stop the vehicle.

“Pull over. They’re probably just pulling you over for a broken taillight or something.”

He scoffs as if the suggestion is utterly hilarious. Leaning over the centre console, his arm briefly brushes my leg as he pulls two black baseball caps out of the glove compartment. Hiding his hair beneath one, he gestures for me to take the other.

“You’re going to want to wear this, and hold onto the seat.”

I take it with hesitation. “Please don’t tell me you’re going to try to outrun the fucking police.”

“All right. I won’t tell you that.” He smirks. There’s a brief pause before he says, “I’m going to need you to hold on tight.”

“Oh God!”

Bracing myself, I press one palm flat against the dashboard as my other grips the chair beside me. But when Harry lowers a gear to speed up, nothing can prepare me for the way my body is thrown back into the seat and the air is swept from my chest. When he suddenly pulls the wheel to the side, I shriek as the tyres skid across the dirt road, and he races onto the slip road leading to the motorway.

Harry slams his foot down, cutting in front of another vehicle that blares its horn when he pulls into the fast lane. The G-Wagon gains speed at an impressive rate, but the police car behind us is fast on our tail.

“For fuck’s sake!” Harry curses, throwing a look over his shoulder before making a dash to the other lane.

I slam my hand against the door as my body is chucked to the side. “You need to pull over! They’re going to catch us, and I don’t want to spend the night in jail!”

“Bit late for that ... You’re witness to a murder, princess.”

“What!” I shout. “You murdered someone!”

He throws his head to the side, facing me. “I thought you knew!”

“I had my suspicions, but I didn’t think you’d murder a man!”

There's a moment of pause as Harry's hands turn white round the steering wheel. "It wasn't anything he didn't deserve anyway."

Oh ... OH. *That* guy.

He really did kill him ... *for me?*

What. The. Fuck.

"Are you mad!" I shout, coming to my senses.

The car jolts to the side, swerving between lanes, as we narrowly miss a car while continuing to drive at an excessive speed. My back is thrown against the door, and I clutch onto the handle above the window. Come to think of it, I've never known what those things are called.

"I told you to leave me alone," he barks.

"You're really blaming this on me right now?" I throw back.

I catch a quick movement in my peripheral, and my lungs seize as a second police car creeps up alongside Harry's blind spot.

"One on your left!"

Harry nods. He checks the mirrors, swerving through motorists on the fast road. The tyres screech, and he turns the wheel erratically, yet with perfect flexibility ... just like he's done this before.

As Harry swerves into another lane, he slams on his brakes as a car in front of us also swerves across. I scream, squeezing my eyes shut as the adrenaline pumping through my body starts to make my arms shake.

"Put your hands on the dashboard," he demands.

I pry my eyes open, my teeth starting to jitter.

His eyes rake over me with concern. "Hands flat against the dash, Gigi. Stretch your arms and put your head down. Now!"

I do as he says immediately.

Hands flat against the dash.

Arms straight.

Head down.

Breathe. Just breathe.

I stare at the footwell, arriving at the thought today was an awful day to wear a skirt. I focus on the goose bumps flooding my skin to distract myself. Hair falls down the sides of my face and blocks my vision, but I can feel every movement of the wheel. Every car we're passing. Every bit of speed in every breath I take.

"I'm going to pull off the road in about ten seconds. Brace yourself."

Ten ...

I nod, digging my fingernails into the dash instinctively.

... nine ... eight ... seven ...

Breathe. Just breathe.

... six ... five ... four ...

Harry lowers to third gear.

... three ... two ... one ...

The tyres' high-pitched shriek pierces my ears as Harry swerves across three lanes all at once.

Tyres squeal.

Horns blare.

Sirens blast.

My body tries forcing itself to the side with the gravity of the movement, but I fight to remain still. My toes curl in my shoes as if it'll help keep me rooted in place. Struggling to catch my breath, and to steady my racing heart, I keep my head down.

Minutes pass before Harry finally slows to a stop. When I feel brave enough to raise my head, I see he's parked on a backstreet far from civilisation. A bridge sits overhead, rumbling with heavy traffic and concealing our vehicle as sirens continue to wail in the distance.

He yanks on the gear stick, steadying the car. Barely waiting a second, Harry cups my cheeks between his strong palms and turns me to face him.

"Look at me. Gigi, look at me. We're okay."

When I meet Harry's eyes, they're alert and scanning every part of me as adrenaline courses through my veins, allowing me the sense I can conquer anything.

The windows of the car start to fog from our heavy breathing.

My skin beads with sweat, and the back of my neck heats with anticipation.

I blink, and Harry's gaze transforms from panicked to ravenous, his eyes practically black from the lust overwhelming them. The power sets my body on fire.

His eyes drop to a stray bead of sweat trickling from my jaw, down the curve of my neck and then to the valley of my breasts.

“Gigi ...” he whispers.

Fuck ... my ... life.

Like magnets we meet in the middle of the car, hands gripping one another simultaneously. He kisses me as if I’m air and he desperately needs to breathe.

His hands run over every part of me that he was ever afraid to touch, and I moan at the mere thought of us having to make up for lost time.

When I tug at his hair the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard falls from his lips. So I do it again, eliciting the same reaction. I clutch the back of his head as his lips fall to my chest, scattering kisses across the tops of my breasts.

He wraps one arm round the curve of my back, pulling me against his chest as he hauls us over to my seat. His hands move down over the length of my body, soaking up the curve of my side, before he clicks a button that sends my seat flying backwards. I pull him between my legs and spread my thighs to allow him between them.

“Harry ...” I moan his name in a breathless pant. “Please.”

A growl rumbles in his chest as his hips meet mine. He grinds between my legs, his cock fighting hard against his jeans. Grabbing the hem of my T-shirt, he pulls it down, along with my bra, bringing his mouth to my nipple.

“I’ll never be able to let you go if I do,” he mumbles against the skin, grazing his teeth across the peak.

I throw my head back against the headrest, my back arching from the seat to encourage his touch. “Stop talking and just do it.”

“If I have you—”

“Just shut up.”

He brings his hands up under the flimsy material of my skirt, running his touch across my underwear. The cotton is drenched, and I whine at the contact. There’s no need to prepare me, but he slips the fabric to the side and pushes in a finger, curling it inside of me.

“Fuck,” he says, slipping in a second and pushing it knuckles-deep. “You’re fucking soaking.”

My cheeks flare with heat, and a whimper gets stuck on my tongue as he starts pumping his fingers inside. I fumble with his belt buckle, desperate to free him from the restraints. I pull the jeans down over his ass, along with his boxers, and my mouth waters at the sight of him. I want to taste him desperately, but I might just explode if he doesn’t fuck me right now. He’s massive, and as my eyes rake over the length of him I consider how it’ll even fit.

“It’ll fit,” he says with a cocky smirk, as if he read my mind. “Are you on birth control?”

I nod, whimpering as he retracts his fingers and pushes my underwear to the side, pressing the tip of his cock to my entrance. He pushes inside in one hard thrust, and I’m forced to stretch to maximum capacity to take all of him.

His forehead meets my shoulder and he growls my name, teeth nipping at the skin. He pulls out completely before thrusting in hard again, and the butterflies in my stomach erupt in chaos at the feeling of being so full. My fingers pierce his shoulders through the fabric of his T-shirt, clinging onto him for dear life.

Desperate not to let this euphoria end, I raise my hips up to meet his and encourage his thrusts deeper.

“Don’t,” he growls, pinning me down by my neck. “I won’t last another minute if you do shit like that.”

I’m panting so hard I hardly recall what he says. His hand remains on my neck, his other hand running over my ass, my upper thigh, and then to my knee, where he pushes it against my chest, building up a quicker rhythm as he pounds his cock into me deeper.

I can hardly stand it. My body seizes with pleasure and my nipples tighten to the point of pain. He notices the reaction on my chest and drops his head, taking the peak into his mouth again and toying with it between his teeth.

Harry’s hand drops down to my clit and he rubs at the spot with friction and precision. I’m a mess beneath him.

My hands grab at the headrest and I squeeze my eyes shut, gasping, “J-just like that!”

“Look at me when I fuck you.” I open my eyes as his forehead meets mine. “I want this sight to be forever etched into your brain, princess.”

“Oh God.”

“Even he won’t save you from me, Gigi.”

My eyes slam shut again as my orgasm hits me like a tidal wave. Spots of colour burst across my vision. I feel like I’ve just hit a new realm as my body curves off the seat and Harry wraps his arm round me, pumping into me faster through the heat of it all and increasing the pleasure tenfold.

His thrusts pick up – he isn’t far behind – before he releases himself into me. I rest my head back, breathless, watching the moment the pleasure overwhelms his face. It’s a sight I want etched into my brain for the rest of my life.

When he finally recovers, he watches me with strained breath, and the reality of our actions slowly creeps into the crevices of my mind, nicking at the pleasure still flushing my body.

“I hate you,” I say on a heavy exhale.

Catching his breath, he runs his tongue over his lower lip, smirks, and then says, “I know.”



Certain the police are no longer on our tail, Harry drops me back to his house. There's no point in him dropping me home or to Mia's place considering my car is on his driveway. I thought he'd be pushing me to leave, but he encouraged me to stay. And I'm not entirely used to this feeling with him.

He tells me to keep myself busy while he makes a few phone calls. While I now have a little more insight into what that could possibly mean, it still doesn't ease my suspicions he's still withholding information from me.

When he walks into his bedroom for privacy during his call, I take the opportunity to freshen myself up in the bathroom. My reflection in the mirror stills me. I look like I've been well and truly fucked. My hair is chaotic, and my lips are plump from being so thoroughly kissed. But there's also a relief that no longer sits on my shoulders, like I can visibly see the weight that's been lifted.

When I exit the bathroom I can still hear Harry's voice quietly echoing through the bedroom door. Walking the opposite way down the hall, I stop instinctively outside of the godforsaken room that's been eating away at my dreams and keeping me up at night.

It's not that I don't trust Harry ... there's just a deep-rooted feeling I get around him that I'm aching to discover more of.

I try my luck with turning the door handle and almost freeze as it audibly unlocks. With anticipation I twist it in my palm. And when I catch sight of what's behind it, I freeze.

A scene akin to something from an underground warehouse glares right in my face. Screens as far as the eye can see flicker with moving pictures. I'm forced to squint my eyes shut, raising my arm above my line of vision to accommodate the harsh light.

I force myself to blink as I take in what's in front of me. Hesitantly lowering my arm, I hover my gaze between endless broadcast screens. There's so much footage my brain can't keep up. And it's all ... live. Every street in London. Every small alleyway. Every tourist hotspot stands right in front of me.

Buttons sit underneath the screens on a desk that spreads the length of the four walls. I couldn't tell you what any of them mean, but my eyes stall on every one as if I could. I push on a soundbar and one of the screens starts to pick up with sound.

There's not an inch of the city that's not being recorded ...

They can see *everything*.

Forcing the lump in my throat down with a heavy swallow, I turn to the only part of the wall that's not filled with an abundance of technology. Something similar to a detective board sits on the wall, strands of thread connecting information about high-end department stores, jewellery brands, sales figures, times, and even dates. One is even dated the first night I met Harry.

Hovering my finger over one of the pieces of thread, I whisper, "What is this ...?"

"Not photography, that's for sure."

I look to the side to find Harry leaning against the doorframe. His ankles are crossed and he leans his shoulder against the wood, arms folded over his chest with awe-striking composure, acting as if I haven't just walked into a new world.

"Not even for a hobby?" I ask, my voice low.

"Photography was always a passion, but it wasn't what I was good at," he says, eyes flicking over the abundance of screens and then back to me. "Have I scared you yet?"

He steps forwards, trying to appear threatening, but I straighten my spine as he backs me into the wall. Flickers of light burst across one side of his face from the moving screens, highlighting his features. It casts a shadow on the other side, hiding half his face in darkness.

Maybe lust overwhelms all my other emotions, or perhaps I'm more intrigued by this idea than I should be, but I bite my lower lip and say, "No."

"You should be," he says, his height crowding my body.

"I know."

I hook my finger round the hem of his T-shirt and pull his face to mine. Our lips meet, and I'm already moving my mouth against his as if I've spent far too long away from it. Before I know it, Harry's belt buckle is open and my underwear is pushed to the side as he presses his cock to my entrance, slipping inside of me.

He lifts my thigh round his hip, fisting the flesh of my ass. My eyes blur with the light of the screens, Harry focusing in my vision as he fucks me deeper. Bursts of pleasure pool in my stomach, bringing me to the conclusion I'm done trying to uncover Harry's secrets. This is a new motive in itself.

I'm drunk on the feeling of him, and I welcome the intoxication deep in my bones.

NINETEEN

Harry

Forgive me, Gigi.

TWENTY

Harry

“That’s everything – all of it. Every single penny I owe you,” I spit.

I throw the tatty duffel bag down onto the mahogany desk. It lands a little harder than I’d like, earning me a menacing stare that snaps my spine straight.

Remain calm, Harry. You’re almost out of this shitshow.

Richard rounds his desk and sits back casually in the leather seat while I stand on the other side, refusing to take a seat of my own. His ass is in that fucking chair whenever I’m at this dodgy building, but there’s never a thread out of place. I’m convinced he replaces it with one just as ugly every week. He must have at least a dozen throughout the many locations.

Today we’ve chosen the office in South London, disguised in a derelict building to avoid suspicion.

“What about the interest?” he asks.

My knuckles crunch as I tighten them at my sides. “I’ve paid the interest.”

“Don’t humour me, Harry. I have no interest in your petty cash.”

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

I force down the harsh lump in my throat. I’m fairly certain I catch his snarl as he watches my Adam’s apple move with the motion.

I dream about the day my fist will meet his evil fucking face often. But the day I hit him will be the day I die with a bullet to the skull.

Richard – that’s what I usually call him since “Boss” sounds too entitled – spares a side glance inside the open bag. His eyes look over the stacks of cash wrapped neatly in their thousands with rubber bands.

His disinterest is deafening.

He leans back in his chair with a huff, and I’m not sure why it angers me so much. I’ve worked my ass off to get this money to him within the deadline, and the fucker won’t even check it’s all there.

My intentions were always clear: provide Greg with the life our pathetic father couldn’t give him, pay back the money I owe my boss, and try to get the fuck out. Nothing has changed. Sure, it’s taken me a few years to get to this point, but I’ve been looking forward to this moment since my initiation more than seven years ago.

“I don’t understand ...”

Richard cocks his head in amusement as if I should see the answer written clearly across his pale fucking forehead.

“What do you mean—?”

He waves his hand in dismissal, causing me to shut my mouth. Richard nods in the direction of the double doors behind me, an evil grin spreading across the lower half of his face as he forces my attention over my shoulder.

“Bring in the straggler,” he says.

Instantly feeling dread creep up in my stomach, I suck in a breath through my teeth as the doors burst open. Both guards stomp into the room dragging a girl kicking and screaming by her upper arms before they dispose of her on the floor like trash.

She’s forcefully chucked to her knees, and it takes everything in me not to run over to her. Her brown hair whips across her face, hiding her features. But as she looks up, her piercing brown eyes shine painstakingly bright through the loose strands that blow against her shaking pink lips.

Fuck.

Fuck.

FUCK.

What have you done, baby?

“Do you know this girl?”

“H-Harry,” Gigi pleads desperately.

GIGI

"I don't like liars," the man prompts as Harry's silence fills the room.

"Yes," he finally grits.

I shouldn't have fucking followed him. That's all that I can think of. Now I'm going to die at the hands of some man in an abandoned building in the back end of the city where my body will never be recovered. All because I was enticed by that secret room at Harry's house yesterday, and I wanted to see what he was up to when he snuck off this morning.

Rounding his desk towards me, the suited man smiles in satisfaction and approaches with heavy footsteps. I recognise him, but I can't place his face for the life of me. I'm still in a bundle on the floor, hiding the shakiness of my hands by claspings them hard together. When I meet his powerful stare he offers me his palm.

I spare a worrying look at Harry, who appears just as concerned by the gesture. The hand moves again, closer towards me, urging me to take it. With a gulp I hold onto the man's palm as I carefully rise to my feet.

"Gigi, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"H-how do you know my name?"

"Outside the nightclub, sweetheart ... don't you remember?" he asks, cocking his head.

Of course! I knew I recognised him from somewhere. At the time I thought he was far from intimidating, but now his voice sends a shiver down my spine and prowls at the back of my neck like a possessive ghost.

I don't realise my lips have parted with shock until the man's forefinger knocks them back into place by tilting my chin upwards.

"Don't touch her," Harry growls, taking a step forwards.

"I wouldn't take a step closer if I were you," the man warns.

When I chance a look over the man's shoulder at Harry, he looks terrified. A hand moves towards my hairline, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Besides ... you owe me interest."

"Not her," Harry chokes out, his voice breaking. "Don't bring her into this."

The man rubs strands of my hair between his fingertips then replaces the hair behind my ear. "She's already too far in."

I pry my eyes back open. The man drops his hand from my hair and turns, approaching his desk again as he takes deliberately slow steps towards his office chair. He speaks with his back turned.

"Anyway, she can make her own decisions, but I'd recognise that fire in a Thomas anywhere."

On instinct I step forwards, moving several paces without even realising. Harry moves quickly once the man's back is turned, gripping my elbow, but I immediately shrug him off.

"You knew Jack?" I rush out.

As if this whole ordeal is humorous to him, the man drops to his chair with immaculate posture, throwing his head back as a menacing chuckle fills the air. He shakes his head in disbelief, and I meet his gaze again.

"Well, of course. Jack Thomas was one of my finest recruits." His fingers fumble in the top drawer of his desk, retrieving a cigar. He places it between his lips, the end turning a bright orange once he lights it and takes a drag. "It's really such a tragedy, what happened to him." He releases a puff of smoke. "Harry will spare you the details. He was Jack's right-hand man on the day."

What?

I'm not sure which emotion fires through my body first, but it leaves me utterly speechless. I turn my attention back to Harry. Panic floods his face, and he immediately shakes his head – faster by the second as his eyes shift between the two of us.

"That's not true—"

"Yes, it is!" the man interjects. "You were the only one with a firearm that day, and the bullet wound spoke volumes. You, Andy, and Jack always fought for top rank. It was merely an accident waiting to happen."

Andy's in on this too?

"You fucking—" Harry growls.

"ENOUGH!" the man shouts, slamming his palm on the desk.

I jump in terror, releasing a shriek out of fear. Turning my gaze to the man, I can barely make out his softening expression through my tearful vision.

"Sorry you saw me lose my temper, Gigi," he huffs, disposing of the cigar in the ashtray. Standing, he fixes his suit jacket and says, "Harry has interest to pay." He plasters on a cruel smile to compose himself. "And you've arrived with impeccable timing."

"Leave her alone—"

"You utter one more word out of your mouth, I'll cut out your fucking tongue."

The threat is enough for Harry to tear his eyes away and dig his gaze mindlessly into the floor.

Tears start to spill down my cheeks. I'm not sure why I'm crying. Maybe it's the realisation Harry is a fucking liar or the fact such a graphic threat was spoken as simply as a dinner order.

“Considering I don’t let stragglers leave this building alive, see this as ... an opportunity.”

I turn back to the man.

“We have an opening – here, with us.”

“I won’t tell anyone anything,” I say with surprising confidence.

“I don’t doubt that, dear, but you’ve heard too much.”

My eyes find Harry, but he’s still staring at the same mark on the carpet. While his mouth is closed, I spot the tension in his jaw that sharpens his features.

“We’ll be in touch,” the man concludes, turning his back to me.

Wait – that’s it?

He starts to busy himself with paperwork on the desk as if this interaction didn’t just turn my entire world upside down. I open my mouth to protest, but he speaks before I have a chance.

“That’ll be all, Miss Thomas.”



My lungs are burning with fire. I can feel every bit of emotion quickly rising in my throat as if I’ll have to spit it all over the pavement, which is flooded with heavy rain. Water splatters against my tear-stained cheeks, and I squeeze my arms closer to my chest to help shield me from the downpour. As I tread further away I shake my head in utter disbelief, trying to create more distance between myself and whatever shitshow just occurred behind me.

“Gigi, wait!”

“Leave me alone!”

My body is whipped round as a strong grip clasps the back of my arm. I’m forced to face Harry, whose stare is intense, dark, and void of sympathy.

“Get the fuck off me.”

“You have to listen to me. I’ll explain everything to you, I swear. But you have to promise me you won’t go to the police.”

Is he being serious right now? Out of everything that’s unfolded in the past hour, he’s worried about being fucking arrested.

“Watch me,” I challenge.

I shove my arm away, ridding myself of his harsh grip. But before I can turn he grips my neck in a possessive hold. My back is thrown into the side of the concrete building we just exited, knocking the air out of me.

Stars dance across my vision, and I claw at the hand blocking my airways. He’s not holding tight enough to stop the air from reaching my lungs, but I attack his grip regardless. The skin breaks under my nails, but Harry acts unfazed, anger pooling in his emerald eyes.

“Fucking listen to me,” he warns, threatening to put pressure on the tips of his fingers. “You don’t know these people like I do. You can’t tell anyone what just happened in there. This isn’t a fucking game. You’re part of this now.”

“Y-you killed Jack,” I choke, tears pricking the backs of my eyes.

He scoffs. “Do you actually believe that?”

“Were you there? Tell me the truth.”

There’s a breath of painful silence. “Yes.”

“Then you lied to me! That’s all you do. You just fucking lie.”

I try to step round him, but his grip on my neck doesn’t falter. His hands shake with resistance from not inflicting pain. He’s not angry; he’s *raging*.

“We were on a job. Things quickly took a turn. I didn’t have enough time. Jack got in the way—”

“Is this why you fucked me?”

“What? No! Fuck—”

“You fucked the little sister of your former best mate – a co-worker – for, what, payback?”

Harry finally releases my throat, more offended by this accusation than anything.

“It wasn’t like that,” he growls.

“What else are you lying about? After all this time I deserve the truth.”

He turns his head from me. “I can’t ... Not yet.”

“You can’t,” I repeat tonelessly.

After everything, this is what I get?

The tears burn my eyes, and I nod, pathetically accepting his shitty excuse. I attempt to step round him, but on instinct he blocks my path.

I meet his stare. “I swear to God, Harry, if you don’t explain yourself right now, then I’m done. I’ll walk away and never speak to you again.”

He tears his face away as if he’s in a silent battle with himself. But his silence clearly indicates I’m not worth whatever dirty truth he’s keeping hidden under his tongue.

“What? Are you about to confess to breaking into my house all those months back?” I ask bitterly.

His head whips towards me as I cock mine to the side.

“I think it’s time you stop with all the lying. Don’t you?”

He speaks with a pinched expression as he says, “I didn’t think you knew.”

“I’m not a fucking idiot, Harry. Of course I knew it was you. I’ve known for a while.”

He takes a shocked step backwards, and then pleads, “Gigi ...”

“Let me go.”

This time he doesn’t stop me.

TWENTY-ONE

Sigi

Every minute turns into every hour. Every hour morphs into every day. Every week. Every month. And so on.

Nowadays I find myself not remembering what I did the day before, let alone last week. Every day is just the same. I watch the sun pour through the bedroom windows for hours until it starts to set again, only leaving my room to pee and eat.

Mia is concerned for me. I've been staying at her parents' house, and she hasn't said it outright, but I know she's worried. She knocked on my door every morning and every night like clockwork for the first few weeks, asking if I needed anything. After my hundredth "no" she stopped offering her help.

Greg has even tried visiting, but every time, I shout through the door for him to leave me alone, chucking the duvet back over my head to remain in my protective bubble.

I'd stay here forever if I could.

I'm not even sure how long it's been since the events with Harry unfolded. When I last counted it had been a few weeks, but it's been at least double that now.

The one time Mia managed to drag me out of the house to the coffee shop I drowned myself in an oversized hoodie, hiding from the sun. It's safe to say she hasn't taken me outside since.

The more I come to terms with it ... I'm not even mad about the fact Harry was in debt.

And do I think he had something to do with Jack's death?

I ...

I don't know.

Do I think he outright killed him? No!

Do I think there's more to the story? Absolutely.

I'm pissed off with the lies. I gave him every opportunity to come clean, and he didn't. End of story.

And what makes things even worse: he hasn't called. I'm not sure what I expected. Grovelling, maybe. An apology. But nada.

Truth be told, he's acting pretty guilty.

I haven't told Mia the extent of my troubles. From her perspective, Harry was just ignoring me and we broke up – not that we were ever really together in the first place.

What a fucked-up situation.

"What, he hasn't contacted you at all?" she asks now, her voice coming across muffled through the duvet.

"Not once."

"Do you want me to call Andy? He can talk—"

"No!" I shout, pulling the sheets off my head fast.

I must've been seconds away from suffocating in the bundle, because taking a breath feels so satisfying. I imagine this is the equivalent of being free to breathe after holding your breath underwater for a long time.

Mia dry-heaves. "Honey, you smell awful."

"I feel it," I say, bringing my knees to my chest.

She leans forwards and cups her palm round my knee. "Tell me what happened."

So I do.

I tell her everything – well, almost everything. I tell her about Harry being in debt with some man. I tell her how he kept his cards hidden when I asked him to explain himself. I tell her about Jack – about Harry knowing him – but I exclude all the criminal lingo. I also fail to mention he said he'd keep an eye out for me.

So, all in all ... I tell her half the story.

"Wait." She holds up her hand. "So you were right. His death really was covered up."

I shrug.

I haven't really lingered on that detail. It seems insignificant now, which is weird beyond belief since I've dedicated nearly half a decade of my life to uncovering the truth.

"This calls for a celebration!" Mia declares, holding up a finger.

Is she joking?

I stare at her as if she's mad, watching her bare feet run through my open door and down the stairs. I make out the sound of her opening and then closing the fridge. And then glassware. She runs back in with some sort of alcoholic liquid, pouring herself a glass.

"You only bought one glass," I state.

She nods and takes a sip. "You need the bottle, my love."

Only Mia would think learning the truth about my brother's death is cause for celebration. Still, whatever plan she had to improve my spirits clearly worked. Our talk has definitely taken my mind off things – even if for a fleeting moment.

As thoughts of Harry start to creep in, I snatch the bottle's neck and take a swig. The sting against my throat makes my eyes water.

"Let's go out."

I shake my head. "I can't—"

"Don't start with that again. Let's go out ... like old times."

After much reluctance I finally obey.

And I find out one thing ...

Getting out of the house really helps.

PART 2

"I must be gone and lie, or stay and die."
– William Shakespeare

TWENTY-TWO

Bigi

Ten months later

My mother would tell you there's no better way to spend spring than in Paris. I'd tell you it's getting damn boring listening to the same bollocks every year.

While securing a job in the city means I earn more money, it also means I *spend* significantly more – especially at the damn pub. After reevaluating my life choices and receiving a kick up the ass from my parents, I stepped into the big wide world of business, and now I work for a marketing company in London. Which does mean I'm back to living with dear old Mum and Dad.

My colleagues and I opted for the local boozer in Surrey this evening. While it's only supposed to be a casual affair, the women insisted we dress ridiculously fancy as if it would be hilarious. I've opted for a black bodycon dress with a feather trim and a pair of stiletto heels. I *hate* heels. But I *love* the dress. The longest part reaches my shin, and the shortest part stops at my upper thigh. There's a decent turnout: my boss Wendy, her husband, the women on my desk, a few people from the social department, and Jamie.

Jamie is my boyfriend. Well, so he tells everyone. We work at different companies in the city, but our lunch breaks collided one afternoon at the local coffee shop. He just popped into my life one day, like he was conveniently placed, and we've been seeing each other ever since. I'm not ready to put a label on it yet, but after confirming we weren't seeing other people, he thought we should declare we were seeing each other. So I let him.

He's a good friend, and company when I need him to be. It was Mia's idea initially – she knew I hadn't recovered from what happened with Harry. Jamie's tall, dark, and handsome. Everything I should want in a man. But he's not ... *him*.

Get under someone to get over someone else, she told me.

As talk of the latest scandal with the Beckhams steals my attention, I turn to the women gossiping beside me. Jamie checks his watch and stands, dusting himself off to rid the crumbs that aren't there.

I turn to him briefly and ask, "Is everything okay?"

"I have to head home. I've got work tomorrow." He shrugs on his jacket and leans down to kiss my forehead. "I love you."

I smile.

There's silence until he leaves. And like a ticking time bomb, the group explodes into chaos.

"Gurrl ..." one woman, Abigail, slams her hand on the table. She looks like nothing short of a disco ball in her sequin dress. Her glass rattles with her eagerness to speak. "I don't know how much longer you can go on without saying it back."

Everyone around our table nods in unison.

I sigh, knowing they're right.

I've only told one man I love him in my entire life. And I still do. I'll always love Greg in a brotherly kind of way. Not that I can remember the last time the pair of us spoke. My distance from St. James men clearly stretched further than just Harry. Since it's been months. *Several* months. I don't want to throw those three words around to just anyone. You can't take back that raw part of yourself once you've shared your heart with someone. And God knows I've had enough trust issues in my lifetime.

Disliking the topic of conversation, I accuse Abigail of flirting with Jeremy in the mailroom. She blushes red like a tomato and raises her hands in surrender when people start overloading her with questions.

She drunkenly spills her adoration for him. "It's the bow tie."

After a few more colleague romance confessions, the pub starts clearing out as the night draws in, and we're all ready to leave. A shiver coats my body the moment I step outside, an unwelcome breeze covering my cheeks. No matter how much the sun shines in England, the nights will always be freezing.

Shrugging on my coat, I feel the tip of my nose going pink in colour, and I hug my arms close to my chest. Abigail comes close to my side, linking arms with me.

She teases, “I’m going to get you back for embarrassing me like that, you little bitch.”

I laugh.

I’m the designated driver this evening for Abi and a couple of others. As we make our way towards the car park we huddle together like a girl group for warmth. Head bowed, I blow hot air onto my ice-cold fingertips.

With my attention elsewhere, I walk into something hard. The sudden impact causes me to stumble over my clumsy feet. My arm slips from Abigail’s, and I instinctively reach out, catching myself on the figure in front of me.

“I’m so sorry,” the person says.

That voice ...

“It’s okay.” I shake my head. “I wasn’t looking.”

When I raise my eyes it feels like the world ceases to spin. It’s like a movie scene, with both of us standing in silence, staring.

The man who plagues my dreams with memories and possibilities stands directly before me. As he steadies me back on my feet the feel of his hands sends a shockwave through me, encouraging my limbs to work again.

“Harry,” I say, winded.

“Gigi, are you going to introduce us?” a girl asks from behind me.

Her statement comes through muffled as I’m busy taking in Harry’s appearance. I know my lips are parted since I can see the breath leaving my mouth and dancing in the cold breeze.

He looks so beautiful.

His stubble has at least a few days’ worth of growth, and his eyes are as piercing as ever. His hair is concealed by a dark beanie, hidden from the wind.

He clears his throat. “I’m Harry.”

Abigail asks, “And how do you two know each other?”

Harry tilts his chin, looking down into my eyes. I know he’s saving me the embarrassment of answering the question.

“Old friends,” I respond with a genuine smile. “He’s Greg’s brother.”

Multiple shocked expressions pass throughout the group, and one person echoes a, “Really!”

“Never liked him. You could have done better,” Abigail says.

I whip my head towards her, and she smirks like a Cheshire cat.

Harry chuckles under his breath, and I’m thankful he doesn’t see the moment the blush creeps onto my cheeks.

Every promise that I’d stay away from this man burns to ash at the mere sight of him. I suddenly can’t remember why I chose to distance myself. But an inkling of doubt must linger ... because I step away.

While it doesn’t feel like the right thing to do, I straighten my spine, smile, and then say, “I hope you’re doing okay. It was great to see you.”

No matter how much he tries to mask it, an expression spreads across his features that impales me right in the gut. His grin is convincing, but I see straight through it to the twinge of regret that I might have chosen not to walk away.

“Have a lovely evening, ladies,” he says, his eyes lingering on me. “It’s great to see you, Gigi.”

My name rolls off his lips effortlessly. I envy how easy it is for him to speak it without faltering. How he manages to say my name without any breathlessness. Do I really mean nothing to him anymore?

He’s moved on, the voice in my head says. It’s been months.

“See you around.”

Forcing my feet, I walk away from him. But the minute I feel the tightness in my chest, the physical distance I’ve put between us, I know instantly I’ve made the wrong decision.

If I let him go now, I fear I’ll never get the fulfilment of having the answers I’ve always craved. Maybe I can entertain the idea. Just once. And then work on my recovery for good.

With my mind fixated elsewhere, Abi hangs back a few paces from the others. Gesturing over her shoulder, she whispers, “Go back to him. We’ll get a cab home.”

“Are you sure?”

She hugs me. “Of course. Text me when you get home.”

“I will,” I say, returning her embrace. “Do me a favour ... don’t tell Jamie.”

“My lips are sealed, Missy.”

She catches up to the girls, explaining they’re getting a taxi home. Thankfully, they’re too drunk to ask questions.

I wait a moment, inhaling a deep breath before I exhale and head back in the opposite direction.

“Harry!” I call out. “Wait up.”

If he didn’t hear me calling his name, he most definitely hears the clatter of my heels against the pavement as I catch up to him. He slows to a stop, chancing a look over his shoulder like he’s convinced I have company.

“Can I walk with you?” I ask. “Where are you heading?”

“To my car.”

“How convenient ... So was I.”

Thankfully, he doesn't pick apart the lie. God, I want to smother him with questions, but I don't know where to start. How is he? What's he been up to? Has he felt the loss as significantly as I have? I worry that if I start my onslaught of questions I'll never stop.

“What were you doing out this evening?” he asks curiously.

“Just out with some friends from work,” I say, purposely ignoring any mention of Jamie. “What about you?”

He references the Canon strapped around his neck. “Just taking some photos.”

“Ah ...” I say, gnawing at the inside of my cheek. “You still do all that stuff?”

My question is overloaded with meaning. Photography was always a façade to cover up his life within the criminal underworld – I haven't forgotten that. And by the stiffness of his body, he hasn't forgotten telling me about it either.

He clears his throat audibly. “It pays the bills.”

So he is still involved ...

During the silence I linger over the idea, and I'm strangely relieved he's still the same person as before. Nothing's changed. The thought should scare me away ... but I've always been intrigued by the danger he exudes.

Pain plagues the quiet, the balls of my feet scorching with fire as my cheap and flimsy heels blister my skin.

“Just hold on a second,” I say, grasping onto Harry's forearm to steady myself. “I can't last another second in these.”

I slip the heel off my foot, sighing with satisfaction as I meet the cold pavement.

“You're not having my shoes, if that's the real reason you're over here.”

“And to think you said you were never a gentleman.”

He pauses before I triumphantly pull off the second.

“I didn't kill Jack, y'know.”

Struck for air, I stare at him in silence, meeting his eye, strappy heels swinging off my forefinger. I teeter on both feet, wondering if I misheard him.

I've thought about this possibility countless times through the endless months away from him. It's the only thing I know for certain through the cloudy haze of lies and secrets he keeps hidden. I'm not sure what happened to my brother, but something in my bones says Harry didn't murder him.

“I know ...” I say, my voice barely a whisper. “I think I always knew.”

He holds my gaze again. I beg myself to turn away, to tear my eyes from his without the fear it'll be the last time I see them. I was always naturally pulled to Harry, and it seems that particularly haunting emotion still hasn't changed.

My grip holds his arm hostage, and his eyes flicker down to my hand. Apologising quickly, I remove it and stabilise myself on the ground.

When we finally reach his G-Wagon the silence turns awkward. We stand there quietly as we wait for the other to speak, the only sound from Harry's keys as he passes them between his palms.

“Do you like my dress?” I ask randomly, unprepared to say goodbye.

He chuckles, the sound far from sweet. “You don't want to know what I think.”

“Why?”

“Because that last gentlemanly instinct you think I have will vanish after you hear the stuff I want to do to you.”

Holy fuck. Where did this side of Harry come from?

His gaze is dark, and the look in his eyes is pure hunger.

“Why are you really here?” he asks, cutting to the chase like he didn't just set my world afloat. His eyes return to their normal hue at an impressive speed.

Taking a second to collect my thoughts, I steady myself. My mind is screwed, yet the words come out with surprising ease. I've awaited this confrontation for months.

“You never called. You never even tried to reach out. You left me. Right when I needed you the most. I knew you'd have it in you to let me come to peace with it all, but when I reached out ... you never answered.” My voice wavers. “Why?”

His hands flex at his sides and he wipes a palm down his face, stopping at the stubble on his jaw. “I didn't deserve you.”

I step forwards. “That was not your decision to make.”

Voice strained, he says, “Don't come any closer. Don't make me beg.”

“Why?”

“Because I can't fucking resist you when you're around.” His gaze clashes with mine. “Even now, after all this time, I can't think straight. You send all my morals to ash, and I'm trying to give you a better life ... I tried for *months* to keep this from you, no matter whether you thought my intentions were good. I thought if I stayed away—”

“But the guy said—”

“I know what he said.” He looks to the ground and shakes his head. “I don't understand any of it, and it fucking terrifies me. I can only pray he's changed his mind.”

This is the first time Harry has admitted to me how he feels. The first time my sanity should be cured that the feelings aren't

one-sided. But the protruding thought through it all is fear. Fear that I won't see him again. Fear that he's pushing me away. *Again.*

"You deserve a good man. A gentleman. Christ, what would your mother say if you brought me home, told her what I do for a living? You deserve a man ... You deserve a man like Greg."

He's not wrong about the gentlemen part. My parents worship the ground Jamie walks on. My stomach sinks momentarily at the thought of him. He's sweet and no doubt a gentleman. But I don't *burn* for him.

He would give me the world if I asked for it, but I don't want the world.

I want the moon and the stars.

Shaking my head, I say, "I don't want Greg."

I want you.

Harry turns his face away.

"You left me. That was a really fucked-up thing to do, and I didn't deserve it."

"You asked me to let you go."

"When have you ever been one to follow the rules?" I throw back. "Don't make excuses because you were too scared to admit your true feelings."

"Trust me, princess, I am many things. *Scared* is not one of them when it comes to my feelings for you."

"Then tell me ... I dare you."

His eyes flare with surprise, but his tongue runs over his lower lip at the prospect. "Why don't I show you?"

I step forwards, surprising myself with my own confidence. "You're not man enough."

Harry huffs a laugh as if I'll regret pushing his buttons.

"I'd pin you to this car." He grips my hips, spins me around, and presses my front flat against the metal of the G-Wagon. "I'd run my hands up these delicious thighs," he says, following through on his threat, stopping dangerously close to my underwear. "Then I'd devour you like a man starved."

Ho. Ly. Shit.

"Then do it," I say, far too short-winded for someone trying to remain composed.

The thought of Harry going down on me in public makes my insides burn with a fire I will never admit to out loud. But internally I know I'm prepared to screw every bit of feminism within me and let this man bury himself between my legs as if he lives there.

Just when I think it might be a possibility, he leans forwards, pressing his lips dangerously close to my ear. "But I'm not going to. Because as soon as I get a taste of you, I won't be able to let you go. You got away from me once and I'm not letting it happen again."

TWENTY-THREE

Harry

Jamie fucking Callahan. London socialite. Only child. Son of Demi and Stewart Callahan. Lives in Chelsea. Drives a Porsche. Sounds like a twat. Looks like a pretentious fucking wanker.

He has a clear record, which took all of two minutes to find out, along with his address. But those are all the reasons why he's fucking perfect for her. And the only reason I retracted the thought about slitting his throat. Catching sight of Gigi after all those months was a shock to the system, but seeing a man with his hands on her sparked a jealous streak I certainly wasn't expecting.

I truly thought I'd rid all feelings for her. And then, when I saw her, they returned like wildfire. I did a full one-eighty before I had a chance to discover what that weird sensation meant ... until the toxic little devil bumped into me outside the pub and then followed me to my car.

Of course she didn't mention Jamie. Why would she? That's why I had to get my hands on her and make sure she still felt something between us. I regret the decision now my cock is rock-solid and I'm sitting in my car outside her family home after warning her to leave me alone ...

It's the first time I've truly considered not fighting the temptation of her. While that's hard to believe, it's not because seeing her with someone else has made me fucking ravenous ... but because she still wants me.

She knows everything. Close to everything. *Well, no, not really.* But her desire for darkness is still unmistakable. And who am I to keep denying it? Even if I'm convinced she can still protect her sanity.

Richard has been hush-hush about the matter, which I can't wrap my head around, but I'm not a fucking fool either. I'm no idiot – I know he has his own plans for her. And the unease is sharp enough to make my bones crack. But until then, there's no reason for me to hold back.

Lord knows she craves the darkness, and perhaps it's too late for me to save her. I see it in the depths of her eyes – the intrigue. I saw it in Jack too. And that Thomas fire is fucking lethal if they don't get their own way.

After I crane my neck and hear the satisfying crack, I climb out of my car and head to her front door. Despite everything I said about her mother potentially hating me, I knock on the door with confidence.

"One moment!" Gigi calls out through the door, fiddling with the lock.

Fuck, I've missed that voice.

When the handle twists and she opens the door, the scent of her rose petal body wash is something akin to pure fucking euphoria. While my eyes are close to rolling into the back of my head, her whole body freezes.

"You miss me?" With both hands pushed deep into my pockets, I rock back on the heels of my shoes before daring a step forwards. Leaving no room for question, I say, "Let me in."

I thought she was beautiful when she was mad, but she's fucking breath-taking when she's caught off-guard.

"What are you doing here?" she hisses under her breath, stopping my advances as I try to walk through the front door.

Oh, baby. I'm coming in.

I wet my lips, taking my time as I watch her eyes drop to the movement. "I decided I'm done watching you walk away from me."

She shakes her head like she's trying to get herself out of a trance. As if I'm not standing on her parents' doorstep like I have a death wish.

"You need to leave."

"We're not interested. Sorry!" someone calls from inside – her mother, I assume.

Gigi's pupils increase with panic. As she places both hands on my chest, attempting to push me out the door, I grip her wrists and turn us both. Toeing the door shut with my foot, I press her against the wall in the hallway. She's still pulling herself together by the time I've snuck a peak at her family, flickers of television reflecting off their faces from where they lounge on

the sofa.

“Who was that?” a man’s voice calls out.

Tilting my head down to meet her state, my eyes darken in warning.

“N-no one, Dad. It must have been a prank.”

“Ugh,” her mother responds. “I hope they didn’t step on my hydrangeas.”

“Hydrangeas?” I mouth silently. She’s amused until I ask, “Where’s your bedroom?”

Her cheeks flush with pink and her breathing picks up, eyes darting up the staircase and back to me. I’ve army-crawled through enough situations to get to my intended destination, but someone will have to bloody shoot me before I even consider doing that in this house. And I’ve definitely met bigger threats than her mother. That’s why I crouch down, wrap my arms around the back of Gigi’s legs, and throw her over my shoulder like some deranged kidnapper.

I stride past the open living space without raising suspicion from those in the room. Climbing up the stairs, Gigi pounds her fists into my upper back, insisting I put her down.

“Which room?” I ask.

“Shouldn’t you know ... since you’ve broken in here before?”

I hear the bite in her tone, and if she’s trying to provoke me, it’s fucking working. When we reach her room I put her down on the floor, wasting no time in stalking towards her. Her eyes flicker over to the open door in panic.

“Door open,” I order.

“Are you crazy?”

“No, baby. I’m fucking obsessed. There’s a difference.”

With parted lips, she stutters and backs up several paces the closer I approach, her neck craning as she looks up at me. Reaching the bed, the backs of her knees hit the mattress, and she falls back against it when I stand just inches from her.

I’ve spent enough time fighting my urges for the little brat.

“Harry, I have—”

“You have a what?” I taunt. “You have a boyfriend?”

Her face stills. Those pretty brown eyes speak a thousand words. She didn’t expect me to know. Maybe she isn’t as corrupt as I thought since her first thought wasn’t that I’d sniff the fucker out before I even spoke to her.

“You weren’t being very loyal when you were asking me to kiss that pretty pussy, now, were you?”

Her expression changes instantly. She watches me warily, like I’m unrecognisable from the man who fought to resist her just hours ago. She’s still wearing the cocktail dress from this evening, and thank fuck, because she looks sensational in it. She looks incredible in anything, actually, but this dress will forever hold a special place within me for reigniting my passion for her.

I lower myself onto my knees, bunch the material around her hips, and decide to worship the fabric along with her.

The underwear can go, however.

When I part her creamy thighs and bring my head closer to her aching heat, I wrap my finger around the lace, pulling it down her legs with ease. Her upper body freezes with realisation, but she lifts her ass with surprising grace, the actions completely contradicting each other. If she doesn’t want this, I’ll stop. I’m not going down on the pussy that smells like her sweet body wash unless she wants me to.

“Are you sure you want this?” I ask, kissing the inside of her knee.

Nerves jumbled, she nibbles on her lower lip as my kiss drags down her inner thighs.

“Because if you don’t, I’ll stop.”

“Please ...”

“Please stop?”

“No.”

“Please, what? Use your words, baby.”

“I want it. Please.”

At hearing her desperation, it takes me a fraction of a second to realise I don’t want the possibility of any fucker ruining this moment for her – for us. I extend my leg and kick the door shut before lowering my mouth to her sex.

It’s as soft as fucking silk and as sweet as the ripest strawberry. My tongue runs over her slit, gathering her arousal on my tongue before I focus my attention on her clit.

“Harry,” Gigi moans, fisting the sheets beside her head.

Holy fuck.

She threads her nails through my hair, teasing my scalp. My dick jerks with awareness, and it swells painfully against the fabric of my jeans as she whimpers the moniker. Sliding my hands up her legs, I tug them over my shoulders with urgency and kneel up higher, pulling her closer to my mouth as her whole lower body rises off the bed.

“I’ve thought about this pussy every fucking day since you’ve been gone,” I mumble against her.

Wrapping my arms around her legs, I press my fingers deep into the insides of her thighs to keep her still and stop her

squirming. Flicking my tongue against her clit, I groan at the sweet taste and drag my teeth over the sensitive area.

If I wasn't an impatient bastard I'd sink my fingers into her and relish the feel of her pulsing around the digits, but I'm selfish and I want my cock to be the thing stretching her.

Her body starts to coil, toes curling, breath stuttering, and I know she's close. I pull my mouth from her and lower her back to the bed.

Before she's returned from her comedown I've already unbuckled my belt, slipped down my boxers and jeans, pulled off my T-shirt by the back of the neck, and pressed the tip of my cock to her entrance. She grips onto my shoulders, fingernails piercing the skin as I sink myself inside of her.

Pure. Fucking. Bliss.

Catching me off-guard, she snatches my mouth with hers and runs her tongue against mine with urgency, her moans a stuttering mess against me. I tug her bottom lip between my teeth, piercing the flesh as I thrust forwards into her.

"Fuck me like you're a criminal," she tells me.

Fuck my life.

My hands start to shake with adrenaline, palms sweating as I lose composure and pound my cock into her without remorse. Her eyes squeeze shut, sweat beading around the top of her chest as her body becomes pure fucking submissive to me.

She stutters my name again, knocking me out of whatever trance I was in. I grip her hips between my hands, flipping us over so she's straddling my hips. Pieces of brunette hair cover the sides of her face, sticking to the sweat there.

"Ride my cock," I tell her, digging my fingers into her sides. "Ride it in a way that would make your boyfriend proud, baby."

Something flickers across her eyes and she blinks it away as I bring my hips up to meet hers. She whimpers, a strand of hair hovering above her plump, shaky lips as she grinds herself down against me.

"Does he fuck you better than I do, baby? Tell me."

"Harry, I—"

"Does his cock feel as good as mine?"

She stutters, bringing her hips down onto my cock like she was fucking made for me, hitting it at all the angles that make me want to rip her apart. Her tits are confined to the dress, struggling to move, and I suddenly decide I hate the black piece of fabric. Ripping the dress at the top of the chest, I hum in satisfaction as her breasts bounce out.

Her nails pierce my shoulder blades as I grip her in my palms, kneading the flesh before I raise my head and tug at her erect nipple with my teeth. Through my haze I realise I didn't ask her about fucking birth control.

Her breath stutters, her walls squeezing around my cock like a vice, signalling she's close. "Harry, I'm—"

Gripping her hips between my hands, I order, "Grab the headboard."

I slip out of her, forcing her hips up to my face before she even has a chance to catch her breath. Gigi catches herself on the headboard and brings her cunt to my mouth like a magnet. The connection has her throwing her head back.

Grinding against my mouth, she chases her high as I start beating my hand on my cock behind her. Her nails scrape the headboard, no doubt leaving imprints, while her other hand fists the hair on top of my head, threading it between her fingertips. I'm panting against her clit, groaning into it as I centre my lips around the area, sucking harshly.

"Harry—!"

"Come for me."

So she does.

Her body coils, back arching hard, and I wrap my arm around her out of fear she'll snap. I'm not far behind, and when I reach my peak, ribbons of cum dance up her back.

She presses her cheek against the headboard, chest heaving. I stare up at her spent and breathless, like an angel descended from heaven. I suddenly wish I could stop time. I want to relish this feeling and never let her go.

But time catches up with us, and I find myself smoothing back her stray pieces of brunette hair as she climbs off me, pulling her dress off her sticky skin and climbing under the covers. She drapes the bedsheet haphazardly over her body, covering her breasts but exposing her thighs. I've concealed myself with my boxers and jeans, and I run my fingertip up and down the length of her thigh.

It feels fucking surreal to have her like this. I've spent the best part of a year trying to keep away from her out of fear she'll be corrupted. But maybe Richard really has no intentions for her. Maybe he's forgotten her invitation still stands.

After I exposed the truth to her, her intrigue to join stuck with me, so it shouldn't shock me as she randomly says, "You never did tell me how you join."

But it fucking does.

I steady my breathing and tell her, "Whatever you're thinking – don't. Promise me you won't even entertain the idea."

With her eyes hovering over my face, I take her wrist, exposing the sensitive flesh as I bring it to my mouth and place a gentle kiss against it. She smiles at the touch, but her eyes seem distracted as she says, "I promise."

"Tell me what you're thinking," I murmur, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

"I thought that man said I was ... interest."

Her statement causes my heart to pound.

“I can only pray he’s forgotten about it. Since you left that day, it’s never been mentioned.”

“Why do you seem so scared of him?”

Choosing my words carefully, I say, “He may be just a man, but there are people who will avenge him before you’ve even thought about the idea. You kill him and you have an army of people to end you. He’s untouchable, and we’re just his minions. Going against what he wants would mean fighting a battle we’re bound to lose.”

She nods her head, running over the thought.

During the moment of distraction I gaze around her bedroom, taking in the abundance of fluffy pillows, dainty furniture, and clothes strewn haphazardly over a desk chair. My eyes land on a photo frame on her desk, and I feel a pang of guilt when I spot the decade-old photo of her and her brother.

There’s still so much she doesn’t know.

While he’s on my mind, I ask, “How long had you known it was me in your brother’s room?”

The question has been eating away at me since she announced the revelation after meeting Richard for the first time. She’d never said anything, never given any indication that she knew it was me. Never even asked.

She pulls the covers further up her chest. “From the moment I saw you, I think. But it came to fruition when I saw the photo of you two together. I refused to think about it, hoping you’d come clean on your own ... but you never did.”

My chest strains with a sharp inhale. “I was after ... something. Sworn to secrecy.”

She nods slowly, and I imagine she’s going to press me further on the subject. Instead she backtracks and says, “Tell me about the society.”

Relaxed, she brings her knees to her chest, resting her cheek against her kneecap and watching me as I speak.

“We rob the biggest chains across London and Europe. We steal art. Eradicate criminals our boss wants us to. Assassinate when necessary. It’s a small price to pay for the luxuries.”

“Why were there loads of girls’ clothes at your house when I met you?” she asks, her voice wavering. “Did you have a girlfriend or something?”

I smirk, enjoying the bashfulness that spreads to her cheeks. “No, princess. I don’t have a girlfriend. They’re there ... just in case.”

She’ll find out more about those one day – I’m sure of it.

She visibly swallows, and rather than investigating the topic further, she asks, “How do you know the people you’re killing are bad?”

“We don’t all the time. But being in the field long enough, you get the sense there are good and bad people around. More often than not, the world seems to be littered with the ugly.”

Gigi brings her hand forwards, running her finger over the tattooed skin on my chest. I shiver at the touch as she says, “And what about Greg? He’s in that small little house, and your house isn’t ...”

“Luxury doesn’t always mean money, designer clothes, and a three-story mansion. I’m not sure what Greg told you, but I think he rebelled so much as a teenager just to spite me in my choice of job. Wiping a record clean every time isn’t cheap. Petty crimes he was caught for eventually piled up. I paid my way to give him a normal life. Ended up in debt with my boss and in a job that wasn’t traditional to pay the bills.”

“I didn’t know about any of that,” she admits. “I’m so sorry he was that way and you were left paying for the damages.”

I shrug, unfazed. I made use of the luxuries even if it wasn’t from my own pocket. Though there were times when I had more money than sense while Greg was going through a dry spell, hence the flash cars.

“Everyone has their reasons for staying. Andy enjoys materialistic things. He’d rake in so much money only to blow it on a mad night in Vegas or buy a yacht he’d never use. Once, the both of us went on a three-month bender across the Philippines, getting fucked on cheap beer and stale cider. It was pretty fun at the time but a death sentence when we came home to our responsibilities.” I chuckle to myself at the memory.

When I catch Gigi’s gaze, her eyes are alight with intrigue. The tell in her irises is eagerness beyond a shadow of a doubt. It’s as if the words are written across her forehead, momentary bliss as she envisions being able to spend money freely and never having to live with her parents again. My face drops almost instantly, but I have her word, her promise, that she won’t entertain the idea.

There’s an echo of movement out in the hallway that makes Gigi’s body stiffen.

“I should go ...” I say, grabbing my T-shirt and pulling it on over my torso. When I turn back round her eyes have widened, causing me to ask, “Are you okay?”

She hesitates, but finally nods.

I assume she’s fearful about someone catching us. Assuring her, I say, “I’ll take the window.”

As I approach my escape route her bare feet pad against the floor, the bedsheet held onto the front of her naked body and trailing behind her like a goddamn ballgown. At that moment I declare it’s the most exquisite dress on the planet if it’s on her.

Hauling my leg out the window, I turn back to her and catch her cheek against the palm of my hand, tugging her back in my

direction. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes – just go! I don’t want them seeing you.”

I haul my other leg out, gripping the edge of the windowpane as she says, “This is like Romeo and Juliet ... you sneaking out my window and all.”

Before parting from her for the night, I ask, “Which film is your favourite?”

“The 1996 version, of course.”

“Baz Luhrmann, right?” Her smile spreads knowingly. “With the angel and the knight at the party.”

Gigi holds the bedsheet closer to her chest, her cheeks a light shade of pink.

“If I called for an angel, would you come to me, princess?”

“Only if you would be my knight, Harry.”

I smile even though the motion stings. “I’m not sure if I deserve a title so honourable.”

The only part of their romance remotely similar to our story is the fact it ends in tragedy.

TWENTY-FOUR

Gigi

You could say I've been on a high since Harry stumbled back into my life. The sex was remarkable, but his presence alone has made me see the world through rose-tinted lenses.

I'm practically dancing around my bedroom when reality impales me like a blunt sword.

Jamie.

Never would I have thought it was in me to be a cheater, but Harry raises the darkest parts of me to the surface. I ache to chase the thrill alongside him despite the danger that lies ahead. No matter how dark his world is, if he's living in it, I will only ever see the light.

Things between me and Jamie have been difficult since the beginning. I haven't even told him I love him, for goodness' sake. And it's been months. There's no denying this breakup needs to happen pronto – even if mine and Harry's sexy scandal is only limited to one night.

When I call, Jamie insists I meet him on his lunch break. It's only after I've arrived at the coffee shop near his office that I realise how fitting my outfit is. Dark jeans, a black tank top, my leather jacket – I look like Death arriving at my own funeral as I approach Jamie looking suave in his business suit. It's designer and probably costs more than my car. Because of course it does.

He arrives before I do and stands up when I approach, ushering me into a chair, asking if I want anything to drink. I shake my head and say, "Thank you, but this will only be brief."

"Okay ..." he says, nodding his head.

"I think it's time we break up."

He pauses for a beat and then replies, "Okay."

"Okay?" I ask, confused. "That's it?"

He shrugs. "You were never one hundred percent into this relationship."

"That's not true." I shake my head, trying to defend myself.

He scoffs. "We haven't had sex. The only few times we've ever done anything you've moaned another guy's name."

My cheeks redden with embarrassment, and I feel like someone just took sandpaper to my stomach. Strangely, though, while I thought I'd be riddled with guilt, all I feel is relief. This turned out a lot easier than expected.

"Friends?" I ask with a smile.

"Probably not."

Okay then ...

Jamie's childishness isn't enough to dampen my happy mood. While he would tell you otherwise, we decide to remain civil for each other's sake, but the likelihood of us ever bumping into each other is minuscule since we both work in the city surrounded by thousands of people. As we say our goodbyes, I go in for a hug and he offers a handshake, which ends up in one of those weird embarrassing embraces where there's a hand wedged between the two of us.

For some unknown reason, the immediate next step after breaking up with my boyfriend is to turn up on the doorstep of the man I cheated on him with. The stupidity of my actions is quickly replaced with lust as Harry opens his front door with a towel hanging low on his waist.

"Gigi?" he says, surprised to see me. "I didn't know you were coming over."

I gulp down the sensation immediately as I race to find his eyes. When he catches my wandering stare, his flirtation comes back with surprising speed.

"Would you prefer if I took the towel off? Honestly, I don't mind."

I fight my blush. "I don't mean to be a bother."

He pulls me inside by my hip, shutting the door behind me. "You're most certainly not a bother."

I try desperately to ignore the feeling of him pressed against me, but the attempt is futile. “Are you sure you don’t mind me being here?”

“I have to head out later, but I’m free for a few hours. Let me get changed, and then we’ll talk.” His eyes run over me. “Unless you want to talk in the shower.”

I swat his chest. “Get ready.”

As he walks back to the bathroom bare-chested, with that crisp white towel hanging low on his hips, I try to remind myself I’m a strong, independent woman who is most certainly *not* on the rebound. But whatever sexual fantasy keeps my mind afloat quickly evaporates as I catch the scar at the nape of his neck.

I noticed it last night while he was putting his clothes back on. I saw it once before, close to a year ago, when I was cleaning up the wound on his chest. But seeing it in the daylight evokes a completely new reaction. And whatever it is, it burns unforgivingly at my core.

I take a seat on the bar-stool and wait around for him. I twist my thumbs, taking in the surroundings. His home hasn’t changed since I was last here. No new furniture has been added to the greyscale landscape.

The desire to snoop around quickly creeps in, but I shove it down at lightning speed. If there’s any chance of the two of us working out, there has to be no more secrecy.

Something that sounds oddly like a ringtone lowers my guard, and I spot Harry’s phone buzzing on the kitchen counter. The screen lights up, but the phone is too far away to spot who’s calling.

The screen finally goes blank.

As I bring my attention to my chipped nails, a shiver courses down my spine at the memory of how they were damaged. When Harry demanded I grab the headboard—

The phone starts ringing again.

“Harry!” I call out.

He doesn’t respond.

Like an endless cycle I watch the phone ring again. And again. It isn’t until the fourth ring that I finally decide to investigate, approaching the device cautiously, as if it’s a ticking time bomb. I’m only able to catch the end of the call, but there’s no caller ID to tell me who’s desperate to get hold of him.

On demand it starts up again. In a split-second decision, I quickly answer the phone, placing it to my ear.

“You pick up the phone when I call or you’ll fucking regret it. The whole thing’s a bust. We need you here. NOW!” The speaker crackles with the man’s raised voice.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

This was a mistake.

I’m seconds away from hanging up completely, but I suspect that’ll only anger this man more.

“H-hello?” I stutter. “I’m really, really sorry, but Harry is in the shower. I’ll get him right away.”

The line cuts to silence, and for a second I’m convinced they’ve hung up.

“I’m Gigi,” I tell him as if that’ll help to rectify my wrongdoing.

“Thomas,” he finishes for me. When a sharp breath whooshes out of me, he chuckles to himself, the sound menacing. “Don’t be so surprised, sweetheart. Don’t you remember me? We met about a year ago.”

I nod slowly, the memories that kept me up at night for months assaulting me suddenly.

“You’re the interest.”

I clutch the phone warily. “I didn’t mean to answer.”

“Put Harry on,” he insists, ignoring my plea for forgiveness.

His calm voice makes my skin crawl, but I nod, clutching the device as I approach the bathroom door. I knock on the wood, and Harry comes out a few seconds later. He’s pulling a T-shirt on, smiling as he says, “I was just coming out—”

With sealed lips I pass the phone over to him. He looks down at the object like it’s completely alien. Cautiously taking it from my hand, he forces a swallow and his spine stiffens as he places it to his ear. As he walks into the kitchen, I watch him run a hand through his damp, tousled hair, keeping his voice hushed.

“I was in the shower ... No, she doesn’t ... I’m not sure ...”

I can’t see Harry’s face, but I imagine he’s furious.

“No,” he finally grits. He turns to me slowly, his expression taking my breath away. He’s not furious – he’s petrified. “Yes, Boss. I’ll let her know.”

He hangs up.

His calmness terrifies me to the core, his movements so slow and precise it’s as if I’m watching the scene play out in slow motion. When he places the phone on the counter with the agileness of antique china, I bravely speak up.

“Harry?”

He keeps his head down.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I—”

Before I know it, he storms over and grips my shoulders with his tight palms. He shakes me firmly, and my whole body wobbles with the movement.

“Why did you do it?” he demands, raising his voice.

I look over at the device as if it’s my eyewitness. “I thought I was helping. I . . . I’m so sorry. I thought it was an emergency.”

Tears sting my vision, and his face crumples the moment he notices. He pulls me forwards by my shoulders and engulfs me in his arms, stroking my hair as I mumble apology after apology.

When the anger is finally overcome by remorse, he presses a kiss to my temple, his lips lingering on the skin. Then, letting our connection break, he pushes me at arm’s length and rubs gently at the parts he grabbed. Harry watches me longingly, like it’s the last time he’ll ever see me, and fear spreads through my insides.

“Harry?” I ask slowly.

“You need to find a dress.”

“A dress?” I ask, taken aback. “What are you talking about?”

“He wants to meet with you. There’s a ball that he’s expecting our attendance at.”

“What?” I chuckle in shock. “Like a masquerade ball?”

“No, not a masquerade ball. But you will be expected to wear a gown.”

I blink, scanning his face, convinced he’s having me on. Never would I have thought his work required formal events like this. Men in suits, women in gowns – it seems far too ostentatious for those in the same field as Harry. Rather than hosting lush get-togethers, you’d think they’d want to stay in the shadows, not drawing any attention to themselves.

“When is it anyway?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow?” I ask, catching my breath. “You must be joking.”

“I wouldn’t joke about this.”

“I can’t go.” I shake my head. “I’m on call for the late shift at work.”

He finds my eyes immediately as if he was called directly to them. He’s careful this time as he steps forwards and grips my shoulders, but the firmness of his hold is enough to get his point across. “Please don’t think I’d ask this of you if it wasn’t one hundred percent important. But you have to attend.”

The look in his eyes leaves no room for negotiation.

I can call in sick to work. Just this once. What’s the worst that could happen?

I finally nod. “Okay.”

He brings me back into his arms again, lowering his voice to a whisper – so quiet I don’t think he intends for me to hear.

“You have no idea what you’ve wrapped yourself into.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Bigi

The fabric is itchy against my skin, and I can already sense the oncoming rash. I turn my body back and forth in the floor-length mirror, admiring the gown from all angles. It's cute, elegant, and feminine, but it lacks that warm-belly feeling, and therefore it simply won't do.

"You can do better," Mia says when I catch her gaze in the reflection.

The two of us have been raiding high-street stores throughout Regent Street all day, hoping to pull off a blinder last-minute. But our hope is deteriorating as quickly as the sun is setting.

"It was so weird, Mia," I say as she unzips the fabric down my spine. I hold the garment to my chest, concealing myself. "He said the guy wanted to see me. I just don't understand ..."

"Who cares? You get to dress up all fancy for one night! Who even gets to do shit like that anymore? I didn't know galas actually existed outside of movies."

I'm thankful for her quick rerouting of the conversation, having failed to tell her all those months ago about my run-in with Harry's boss. It didn't feel appropriate at the time to say a stranger saw me as payment for an overdue debt.

I can't keep up with all the secrets I'm telling ... How hypocritical of me.

"What did you tell work anyway?" she asks, searching through the rack of clothes behind her.

"Just said I had food poisoning." I shrug. "They didn't think to question it."

Since I'm shopping in the exact city where I work, you'd think I'd be a little more secretive about my rendezvous. But trying to spot someone you know during London rush hour is near impossible.

"What about this one?" she asks, lifting a dress and interrupting my train of thought.

I shake my head, my nose crinkling at the bright pink number. With a huff, she places it back down and continues her search.

"Will you be seeing Andy tonight?" I pry, careful with my questioning.

"Nah, he said he's got tied up with work. Whatever that means."

While Mia fought to keep her relationship with Andy on the down-low during my heartbreak, it prevailed, and they're still very much together. But with her lack of knowledge of his whereabouts this evening, I suspect he's failed to tell her the details of his job. Harry hasn't outright told me Andy will be attending this evening's event, but their boss name-dropping him about his desperation to reach top rank hasn't slipped my mind.

I watch Mia with sadness, knowing the secrets I'm keeping from her. But when she turns and holds up a dress with a mischievous glimmer in her eyes, I smile and say, "That's definitely the one."



When in doubt about where to find a formal dress at the last minute, you pray your local charity shop has an off-season slender mermaid gown that fits you like a glove.

The maroon dress features a square neckline and dips low at my lower back, the material's ruching snapping my spine straight. My idea was that simplicity is key, but judging by the raw hunger radiating off Harry, "simplicity" seems to be the wrong word.

He steps out of the driver's seat of a damn Bentley dressed in a suit, radiating masculinity. His tousled black hair is lightly gelled, the lone strand in the centre of his forehead perfectly distracting and aching to be touched. It's strange to see Harry in anything other than leather jackets and black jeans, but witnessing this sight in front of me feels like I've just taken a peek at

heaven's gates ... in a dark, unruly fantasy. It makes me want to switch out his wardrobe for black suits and crisp white shirts since that's what he's wearing right now. The first few buttons of the shirt are undone, and the suit is traditional, but he makes it look utterly unique.

His eyes roam over my body, and I fight a blush as he says, "Wow, princess. You look ..."

"Harry St. James, are you about to call me pretty?" I tease, taking a step forwards.

He chuckles, his gaze locked on mine. "You don't want to know what I think."

"I bet I do."

He takes a step closer, the tips of his loafers touching my heels. "I was going to say it'll be tough not to gouge out the eyes of any man who looks at you."

I blink, the statement sending my pulse spinning. It's not fear but something else entirely.

"You ready to go?"

My cheeks warm, I nod. "Ready."

Harry drives us in the Bentley through town. I watch him carefully, taking in the confidence with which he holds the wheel and the way he parts his legs to accommodate their large length in the footwell. He acts as a mental block on my surroundings, and I almost don't recognise which part of the city we're in until we pass the ballet studio my mother insisted I attend when I was younger. Dad would never show – he was never invested in mine and Jack's childhood.

The car's radio plays quietly in the background, adding background music to my haunting memories. As if Harry can read my thoughts, he clutches my knee softly.

"Is there anything I should know before we arrive?" I ask.

His hand flexes around the wheel. "You're walking into the lion's den."

"Men and their egos."

Huffing a laugh, he glances towards me and then back to the road. "You don't want to go near Poppy Green. She's a fiery little thing with no remorse."

"Stay away from Poppy. *Got it.*"

"She isn't a big fan of newcomers ... especially women." He clears his throat. "She sees them as a threat. Not one she takes lightly."

I nod slowly, processing his words. But as if my response hasn't quite convinced Harry I've caught the extent of his warning, he stiffens ever so slightly in the driver's seat.

"What is it?"

"She and Jack ..." His voice trails off as he watches me sympathetically.

I blink, surprised. "They slept together?"

Harry's only reaction is to grimace as if my question barely skims the surface.

I swallow uncomfortably, unsure of how to take this news in. How to process the idea my brother has slept with a woman who's now not only looking for someone to blame for a messy break-up but also probably wants to kill me for stepping on her territory. *Great* first impression.

Harry purses his lips, eager to change topic. "Please be mindful when speaking with the Boss. I've protected you as much as I can until this point, but now my hands are tied. I have to trust you enough to make your own decisions. So be careful."

He holds my gaze for barely a second before focusing ahead, the peculiar look in his eyes causing my heart to race. Throughout our months apart, his fear of his boss hasn't changed. That much I'm able to see.

When we arrive Harry acts like a true gentleman and walks around the vehicle to open the passenger door. He offers me a hand, and I grip the ends of his slender fingers as he chucks the keys to the valet.

I take in the venue, my mouth agape. This building has no right to be in London. It's some peculiar cross between a manor house and a frickin' resort hotel sitting atop marble steps. Pillars line the entryway, and a large elegant fountain sits in the middle of the courtyard, where people are purposely avoiding the spray.

Encouraging me to slip my arm through his locked elbow, Harry says, "People are staring."

"Sorry," I say, shaking my head to clear my senses.

"I wasn't complaining, baby. Let them look."

I link arms with him, my eyes scanning the dozens of men and women as we approach, all dressed in their best attire. There are a handful of men in identical formalwear to Harry's black suit jacket, trousers, and white shirt, while others opt for choices far more extravagant. Women are dressed to the nines in ballgowns, stiletto heels that make my feet want to scream in agony, and jewellery so striking it looks like it's worth thousands. It's then I realise these attendees are using their outfits to portray their wealth. It makes me question why many people – like Harry – have dressed simply.

The air is polluted with the overwhelming stench of money and bad decisions, and I inhale through my nose, welcoming the feeling into my core.

"There's so much you haven't told me," I whisper, still struggling to take in the sight before me.

"You have no idea," he mumbles.

I imagine an exclusive event like this calls for the fancy kind of invitations that probably get hand-delivered to the attendees' front doors, so it surprises me when the doormen and Harry exchange a simple nod and we flounce right through.

How much power does he even have in a place like this?

We walk deeper into the foyer, following the string of people while I gawk at the interior. Artwork lines the walls in golden frames, and the sweet strum of violin music fills my ears like the sound of angels.

When a waitress offers me a glass of champagne, I take it and bring it to my lips, welcoming the snapping fizz of bubbles on my tongue. Harry places his strong hand on my lower back, and I hum, naturally leaning into his touch.

"Hey, princess?"

"Yeah?"

"Look up."

I tilt my head upwards and gasp. My arm slips from Harry's, and I push the champagne flute to his chest as I turn around in a slow circle, staring up at the ceiling.

With all the new technology in the world, smartphones and damn AI, you forget that some of the most magnificent creations have been here the longest. This mansion must have been made centuries ago. The ceiling reminds me of the Sistine Chapel, decorated with murals that force me to blink at their similarity.

"Wow," is all I say.

"Remind you of anywhere?" he asks, handing back my drink.

"Of course ... but how?"

"This house belongs to a descendant of one of the biggest drug empires in Europe. The interior designer conspired with an artist who drew the entire thing from memory since there are no phones allowed in the Sistine Chapel."

"Couldn't they have just hacked into security footage somehow?"

"Even druglords know to appreciate the finer things in life ... Sometimes you have to realise that the things most beautiful in life are the ones right in front of you."

I don't have to turn to feel his eyes on the side of my face. The weight of them does something peculiar to my insides.

I gnaw at my lower lip. "I didn't know about any of that."

"I'll take you there one day to see it in person."

"That sounds like a proper fairy tale."

When I turn to him, his expression falters. He smiles despite it not quite reaching his eyes.

We arrive in the main room, which is swarming with guests. Floor-to-ceiling windows are draped with excessive curtains, the fabric lit by the ambient glow of chandeliers. My eyes land on a woman in the centre of the busy room. Her hair is striking, immediately gripping my attention. She appears to be about Harry's age, and her hair is burnt orange, framing blue eyes that stare directly at us. Harry conveniently leads us the other way, but the woman's gaze follows. I wonder if the look on her face is one of longing. If she wishes it was her that Harry had his arm around.

"Who's that?" I whisper, facing forwards and putting the woman behind me.

"The girl with reddish hair?"

I nod.

"That's Poppy. Stay away from her. You don't want to get on the wrong end of her. Trust me."

"Why?" I ask, his previous warning going amiss as something uncomfortable quickly rises to the surface. "Is she your ex-girlfriend or something?"

Please say no.

Please say no.

"Or something."

I think I dislike that answer even more.

We approach the bar and stand alongside Andy. He's leaning against the wood that decorates the entire width of the wall, which must reach at least a trillion feet in length. It's classy, without a shadow of a doubt, with waiters and waitresses assigned to no less than a two-metre radius.

The reflection of the jewels from the chandeliers sparkles in Andy's eyes as he pulls back from his hug with Harry. This fancy-ass setting has thrown me slightly off-kilter, and I lean forwards, kissing his cheek. The interaction seems natural enough until Harry fists the back of my dress tightly.

Whispering into the top of my head, the words smothered by my hair, he says, "Don't ever do that again."

A normal person wouldn't be so intrigued by his possessiveness, but my interests never really were the norm. His actions give me the impression there's potential for us to become something more, and I entertain the idea for a fleeting moment, enjoying the sense of power.

"Harry mentioned you bumped into one another," Andy says. Turning back to the bar, he passes us both a drink – Harry an amber liquid in a shallow glass with ice, and another flute of champagne for me. "You were out with your ..."

"Colleagues."

He hikes his brow. “Mia said you were also out with Jamie Callahan.”

Bloody Mia.

Of course, she had told Andy about Jamie. She probably has his birth certificate on hand, his registration plate, and who knows what else.

“He tagged along.” I take hefty sip of my drink. “I ended things with him yesterday.”

Harry turns, looking at me with the recollection of a stranger.

“Why would you do that?” he asks.

Confused, I scan his expression, which seems full of disbelief. Is he conflicted about why I broke up with Jamie? Because the answer seems pretty straightforward in my head ... if not completely obvious.

People walk by us, businessmen patting Harry’s shoulder, dropping a quick hello as they pass, but he has tunnel vision. I watch him over the rim of my glass, my throat scraping with the words, “I guess I was hung up on someone else.”

An unreadable expression crosses his face – a battle of emotions, perhaps. “He was perfect for you,” he says, voice raw. “He was good for you.”

Despite the good in his statement I feel physically wounded. “Who are you to say what’s good for me?”

His nostrils flare, and before we have a chance to hash out our differences, Andy’s spine snaps straight and he warns, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. We have company approaching. Ten o’clock.”

Maybe it’s the fiery redhead – the one who shot me daggers when I first walked in. But even if I wanted to look, I’m stuck in a stare-off with the beautiful fucking idiot in front of me.

“Harry,” Andy hisses.

But it’s too late.

“I was wondering when we’d meet again, Gigi. I’m so glad you could make it.”

I finally turn my head, spotting the older man – Harry’s boss – standing with one hand resting loosely in his trouser pocket, the other wrapped around a whiskey glass. His eyes dart between the two of us, and I realise he looks exactly the same as he did that night outside the nightclub, a white handkerchief in his breast pocket and gelled salt-and-pepper hair.

“It’s great to meet you again ...” I say, struggling with what to call him.

“Most people refer to me as the Boss, but please, call me Richard.”

Andy leans back against the bar, using both elbows to support his weight. He seems reserved as he sips his drink, the worried expression he wore just seconds ago a distant memory.

“Walk with me,” Richard says, retreating a step.

I take a step towards him, and Harry follows simultaneously.

“Just the girl.”

Harry stiffens beside me.

Reassuring him with a smile, I say, “I’ll be fine.”

His eyes dart between the two of us with uncertainty, but before he can consider holding me back, I’m already walking by Richard’s side, trailing the edge of the room.

“I hope you’ll excuse me for not reaching out sooner, but I’m a big believer in fate, and I wanted to assure you our paths would cross again naturally. You may not know this, Miss Thomas, but I’m a man of loyalty, and my people watched you closely throughout those months to ensure you didn’t run your mouth about what you saw.”

My mind silences the strum of violins as I repeat his words.

My people watched you closely ...

How did I not know I was being watched?

The realisation sends a cold rush through me, but it’s not fear. I feel ... enthralled. Intrigued that someone holds so much power.

I sip my drink and say, “I hope you weren’t disappointed with your discovery.”

He grins, a swell of pride reaching his wrinkled cheeks, the kind of satisfied look you’d give to a child. My answer clearly pleased him.

Two security staff guarding two empty stools at the end of the bar allow us to pass and occupy the seats. Richard orders me another glass of champagne, and I make a mental note that this’ll be my last. I scan the room, feeling several sets of wandering eyes hovering in my direction, but only one stands out through the crowd. Harry watches me with unease, prepared to storm over here at a moment’s notice if something goes wrong.

I hold his gaze momentarily, trying to unveil his secrets.

If only I could discover why he’s so on edge around this man.

“My offer still stands,” Richard says, forcing my attention back to him. “We have an opening here with us.”

My eagerness is hard to contain. “I’d like that very much.”

I’ve spent several months hoping this possibility would arise. Sure, people may not be proud of me for entertaining the idea of being a criminal, but I’m tired of a dictatorship ruling my life. When someone offers you a free pass into the most notorious

crime group in London, you take it by the horns and splinter your palms holding on tight.

“When can I start?”

He laughs, and my whole body stills at the sound. In my peripheral I catch Harry starting to make a move, but Andy catches him by the arm, holding him back.

“You really think it’s that simple?” Richard asks, composing himself. “Blimey, Miss Thomas, you have much to learn. The Circle is a cutthroat industry. We only allow the best candidates entry on the understanding that they abide by my most important rule ... You think I’m willing to put our livelihood at risk by taking you at your word?”

Fearful I’ve made a mistake, and feeling the opportunity slipping through my fingers, I rush my words out. “What’s your most important rule?”

His smirk grows slowly. “That my recruits understand this is a life worth dying for. It’s kill or be killed after all.”

Before he can continue, the security guard with a bodybuilder’s torso, who’s been keeping a watchful eye on us, leans down and mutters in Richard’s ear. Schooling his features, Richard nods, dusting down his suit as he stands.

“Excuse me, but I have important business to attend to. We’ll continue this conversation another time.”

No matter how much I try to deny my disappointment at his departure, it’s evident in the way my shoulders sag and my eyes bore into the champagne like it’s the most foul-tasting thing in the world.

Despite Harry’s warnings about the society, I can’t ignore the gravitational pull I feel towards the Circle. This very well might be my only chance ... and the opportunity is slipping away.

Screw this.

Dropping down from the bar-stool, I hike up the front of my dress, fisting the fabric as I dart out of the room unscathed. Dozens of people fill the entryway, pacing between the main ballroom and the billiard room. I walk down the hallway directly in front of me. It’s significantly darker than the adjacent rooms, all of which are well-lit with the sparkling jewels of chandeliers.

I pass a series of doors, but none of them pull my attention as I’d expect them to, until I hear, “... enough of you.”

A voice from one of the far rooms catches my attention, and I slow my footing, stepping closer to the door. It’s open by a hairline crack, but I can see Richard standing beside another man. His posture is rigid, and he exhales, his fingers twitching near his inner jacket.

“I’m done talking,” he says.

Reaching into his suit jacket with surprising quickness, Richard retrieves something silver and not much larger than his hand. It’s hard to decipher what it is until the deafening bang of a gun rings in my eardrums, chilling me to the bone.

I slap my palm over my mouth to silence my sudden scream.

The man before him slumps to the floor with a loud thud, tumbling like a rag doll, his body lifeless against the dark wooden floorboards. Trembling, I quickly retrace my steps, retreating down the hall to the entryway.

I just witnessed a murder.

I just witnessed another murder.

The sound of violins assaults my hearing, and I watch as people walk around completely unfazed by the occurrence.

Did they even hear it?

Of course they didn’t!

Head down, mind occupied, I stumble into someone else.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Harry’s voice calms my nerves with unnatural speed. He pulls me back from his chest, his hands gripping my hips to steady me.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

I clear my throat and nod. “I-I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” His eyes hover over my shoulder to the hallway I just departed, and I follow suit.

The two guards from earlier walk through the door, Richard bellowing his orders behind them, though the noise goes unnoticed beneath the ambience of the guests.

Harry’s eyes find mine, a dark cloud washing over them as he says, “I tried to warn you.”

“I didn’t say I was scared.”

And it’s true.

The bigger concern is that I’m not scared.

I’m intrigued.

Or, as Harry would say ...

I’m not crazy. I’m fucking *obsessed*. There’s a difference.

TWENTY-SIX

Gigi

The colour of red velvet cake is eerily similar to blood – specifically, the blood of the man who was shot right before my eyes. This cake may be slightly lighter, but I can't stop my mind from running with the thought the sponge was drenched in the thick puddle as I bring the bloody cake to my mouth.

"How was last night?" Mia asks, distracting me.

I fist the discarded crumbs in my closed palm, wiping my hand clear on my trouser leg. The pieces drop to my feet, scattered around a few wrappers lying dormant on the coffee-shop floor.

"It was fine," I say, nodding like I'm trying to convince myself.

"*Fine?* You were on the arm of a bloody hunk all night and it was just fine?"

My palms start to sweat, and I rub them along my thighs. Stubborn crumbs stick to my skin, and I scrub harder, gnawing at my lower lip.

Tell me why I'm considering confiding in Mia about what I saw.

I spent all last night staring at a blank wall, replaying the scene in my head. The memory should send me running for the hills, but for some unknown reason I find myself struggling to get the Circle out of my mind. It's not a want at this point. It's a *need*.

Quickly scoping out my surroundings to make sure there aren't any Nosy Nellies listening in on our conversation, I find we're alone. Except for a mother and her baby and a man sitting in the corner reading a copy of the daily newspaper. All are too far away to hear our conversation.

"He shot ..." I say, my voice too quiet to hear.

"What?"

"Shot someone ..."

"Huh?"

"He shot someone."

"HE WHAT!"

I dart forwards and slap my palm over her mouth. "Keep your mouth shut."

Her eyes are panicked as she pries each of my fingers off her mouth. She clutches my hand and searches between my eyes for answers.

"Harry shot someone?"

"What? No!"

I don't doubt he probably has shot someone in his life, especially if his boss is anything to go by, but he's not who I'm referring to.

Hushed, I clarify, "His boss did."

She gulps, her eyes wild as she looks between mine. "Does Harry know?"

I nod, bowing my head.

"Gigi, you have to call the police."

My head snaps up, and I shake my head no. *Is she crazy?* Harry once told me I could *never* call the police about this kind of stuff.

Someone walks past us, and fear races up my spine. Anxiety hits me like a thunderstorm, and I suddenly feel as if I'm standing under a spotlight.

Why did I tell her?

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid, Gigi.

"We should get out of here," I tell Mia.

Confused, she gathers up her belongings, slips on her jacket, and hangs her bag over the crook of her arm. The bell rings

above our heads as she pushes open the door to the coffee shop, signalling our departure. A gust of wind sweeps through the cracked door and sends a chill through my body.

Outside my gaze narrows on two men standing on the pavement opposite the coffee shop.

“Is everything okay?” Mia asks, stepping beside me.

The men make no attempt to conceal their actions, hands pressed firmly in their pockets, staring directly at Mia and me. Their faces are stern, causing every hair on my body to stand on end.

It’s the duo from the ball. I just know it.

The ones who helped Richard dispose of the body.

Did they hear what I said to Mia?

Immediately bowing my head, I grab her arm. “Start walking and keep your head down.”

Thankfully, she doesn’t question my sudden demand. Our footsteps scurry across the pavement as I lead us on a longer route towards the parking lot. My theory – if these men are following us – is that we’ll be able to lose them in the back alley behind the shops.

“Where are you taking us?” Mia hisses.

“Right this way,” I tell her, making sure not to lose grip of her arm.

Turning down the alley, my feet grind into the floor when I see a figure standing at the opening to the car park. He stands alone, his arms folded across his chest.

But where’s his friend?

With my throat threatening to close, I shake my head, backing up a few steps.

“Do you know these guys?”

I tug her arm again. “Mia, we need to go.”

I scurry backwards as the other man enters the other end of the alley, standing directly in front of us. Mia grabs onto my arm, digging her nails into my skin in fear.

“What do we do?” she whispers as they both step closer.

I watch as the men approach, rendered silent. If these men are who I suspect they are and their loyalty lies with their boss, they shouldn’t hurt Mia. I’m the one who made a massive error, and I’ll be the one to pay the price. Not her.

The man steps a few feet in front of us. “Gigi, you need to come with us.”

I nod slowly, knowing I have no other choice.

“No!” Mia says. “You seriously can’t think about going with these guys.”

Ignoring her protests, I grip her shoulders. “Mia, you need to go home. Lock your front door. Make sure the windows are closed, and don’t let anyone inside unless it’s Greg, Andy, Harry or me. Okay?” I shake her shoulders when she doesn’t answer. “Promise me!”

She nods her head. “I-I promise.”



I’m in fucking trouble. That much I know.

I could’ve tried to escape, but what good would that have done? I’m no competition for two oversized men. While I could convince myself this is the start of my journey into the Circle, there’s no point denying the obvious. I’ve done something *majorly* wrong.

“Can you tell me where you’re taking me?” I ask.

Silence.

I tip my head back against the headrest, trying my phone and immediately cursing as Harry fails to answer when I dial. It’s probably for the best. He’d flip his shit if he found out what I’ve done.

After swerving through London traffic, the car pulls up outside the derelict building I once followed Harry to. From the outside, you’d be convinced there’s nothing but rubble and ash inside, but I guess that’s what makes it the perfect spot to do business. No one would suspect a thing – especially as it’s far from civilisation.

The car door is ripped open and the men pull me out, forcing my arms into their harsh grip. I’m escorted into an office – one I recognise immediately. Every bit of furniture has been etched into my brain since the moment I left. There are a few steps down to the sunken room. Art hangs on the wall to our left, a desk sits immediately parallel to the entrance, and the office chair is unoccupied behind it. Everything is identical to my first visit, except this time the coal fire in the corner crackles with the sound of burning wood.

The guards leave me at the entrance, exiting without another word. The sun leaks through the dark windows, and despite it

being spring, I hug my arms close around my waist in anticipation of what awaits me.

The office doors swing open, and I whip my head towards the presence.

“Harry?” I ask warily, ready to take a step towards him.

Our eyes lock, and a look I hardly see on him flickers to the surface.

Unmistakable panic.

“Stay right there!” He throws his hand out towards me, insisting I remain rooted in place. He screws his eyes shut, exhaling a heavy breath as he warns, “Don’t move.”

His feet stay glued to the spot like he’s stuck in quicksand, as if the floor below him could swallow him up in one wrong move.

Eyes still closed, he pleads, “Tell me you’re not hurt.”

“No,” I breathe. “I’m okay.”

“You need to tell me what happened.”

I watch as his lips part in another exhale, eyes slowly creeping open. His arm starts to shake vigorously from the way it’s still hanging in the air between us.

“Did you tell anyone what you saw?”

Despite remaining still, he seems to be itching to race over, appearing so restrained it looks agonising.

“What’s all this about? Why are you here—?” I go to step forwards again.

“I said don’t move!”

Placing my foot back on the ground submissively, I sheepishly admit, “I spoke with Mia. I told her what I saw in the office.”

Harry’s expression falls, and he’s suddenly a blank canvas. I can’t tell if he’s fuelled with anger, panic, or rage.

I just see nothing.

Heavy footsteps echo directly outside the door, alerting us to the arrival of our impending company.

As if time has sped up, Harry is suddenly at my side, his hands crowding my face as he forces me to look into his eyes. The whole interaction looks like it’s costing him something priceless.

His voice is rushed. “Don’t show emotion towards me – it’ll only trigger him more. Remember everything I’ve told you about him up until this point. And whatever you do, don’t be foolish.”

“What are you talking about?” I grip his fingers.

As the doors open, Harry parts from my body like a flash of lightning. Footsteps echo against the floor, the sound so daunting it overtakes the noise of my thumping heart.

Richard says nothing.

He walks down the steps slowly and torturously, rounding his desk to sit in his chair. The fire seems to crackle a little harder at his presence, and I ache to look over to Harry, but it’s like I can hear him screaming at me telepathically to keep my eyes forwards.

Resting his forearms on the desk in front of him, Richard meets my eye immediately. I hate that no matter how dangerous this man is, I’m drawn to him like a lonely child aching for a father figure. Despite everything I’ve been warned about, I admire the way he silences a room.

I want a life surrounded by what he has. What *they* have.

“Why do you think you’re here today, Miss Thomas?”

Don’t be foolish.

Don’t be foolish.

Opting for mercy, I say, “I think it has something to do with the conversation I had with my friend.”

“Mia Allen, you mean? Clean record. Lives in Surrey. You both attended the same primary school in the neighbouring village. Not really someone I want lurking around me and my team ...”

“She won’t say anything. I swear.”

“How can I be sure you won’t slip up again?”

“You have my word.”

“That means nothing to me.”

He pushes off from the desk, getting to his feet, and I catch the stiffness of Harry’s body from a few feet away.

I can’t let this opportunity slip through my fingers.

I’m so close.

SO close.

Richard makes torturous steps towards the fire, reaching out for the steel poker beside the fireplace and prodding the burning wood. The increase of the crackle fills the silence.

With his back turned, my attention slowly drifts towards Harry. His eyes bore into the fire, his jaw clenched. I look between the two, knowing I need to make a split-second decision that could ultimately change the course of my life. And as I look towards the end of the poker, which burns red from the fire’s wrath, I recognise the undeniable shape of a circle instantly.

That circular burn on Harry's skin never made sense to me ... until now.

"I'll endure punishment as a consequence. But you must swear you won't touch Mia."

At the same moment as I catch a menacing grin growing across the side of Richard's face, Harry whips his head towards me. The look on his face, while subtle, says, *Are you fucking kidding me right now?*

"You once told me it was kill or be killed. Let me show you how devoted I am," I plead.

I turn to face Richard's back, ignoring Harry's pressing gaze.

"A life worth dying for – that's what you told me. Your most important rule. Let me show you how much this means to me."

Kill or be killed.

Endure and survive.

I repeat the words in my head like a mantra.

Richard prods the fire with the metal stick, twisting it slowly in the flames.

"If you are looking to take this opportunity seriously, Miss Thomas, this will come at no challenge to you ..." He retracts the metal from the fire and blows against it, causing a small spritz of sparks to spray the air. "A symbol of your promise to this life."

The metal hangs between the three of us, drawing our attention like moths to a flame. A circle. The symbol of the inner crime group. And the same marking that Harry has imprinted on his neck, and which Jack had stained on his left shoulder.

I look at the ring inflamed with raw red heat.

A lump clogs my throat, but I refuse to let fear deter me.

"I'll do it."

"Absolutely fucking not," Harry demands.

What the fuck is he doing?

Didn't he just say not to show emotion?

I meet his eye in a brutal stare.

He says, "Gigi, think about this ..."

I turn my head away.

It's too risky to be swept up in the sorrow that aches to convince me otherwise.

I want this – I *know* I do.

I've never been surer of anything.

"I've made my decision," I say, remaining headstrong.

Slowly stepping up towards the desk, my fingertips splinter from the wood with how hard I grasp it. Taking a moment to regain my composure, I bow my head between my shoulders, releasing a heavy breath.

This is so much more than a symbol. It's a branding. I'm meant to be a fucking feminist and I'm allowing myself to be branded by a man. But if this is the small price to pay, something I must endure to be granted a life of money and power, I'll embrace it.

I'm doing it for Jack.

And to prove myself to anyone who dared to undermine me.

Leaning over the desk slowly, I gather my hair in my hands and bring it over one shoulder as I slowly press my chest flat against the wood. It acts as a firm surface for the organ that beats ferociously.

Thump ... thump ... thump ...

Richard approaches with the poker in his hands, and my heart rate increases tenfold the closer he gets.

He shoves the cool end of the poker into Harry's grip, his words strikingly clear. "You do it."

This is why he didn't want me to show emotion.

My God.

Harry grits his teeth. "No."

I don't doubt the punishment from Harry will just be a fraction of what I would endure if the poker were in Richard's grasp.

Meeting his panicked expression, I mouth, "It's okay."

He shakes his head no.

It's not okay. It's not fucking okay, he must think.

But it is.

He approaches my back, suffocating my body with warmth and providing a false security blanket. Exhaling a heavy breath, I jump when the collar of my T-shirt is torn. Harry exposes the skin at the nape of my neck, a patch of unscarred flesh that's about to be victim to his punishment.

As I turn my head towards Harry, he fights my gaze, and the panic and adrenaline hit me at once. My body trembles with the fear he'll hate me, not the upcoming pain.

Harry draws near, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

I can feel the heat radiating from the poker.

“Wait!” I shout, and he freezes. Craning my neck to look at Richard this time, I say, “Swear to me you won’t touch Mia.”

He chuckles as if I’m wasting my time. “I swear.”

“On Jack’s grave,” I demand. “Swear it!”

He pauses, grinding his teeth. “Fine. On Jack’s grave, I swear it. *But* you must vow to cut all contact with your friend. I can’t afford for you to slip up again, or to have her reporter tendencies sniffing too closely ... unless you’re both asking for death, of course.”

I halt, blinking rapidly.

Richard grins slowly, amused by my surprise. “She is a reporter – no?”

Everything feels suddenly cold.

Never speak to Mia again? We’ve never missed Mystery Monday – not once – but now I’m expected to cut contact for the remainder of my life here? It seems unfathomable, severing our relationship ... But at the reminder of Richard’s quiet emphasis on “death”, I shudder inwardly.

As if hearing my thoughts, he adds, “If you are so devoted to joining us, then this shouldn’t pose as an issue.”

“You won’t hurt her?”

“On Jack’s grave,” he repeats tonelessly.

I pause, passing a steady breath through my lips.

Richard groans tiredly. “Clock’s ticking ...”

The air whooshes out of me. “Fine.”

Slowly, I turn away from him and face the opposite wall. My eyes bore into a fleck of paint that steals all my attention.

“Do it,” I tell Harry.

Voice cracking, he says, “Please don’t make me—”

“I know what I signed up for.”

The pain starts off as a slight pinprick, like a scratch I can’t quite reach. *This isn’t so bad*, I think ... until my body feels like it’s being assaulted at alarming speed. A feeling similar to fire, pure molten lava, melts my skin, sending me into panic mode as my neck scorches with agony.

A scream lets rip from my lips and my feet kick the floor, demanding freedom from the torturous minutes – but in reality, it’s less than a few seconds between Harry branding my skin and him stumbling backwards. The burn is excruciating. If I couldn’t see, I’d think he was still assaulting me.

As darkness flickers at the edges of my vision, I wonder if I’m about to pass out. I feel as if my entire body has just been dipped in acid.

My eyes find Harry, and his hands are shaking vigorously. He’s staring at his palms as if he doesn’t even recognise himself.

His lips move over the words, “What have I done? This is all my fault.”

“Again,” Richard insists.

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Come again?”

“I’m not doing it,” Harry demands, retreating a step.

He chucks the weapon to the floor, and it rattles, rolling several inches before stopping near my feet.

“You’ll do it again or I’ll put it on her fucking face. Or better off, I’ll kill her.”

Harry shakes his head, his voice dropping to a desperate plea. “Kill me.”

“Harry,” I say, my voice weak. “Just do it. It’s okay.”

Richard approaches the fire and prepares a new piece of steel, freshly brewed among the flames. Storming back over, he shoves it into Harry’s hands as if to teach him a lesson for speaking up.

“I’m so sorry, baby ...” Harry whispers, the sound only intended for me. “You just need to breathe. Breathe through it, and it’ll be over.”

But I don’t.

I scream.

I scream until my voice is hoarse and my body feels like it’s physically breaking.

Harry and I aren’t like Romeo and Juliet. We’re only the tragedy.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Sigi

Many, many weeks pass and I hear from no one. Not a single sign from anyone within the Circle.

I feed Mia a faultless story, leaving no stone unturned, and it seems to work. She doesn't question my odd behaviour or bring up the two men who cornered us in the alley. It breaks my heart, the thought of lying to her and distancing myself from our friendship. But I'm protecting her life, and I hope she'll forgive me one day. I'm not sure if I trust Richard to leave Mia alone, but the only thing I have right now is his word.

And it's wearing thin.

I withstood one of the biggest tests of loyalty and I've had nothing in return. Nothing. It's driving me utterly insane. Along with Harry acting more secretive than ever, I feel like I'm losing myself. I think he's tearing himself up, blaming himself for what happened. As the wound on my neck heals with each passing day, I'm more convinced it was all some wild lucid dream.

By the time a full month has passed, the mark on my neck has faded to a light pink, and Harry and I have kept our distance from each other. I've given up all hope.

But then one day, a small rectangular card is left in my parents' letterbox. It's no bigger than a business card and instantly draws my attention.

An invitation. No address. No time. One date.

"Where art meets the sky," the card reads. The logo on the front is a masquerade mask – an elegant one with lace and ribbon.

I flip it over with intrigue. There's no location. The invitation gives no inkling of who it was from, but something in me knows instantly. I hold it close to my chest, treasuring it as if it might puff into smoke in front of my eyes.

They haven't forgotten about me.



If I want to fit in like the other society members I must dress accordingly. Thank God I paid attention to what Poppy, the fiery redhead, was wearing at the private event. If my calculations are correct, members of the Circle typically wear black.

At first glance, the material of my dress is as black as the steel rod that scorched my skin, but under the crystal chandeliers it'll reflect the light and appear as a kaleidoscope of colour. Spaghetti straps give way to a sweetheart neckline, and my mask is made of the excess fabric. A few pieces of hair frame my face, but the rest is pinned back to reveal the mark on my neck, which I wear with pride.

I'm making a statement, and I know it.

I've avoided telling Harry about my invitation out of fear he'll try to stop my attendance. Therefore, my only option is to avoid him at all costs this evening.

Taking a big risk with the business card, I direct my driver to the location of first ball I attended. And I'm second-guessing that decision until the gates of the mansion give way to grand doors and an abundance of guests wearing luxurious masks to conceal their identity. Relief sweeps through me like a gust of wind, having deciphered the card correctly.

As I exit the car and traipse up the marble steps, people look at me like I'm supposed to be here, allowing me to walk with a confident stride and my shoulders upright. I smile at the guards positioned at the front entrance, and they nod silently, allowing me entry. My thumping heart threatens to overtake the ambient sounds of chatter and elegant music as I walk through the hall, past the artwork in the sky, towards the bar.

When I approach a waitress and ask for a signature vodka and cranberry juice, I take the opportunity to scope the floor.

There's something dangerously sexy about everyone's dark attire and the masks they wear.

Hundreds of people fill the room, increasing by each second, so I'm taken aback when I spot Harry through the crowd. He's wearing a mask like everyone else, but the length of his body, his posture, his midnight-black hair, and just his sheer confidence draws my head to him naturally. He stands out as if he's under a spotlight. He's heavily engaged in conversation, capturing all attention as if he's God Himself. Even in a crowd his presence is compelling.

I know because I fall for it every time.

But I'm not here to see him. My mission hasn't changed.

Before I become his next victim, I down the rest of my drink, calculating how I'm going to slip out of the room without drawing attention to myself. Turning to leave, I excuse myself from the person sitting on the bar-stool beside me.

A hand darts out, its iron grip capturing my wrist and halting my escape.

"You know ... that get-up isn't fooling anyone."

I keep my eyes forwards, my jaw tensing.

"What are you doing here, Gigi?"

FUCK.

Andy.

"What gave me away?" I ask, trying to play coy.

"I only know one person foolish enough to show off the mark," he says, referring to my neck.

I scoff, trying to pull free. "It's rude to lay hands on a woman."

He stands up, tightening his fingers. "Did getting fucking branded not teach you anything?"

"Clearly not," I say, finally ridding myself of his hand. "Why do all the men around me think they can make my decisions for me? This is my life."

"Then you're pretty stupid. You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

"I think I do."

Andy's eyes flicker over my shoulder in panic.

"If you're looking for Harry, I think it's in both our interests not to disturb his evening."

"He's going to flip his shit when he knows you're here."

"That's why you're not going to tell him."

I'd be a fool to think Andy wouldn't tell him. That's why I need to get out of here quickly.

Placing a hand delicately on his shoulder and making sure not to waste any more precious minutes, I slip past him. "If you'll excuse me, I have somewhere to be."

Refusing to hear what he has to say, I bow my head, scurrying past the people on the dance floor and feigning disinterest in the multiple offers of champagne.

I need to talk to Richard.

And I refuse to let anything get in my way.

Thankfully, no one follows me down the hall, meaning I can slip through the office door and close it silently behind me. Approaching the desk carefully, I run my fingertips over the surface and feel the ingrained birch wood beneath my nails. While it's not the same one I clutched to for dear life until my throat went hoarse, it still sends a shiver through me.

I wander around the desk peering at its contents, deciding it best not to snoop unless I want to be decapitated. I turn to the bookshelves. Books decorate the space, and a singular framed photograph sits on one of the higher shelves. I creep closer, my lungs constricting for a solid few seconds as I eye the image where it sits beside some special-edition works of Charles Dickens.

The photo is of Jack.

I take it in my hands instantly, my knuckles turning white as I grip the edges. In my flush of sadness I fail to hear the door open, but awareness pricks the back of my neck as a heavy presence enters the room.

Richard says, "I thought I'd find you in here."

I carefully return the frame back to its place.

Acting unshaken, I ask, "Am I that predictable?"

"I'd recognise a Thomas anywhere."

I turn around to him, but his gaze is on the photograph that sits perched on the shelf.

"There was something special about your brother. His death really was a tragedy."

"It was."

"What can I do for you, Gigi? I doubt you're here to trade stories about your brother. While we can, I must admit, you probably won't like what I have to say about him."

When his mouth forms a smile I feel my confidence wavering. The emotion seems far too authentic for a man like him. But I'm desperate to hear his stories, so I say, "He was always a troublemaker in school."

Richard chuckles, taking a seat opposite the desk and nodding towards the lush office chair I should occupy. I do so

hesitantly. It feels peculiar to have the roles reversed, but for this confrontation I embrace it.

“I’m not sure how much you know about Jack’s time with us – very little, I suspect – but he was one of the best members we ever had. He was one of the most notorious criminals in Europe. But he lost his sanity in the madness, and his own incompetence got him killed.”

“Europe?” I ask, my eyes wide.

He smirks.

Surely not. Not Jack. The idea seems preposterous. Every morning when he’d come home exhausted I imagined he’d had a heavy night drinking, or when he came home grinning from ear to ear I expected he’d scored lucky with some woman.

While I’m upset by the secrets he withheld, there’s something else I find equally disturbing.

Lost his sanity in the madness ...

“How ...?”

Richard lifts a brow. “How did he die?”

I nod – even if I’m not fully convinced I want to know the story.

Richard sits back in his chair, rubbing his hand against his chin. “How’s the scar healing?”

Taken aback by the change of subject, I refuse to let the shock deter me. I hold up my chin. “Fine.”

If he thought I was going to call for mercy, he’s wrong. The scar is a branding, but it’s also a trademark of everything I’m yet to achieve.

He smirks. “It seems we got off on the wrong foot before. I’m happy that you’re taking your role in the society seriously. But we don’t allow entry to just anybody. There’s an initiation you must pass first.”

Initiation?

No one mentioned anything about an initiation.

“Like a test?”

“If that’s what you want to call it. It’s tailored to each individual. They – or you, in this instance – must go through a series of tasks to see whether you’re a good fit for the team. Get St. James to show you the ropes. Even he won’t know what you’ll be expected to face, but he can prepare you with some knowledge from years of witnessing initiations. And even if I was fond of your brother ...” He leans forwards on his elbows. “I will not be taking it easy on you. You have big shoes to fill, Miss Thomas. And I must warn you, there is a codex of rules that one must abide by with the utmost importance.”

“Anything,” I say, nodding eagerly.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

It doesn’t matter, I think. I want in.

“Your eagerness is admirable, so it shouldn’t be an issue for you that I don’t allow fraternisation within the Circle.”

While my smile merely falters at the edges, my stomach completely plummets. I imagine the feeling is something akin to jumping out of a plane with no parachute. I’m struck speechless, any meaningful response stuck on my tongue.

“That won’t be a problem, now, will it?”

Fuck.

My mind instantly gravitates to Harry. Harry with the piercing eyes and dark hair. Harry who sealed my fate and my ache for danger the moment I found him in my brother’s room. Ever since laying eyes on him, I’ve been destined to chase a villain.

But perhaps the villain was me.

Forcing a swallow, I barely recognise my voice. “Not at all.”

“Very well.” Richard grins, standing to leave. He opens the door to his office, turning to me as he adds, “And if I find out you’ve gone behind my back again, Miss Thomas – whether it’s spilling secrets or fraternising with people like St. James – then I promise you that you will pay.”



After Richard leaves the room I sit in the chair for hours turning the decision I made over and over in my head. My hair is practically a bird’s nest from running my hands through it so many times.

What am I going to tell Harry? is the main thought running through my mind. But he knows the rules – this will be just another secret he’s withheld. We were never fully exclusive anyway. I was in a relationship just a month ago. Harry and I were two people letting off a bit of steam.

Lie.

When I finally get the courage to leave the room, I realise Andy must not have exposed my presence, otherwise Harry would’ve come to find me. The thought instantly turns to ash, however, when I exit the mansion and spot a figure waiting at the

bottom of the marble stairs.

There he stands, legs slightly parted, hands pushed deep in his trouser pockets as he stares straight at me – right into my soul. His mask conceals harsh lines, but his eyes are piercing and full of rage. He charges up the steps, temper flaring. Even on the step below mine, his height still towers above me by several inches.

“Why couldn’t you just listen to me?”

“Let me guess ... Andy told you I was here.”

Coward.

Harry’s eyes cling to mine. “What did you expect?”

“I’m not your dog to boss around. This is my life,” I say faintly, drawing closer to him. “I want to experience it with you. Just let me.”

He rises onto my step, and I stumble back, forced to accommodate him. Harry moves closer to me until there’s no room left at all.

“Whatever this is between us, it can’t go on any longer. He told you that, right?” he asks, his voice cold and as clear as water.

I crane my neck to look up at him. “Yes, I know.”

“Then why did you agree to it?”

The words taste bitter on my tongue as I say, “It’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Harry shakes his head, his jaw clamped tight as he forces his eyes from mine.

Throughout the time I’ve known him, I’ve seen several emotions pass through Harry’s eyes, but this is the first time I’ve witnessed him experience hurt. It lasts a flicker of a second, and I debate whether or not I’ve misunderstood the emotion before he blinks it away.

He drops his head and says, “The initiation alone could kill you.”

I don’t doubt it for a second.

But through it all, I must make sure of one thing ...

Don’t lose your sanity in the madness.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sigi

A few weeks pass. Harry and I try to work out where we stand with each other, and it becomes more of a struggle than anticipated. We hit a niche since we were never together, nor did we have enough time to consider if we had feelings for one another. We shared less than forty-eight hours of a lust-filled high before it was thrown back in our faces.

But I understand what I've signed up for, and I'm not risking it for anything. Not even Harry. Yet the thought seems to last all of two seconds when I catch his lingering glances or if he stands closer to me than necessary, and then I'm sucked into his addictive bubble all over again. The scent of leather and mint wraps around me and I'm practically putty in his hands. I get the fleeting idea we could still strive to be our own Romeo and Juliet like we imagined and kiss behind closed doors or shag in cleaning closets. Harry doesn't want that though. I don't think he's quite forgiven me since the incident with the steel poker a few months ago.

From the stories I've heard, even the thought is too dangerous to consider. Richard's anger knows no bounds, and the thought of Harry being punished for an incident caused solely by my wrongdoing makes my heart ache. Whatever feelings exist between us, they're tainted. I don't love Harry, so my decision is final. And I'll keep telling myself that whenever my composure threatens to slip.

I have no interest in finding love elsewhere. I'm not sure where Harry stands, but the thought of him with someone else makes me want to hurt a motherfucker ... not that I'd ever admit that out loud. What I will admit is that it makes my stomach queasy and my throat swell like I've swallowed a frog.

Besides, if I was prepared to breach Richard's trust for anything, it'd be to contact Mia again. With every phone call that I send to voicemail and each excuse I make, I mentally recite this is for her own benefit. And mine.

God, I miss her.

But my initiation is fast approaching, and that's possessing most of my thoughts. While the date's not confirmed, Harry says he's got an inkling it's going to happen a lot sooner than we think. He's been prepping my body physically for the challenges I might face – and not physical in *that* respect. It's an unspoken rule between us that sex is out of the question. It'd complicate everything. If resisting him wasn't hard enough already, with intimacy thrown into the mix we'd struggle to ever keep our hands to ourselves.

Right now, as he leads me through the society's facilities, sex is the last thing on our minds. It's like a big campus for adults. Situated on the outskirts of London, the building was originally built as a boarding school, but plans ceased, so what better use than investing in the property as a massive frat house for criminals?

Richard bought the property approximately thirty years ago, building the society from the ground up into what it is today: the most notorious crime group in London. And, most importantly, thriving off endless cash and power. Of course, with that, he's practically calling for trouble. But in the meantime everyone is striving for success.

We've only just started at the main entrance and I'm already overwhelmed, but my skin tingles with anticipation. As we walk down the outstretched hallway and step onto glistening floors that reflect the colours of the stained glass windows, I can't help but wonder how much this place must have cost. I imagine it was a pretty penny.

Though I'm yet to see it all, there's everything you could ever think of in here – a food court, apartments in the outbuildings, a library, lounge areas, a gym, and far more. People walk down the halls with smiles on their faces, calling out to Harry with a wave as they pass. They're like a family here – one I've been looking for my whole life – and while I haven't been accepted yet, this place already feels like home.

Failing is *not* an option.

Keeping up with Harry's long strides, I ask, "How much did this place cost the Boss?"

He turns, looking at me as if I just spoke in Parseltongue. "Did I say something?"

"You called him Boss."

“Isn’t that what we’re supposed to call him?”

Harry smiles, turning his head before I can test whether the emotion is genuine. He’ll never tell you how he’s truly feeling, but he’s yet to master control of the microexpressions that give him away.

His jaw is clenched, and he shrugs. “Hadn’t really thought about it.”

Well, I have. I reckon you’re pushing a hundred million pounds at least for a Grade 2 listed mansion with outbuildings, parkland, botanical gardens, a sweeping driveway leading to a courtyard, and gardens that house some of the most magnificent flowers I’ve ever seen. From the outside alone, parts are beautifully modern while others are breath-takingly classic. As we pass by more rooms, I notice the lounge and the billiard room have been restored to their nineteenth-century heritage.

I’m swooning.

The courtyard follows a designated path that leads to the converted apartments set in old cottages on the north side of the property. While I’m not officially a recruit yet, the Boss told Harry I have a temporary residence here. I left my marketing job and gobbled up the opportunity faster than I could say “yes fucking please”. I’m trying not to put it down to special treatment since he insisted otherwise, but my excitement speaks volumes.

Andy also owns an apartment here, I’ve found out. But Harry has never seen the appeal in living at work. He says he prefers to go back to his own place at the end of a long day and separate himself from the Circle – especially if a heist has gone to shit and he wants some headspace. I hear him, but I can’t understand why. Perhaps I’m in my honeymoon stage, but this place seems faultless.

My motivation isn’t money; it’s freedom. I’ll never have to live with my parents again, and there’s no fear I’ll be putting Jack’s death behind me, because he lived within these walls. And I’ve never felt closer to him.

Everyone has a story. Harry wanted to provide for Greg. Andy wants the materialistic perks. Someone else wants his mother to never have to work another day in her life. But most do it for the luxuries. With my uncertainty and slight distaste for Poppy, I stereotype her as the flashy type. But Harry claims she lives with her father, spending her cash elsewhere. We’ve had a few run-ins but never spoken face-to-face. It’s clear her hatred for us Thomases doesn’t end with my brother.

Harry pushes open a solid oak door, and I crouch beneath his arm before falling into step beside him as we walk down a long hallway. A man of similar age to his, with light blond hair and olive skin, sits perched on the end of a bench, holding his phone in front of his face as he awaits a video call.

“What’s his story?” I whisper, watching as the humble man smiles as someone picks up.

“How are you doing, kiddo? I’ll be home soon,” the man says before a child’s voice comes through the speaker.

“That’s Oliver Lark. One of the soundest people you’ll ever meet. He just wants to provide a legacy for his son,” Harry says, most likely referring to the young boy he was speaking with.

Heat sparks in my chest.

“If anyone is majorly injured then they go to medical. Hopefully, it never comes down to that.” He spares me a glance. “It’s not worth someone going to hospital with a bullet wound as it’ll draw suspicion. The injured head straight here, where they’ll find doctors and surgeons available with the proper necessities. If you need surgery or a leg amputated, you’re in no better hands.”

I blink suddenly to hide my shock. “Medical. Got it.”

Leading us down the corridor, Harry nods his head towards the wing occupied with people in blue scrubs, standing on pristine tile floors that look like they’ve been plucked straight out of a hospital. Someone is wheeled past in a stretcher, and I’m forced to double-take as a nurse whips the privacy curtain closed.

“Scared yet?” Harry asks.

“Nope.”

“It’s not too late to back out.”

I scowl, turning to him. “Not happening.”

His gaze is incredibly captivating even being on the wrong end of it. And my body seems to remember just how easily I react to him. My core tightens with need, my lips parting on a shallow breath at the mere thought of his hands on me. God, what I’d do to have just a moment alone with him without any repercussions.

Noticing my concentration has been knocked, Harry’s eyes drop, focusing on a stray bead of sweat as it falls down my throat. His Adam’s apple bobs and he forces himself to clear his throat, tearing his gaze away. As if he can read my mind, he says, “For fuck’s sake, Gigi ...”

My cheeks burn red.

This is going to be so much harder than I thought.

Deciding to change the subject completely, I ask a question that’s been bothering me for a while. “How does all this stuff go unnoticed by the police?”

We reach the end of the hallway and step into the food court. Multiple benches and stools are littered with people on their lunch break. Referring to a table scattered with blueprints, Harry gestures to a man with a buzz cut, tattoos dominating every inch of his skin, who appears to be in his early thirties. “That guy works part-time as a policeman. He’s betraying the bastards

right under their noses. Been in the industry for years and feels fucked over by the system, so he braces us for any lines of enquiry that might lead to us.”

I nod, impressed, then Harry points to a man beside him. He has a thick head of brown hair and glasses perched on the end of his nose. “Dan’s the tech whizz, hence why we call him Whizz Tech Dan. He deals with the logistical side of things and is the mastermind behind the heists and wiping all evidence clear. Thanks to him, no one has suspected us for years.”

During my moment of admiration for these men, bright orange hair sways in my peripheral vision. Poppy comes striding over like a woman on a mission.

“Harry,” she says with a flirtatious twinge that causes my muscles to stiffen.

“Poppy,” he throws back.

She barely acknowledge my presence, but her words are harsh and full of bitterness. “You haven’t introduced me to the little baby.”

The statement causes the edges of my vision to darken with rage. I’m not totally sure why I allow Harry to call me baby, but when this woman says it, it makes me want to send my fist into her nose. It’s like she knows the name is patronising. Whether she’s trying to taunt my height or insinuate that I’m not adult enough to be here, it solidifies my hatred for her.

Harry seems to notice how my body coils and my fists clench at the name. Subtly hooking his forefinger around the belt loop of my jeans, he pulls me back, attempting to put space between us.

“It’s strange …” I say, unable to help myself. “The only other Penelope I knew was my family’s pet pig. I guess there are more similarities there than just your name.”

Harry stifles a laugh, hiding the full extent of it by biting his fist.

Shock flies through Poppy as she eyes me with fury, but she manages to recover fast.

“It’s a shame, what happened to your brother.” She steps closer, her voice dropping to a hushed whisper. “He was always a good shag. He had nothing on Harry – though I imagine you probably know that.”

I see red as she pulls back. “You fucking—”

Harry catches my elbows and pulls me against his chest. A few heads in the room turn to us, witnessing the commotion, but I barely notice them, only imagining the blissful sight of blood coating Poppy’s hairline.

“Fuck off, Poppy, and go bother someone else,” Harry barks.

Tugging me backwards, he leads us out of the room and into the hallway. He releases my arms, and I step back from him instantly as if it burns to be near him.

“I hate her,” I huff.

“She was taunting you, and you fell for it.”

Damn right I fell for it. While I expected the comment about Jack, her bringing up Harry in that manner sparked anger and a protective instinct that I’ve been refusing to admit exists. No matter how intense the emotions feel, no matter how much they try to overwhelm me, I can’t allow them to sabotage my success in the Circle. And I’ll keep telling myself that – no matter how much my body tries to deny it.

“Well, she hit a soft spot.”

“I warned you to stay away from her.”

Ignoring his statement, I ask. “What happened between the two of you?”

Profile strong and rigid, he looks away.

“Harry?” I prompt. “Did you do anything with her?”

“No.”

“Then why did she say that?”

“Let’s go outside.”

I shake my head. “Just tell me.”

He sighs, tilting his head back against the wall he’s leaning against. “She pushed for things to happen … a few times.”

“For fuck’s sake, Harry.”

Silence stretches between the two of us, and I rub at my temples as if it’ll push away the images running wild in my head. “So nothing ever …?”

His spine snaps straight. “Fuck no.”

“Swear to me.”

Pushing off from the wall, he cups my cheeks in his strong hands, forcing my gaze up into his. With the emotion of how he’s looking at me, he’s screwed all morals for these precious few seconds.

“I swear to you, baby.”

Stroking his thumb across my cheekbone with agonising slowness, his eyes dart down to the movement. I savour the touch through the dangerous game we’re playing until he eventually steps away.

After I finally agree to the invitation to step outside, we reach an oversized patio that occupies the space between the main complex and the outbuildings. Trees line spots in the concrete, and people sit perched on benches.

I welcome the fresh air against my skin. When I tilt my head back to inhale a deep breath, my eyes catch on something way over a hundred feet above my head, and at least a hundred yards in length.

“What’s that?” I ask.

Hanging between two large buildings is a piece of rope. It moves in the wind, but that’s not what caught my gaze. In the very centre of the rope is a crown, almost like a tiara. Someone would have had to risk their life putting that in place.

Harry follows my gaze and chuckles. “Your brother.”

I turn to him. “What?”

“He put it there. Jack, Andy, and a few of the women got drunk on some expensive wine in Richard’s office. He took one of the tiaras from Pixies and hung it up there, claimed he almost lost his life doing it. No one dares step up there to prove otherwise.”

The thought brings a smile to my face. Of course Jack would choose to do something so chaotic.

“Pixies?” I ask.

Turning to me deep in thought, he asks. “Hmm?”

“You said he got the tiara from Pixies.”

“It’s kind of a cross between a burlesque club, a strip club, and a sex club ... just without the sex. Some girls have been known to dance there as part of their initiation – their success depends on the magnitude of applause.”

“Do you think I’ll have to?”

His jaw tightens. “It’s not guaranteed. As part of Poppy’s initiation, she was made to do the opening number. She looked a right mess. She was destined to fail until she flashed her tits to the crowd and got a standing ovation.”

I scoff and shake my head. Despite my disdain towards her, I can’t help but mentally applaud her dedication. *Atta girl.*

Barely having a moment to agonise over whether Harry enjoyed the sight, he says, “We’ll be going there tomorrow night, so make sure to wear something pretty.”

I look up at him with a playful smirk. “I already am pretty.”

“No, baby.” He looks down into my eyes, his fingers flexing like he wants to hold me. “You’re beautiful.”

TWENTY-NINE

Harry

Even when I force myself to look away from her, her reflection is in the mirrors on the four walls, taunting me. It's like a shrinking box tugging me closer to her. And if it's not those big eyes drawing me in, it's the shape of her body in gym wear. The way the material clings to her hips and thighs sends my emotions haywire.

"You punch like a girl."

"I am a girl!" she spits back, flustered.

This whole "training" malarkey has ended up being a huge pain in my ass. My fists aren't the only thing I'm putting up to improve her defence and attack skills – my cock's getting a massive workout too. The levels of restraint I've had to exhibit over the past few hours are unlike anything I've ever known.

Gigi is in nothing more than gym shorts and a sports bra that brings my sight straight to her chest—

For fuck's sake, I just looked again.

Sex is out of the question. It's most definitely not even worth considering. *But what if—*

I start reciting UK Prime Ministers to bring myself off the ledge.

When I block another one of her advances on the pad, she huffs out in frustration and pushes back a loose strand of hair with the underside of her glove.

"Why can't we do hand-to-hand instead?" she argues, growing tired. "We've been doing this all day, and boxing might not even be one of the tasks I'll face."

"Possibly not." I shrug. "I want a jab, cross, left hook combo, quick succession."

"No way." She shakes her head, puffing out a heavy breath. "I'm giving up for today."

Barging past me, she storms over to the rack of gym equipment, undoing a glove and ripping the ties of the other one loose with her teeth.

She's right. Boxing might not be on the agenda for her, but not training for the possibility is a risk I'm not willing to take. I know she can handle herself – she had Jack as a trainer, for fuck's sake – but you can't just throw around punches and elbows in boxing. There's a precise set of rules she'll have to follow. If she doesn't practise combinations and blocking, she'll unleash all her anger in the first round and drain herself before the bell has even rung.

Word around the block is that Poppy's been taking up a few extra sessions in the sparring gym, and I wouldn't put it past her to take pride in punching Gigi in the face at any given opportunity. It's nothing new that Poppy is threatened by Gigi's arrival. I'm certain she's desperate to knock her off the pedestal.

I stalk towards Gigi, pointing at her as I rip off both pads. "We're not done here."

When I reach her, she spins and knocks me off my feet in one movement. The surprise has me tumbling backwards onto the padded mat. In an instant she pins my body to the floor, restricting my throat with her forearm.

She grins with pride. "I don't need training to defend myself, pretty boy."

If I wasn't so turned on, I'd comment on her technique. Instead I taunt, "Element of surprise. Cute."

This angers her.

Slipping her hand behind her, she quickly pulls a knife out from the back of her shorts and brings it down to my neck as if it's some sort of fucking game.

"Where the fuck did you get a knife?"

She smirks. "The kitchen."

That corrupt little monster.

"The problem is, baby ..." I bring my head up, ignoring the nick of the blade against my skin as I skim my lips dangerously close to hers. "I don't care if you kill me. As long as your pretty hands are the last thing to touch my body, then I'll die a happy man."

No matter how much the feel of her lips scrambles my senses, I refuse to miss a beat. Sending her body spiralling underneath me, I pin her pelvis down with mine, slipping the blade from her fingertips so easily it's comical. With the knife still in hand, I pin her wrists above her head, and I see the moment her memories come flooding back. Her body bows off the floor and she squeezes her thighs around my hips as if she's drunk on lust. I fight every instinct deep within my body to grind myself between her parted legs and feel how much she craves me.

As quickly as it appears, I watch the cloud of lust in her eyes evaporate. She huffs like I've aggravated her, pushing at my chest while she gets to her feet.

"You're a dick."

Propping my head up with the heel of my palm, I turn to my side and twirl the knife handle between the fingertips of my spare hand. "You're the one who doesn't want us to be together."

Her back is turned to me as she digs through her bag, but I can picture her eyes rolling as she says, "I'm not prepared to break the rules. You shouldn't be either."

"Trust me, I know what your thoughts are."

I hear the mumbling of profanities beneath her breath as she fastens the strap of the bag over her shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"None of your business."

Fine.

We're playing that game.

As she takes a step towards the door, I pinch the tip of the blade between my thumb and forefinger, squinting as I zero in on my target. Just as she dares a step forwards, I flick my wrist and let go of the knife, watching it fly through the air and land directly in front of her, barely missing her stomach.

She whips her head towards me, anger coursing through those pretty eyes. "HARRY!"

"I asked you a question, baby ..."

"Stop calling me that!"

I tilt my head. "Stop calling you what?"

"That! You think this is easy for me?" She jabs a finger into her chest. "Trying to resist you?"

Her eyes meet mine, tired and tearful.

"Did you know it was Mia's birthday yesterday?" Gigi asks, puffing out a slow, steady breath. "Her fucking birthday. And you know what I did? Nothing! I did nothing. I hate it, but this is the price I'm willing to pay if it means I can join. If Jack had —"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I rise to my feet, barely containing my scoff. "You're doing this for him? He's not even around anymore."

"Stop."

"You can't compete with a ghost! Trust me, he wouldn't want this for you. If he knew for a second what you were about to go through—"

"STOP!" she shouts, throwing her bag to the floor.

I run a hand down my face in frustration. "You need to believe me."

"How would you know what he wants?"

I meet her stare and see the glaze of tears sprinkled across her vision. It tugs at my heartstrings, knowing I caused that reaction. The last thing I want is to be the cause of her torture.

I exhale a breath and say, "Because he told me."

"He ... told you?"

I tear my gaze from hers. "Put the gloves back on."

Her fists tighten at her sides. "No."

"Put the gloves back on, and I'll give you the answers you want."

She glances over at where they lie abandoned on the floor and quickly squeezes her eyes shut before she can think better of it. Picking her bag back up, she holds it tight, placing it back on her shoulder. "Please don't do this, Harry. Just let me go."

Four words. An infinite number of meanings.

The issue is ... I'd follow her for my entire life – even if I died trying.



The little monster and I are heading to Pixies tonight. It'll be her first time visiting the place that reeks of champagne, money,

and impending doom. It's hard to explain the dress code for the club, but most men choose to wear a variation of formal attire. The Circle's male recruits are forced to wear a strict dress code at galas and lavish events – black suits and white shirts so we're easily plucked from the rest – but Pixies is free rein, so jeans and a shirt will fit the bill for this evening.

I wasn't lying when I said Jack told me he didn't want Gigi to be a part of this life. It's been eating away at me since I confessed it to her, so I make myself a promise that when I see her next I'll come clean. But when I knock at her new apartment and a quiet, "Come in," sounds through the door, my steps falter.

The door is unlocked, and I make a mental note to complain about that later. She thinks she knows how to protect herself and she leaves her door unlocked? Not cool. And with how fucking breath-taking she looks in the reflection of the mirror, I wouldn't put it past someone to snatch her at a moment's notice.

Christ, she's stunning.

My pulse quickens at the sight of her, and I'm forced to drop my head to stop myself from mentally undressing her. But from the way her body fills the dress and the fabric effortlessly shows the dip in her waist, the action is pointless.

I busy myself rolling up my shirtsleeves to my forearms. When I brave a look back at the mirror, she's struggling with trying to fasten her necklace.

"May I?" I ask, my voice soft.

She passes me the necklace and I take it between my hands, struggling with the little clasp but persevering anyway. When I lean over her shoulder to bring the chain from the top of her chest to her neck, I inhale the scent of her perfume and my eyes threaten to roll at the sweetness.

"You look beautiful, if it isn't completely obvious."

"Thank you."

There's nothing overly special about the dress she's wearing, but it doesn't need to be – it's the way she wears it that's sensational. The little black dress is sophisticated, and it gives way to a square neckline and short sleeves that show off her glowing skin.

As if I don't have control over my actions, my hand finds the back of her thigh. I flex my fingers before slipping my hand against her skin and pushing under the fabric of her dress, my fingertips skimming the silk of her underwear.

She tilts her head back onto my shoulder, struggling for breath, and when I discover her arousal we both release a breathless moan.

"Harry ..." she whimpers.

I bring my other hand up the front of her body, over her chest, until I'm cupping her jaw, encouraging her to look at our reflection. Showing her what we could have. My fingers tease her slit, and she wraps her own tightly around my wrist.

"Tell Richard you're quitting, and I'll give you what you want."

Anger overtakes the lust, and she turns back to me with drooped shoulders. Her lips form a thin line as she tries to act unfazed by the interaction.

"I hate you."

"Your words say one thing and your pussy says another. You don't hate me, baby." I bring my fingers to my mouth, sucking with a swirl of my tongue.

Her posture straightens, and to the naked eye she'd look the picture of composure, but I know she's flustered.

She tries to barge past me, but her movements halt as I say, "Jack talked about you a lot. He told me to never let you into this world. He knew what he was doing was wrong and he was lying to his whole family. He felt awful. Your brother cared about you so much, Gigi."

She sniffs, and I raise my thumb to her cheek, catching the stray tear and savouring the feel of her.

"You haven't asked me about him any further. And I won't push you to talk until you're ready. But I will say this ... He said this place would be the death of you. He also said that if you somehow manage to succeed, you're capable of being the greatest weapon we've ever seen."

THIRTY

Sigi

Considering the Circle's recruits aren't allowed to hook up with one another, Pixies is allegedly the go-to place for matchmaking. The club is situated in a bustling back street in Shoreditch, and it's attended by some of the most eligible bachelors in the city.

With a hand on my lower back, Harry ushers me through the front entrance with a nod to the bodyguard controlling the front door. I watch in surprise as girls crowd the length of the street, waving about their resumes in the hope of being hired. Despite their perseverance, I've been told the main staff are women within the society, working either to appease our boss or to earn some extra cash.

We walk down a cascade of steps that causes my thighs to burn, and when I truly don't think we can walk much further we keep going ... until we finally reach a room that should never see natural light. The dark ambience, with its pink strobe lights and sleek furnishings, is incredibly erotic, causing the skin Harry rudely teased earlier to burn with desire.

To add to the mix, he looks incredible tonight. The dark shirt struggles to accommodate his biceps, and I suddenly forget all the reasons I don't want him. I'm reminiscing about how his forearms strained as he ran his fingers over—

Nope. Nope. Not thinking about it.

Pixies isn't huge. Modest, if you will. The Boss owns the property, but he must have conspired with an interior designer, because it's nothing short of spectacular. Pink and red curtains decorate the walls, emphasising the stage, where women prance around in their lingerie. Meanwhile the bar is stocked with vintage wines and liqueur and lined with a rich velvet fabric that runs across the back wall.

Sitting on plush chairs at circular tables or inside the booths, rich businessmen gawk at the half-naked women onstage while their trophy wives turn a blind eye.

Despite it not being obligatory to get down on the dance floor and shake whatcha' mumma gave ya', I imagine the performers would argue it's a small price to pay in exchange for the wealth and power they've gained throughout the years. While the idea of stripping down to my bare bones should make my skin crawl, I'd be lying if I said a part of me isn't intrigued. Their confidence bounces off the walls, and even if the male gaze should be off-putting, it puts a soft blush on my cheeks.

Air is sucked from my chest as Harry fists the back of my dress.

"Don't even think about it."

"I was joking," I say, referencing my heated cheeks.

Andy chuckles, warning half-seriously, "He wasn't."

Harry leans down, brushing his lips against the shell of my ear. I check my surroundings, making sure nobody witnesses my body screaming for him as he whispers, "I'd gouge the eyes out of every man who caught a glimpse of you on that stage. And I don't make threats I don't intend to keep."

"Don't be so dramatic." Ignoring the spark of something peculiar in my abdomen, I add, "I'm not yours to protect, remember?"

He stares back in silence.

We reach the bar, crowding near the end since all the seats are occupied. Andy orders for the three of us, and I welcome the tart taste of cranberry against my lips. He chuckles, the sound vibrating his glass of beer and causing the contents to spill over the edge.

"Look at her go."

"Who is it?" I ask, following his sight to the stage.

"It's Poppy," Andy says, finding amusement in my shock. "You'd never recognise her, would you?"

I watch, holding back a shocked scoff as she embraces the attention with an extra swagger in her step. I wouldn't have even recognised her. She's wearing a costume wig to conceal her real identity, and her confidence is blinding.

I turn to Harry, intending to see what's keeping him so quiet, but there's a distant look in his eyes. He stares at my hand where it hangs loosely at my side, watching it with the same levels of concentration as he'd give to an intricate jigsaw puzzle. Ever so slowly, he stretches out his finger and brushes his skin against the back of my hand. I've been so hell-bent on trying to join this society and throwing all consequences aside that I haven't even considered how detrimental this could be to his mental health.

My selfishness must be slowly killing this man.

I don't want him to get in my way, but fucking hell, I do. If anyone would be able to convince me otherwise, it's him. That's why I've been refusing his advances – I fear the hold he has on me will tear down my barricades with force and invoke a feeling stronger than my tunnel vision to succeed.

I slowly raise my head, finding his eyes fixed on mine. "Harry—"

"Trouble incoming," Andy says, disguising his warning with a sip of his drink.

Mine and Harry's hands rip apart as if sparked by a current.

He turns his back, busying himself at the bar, as I plaster on a smile at hearing heavy footsteps approach.

"Gigi, so glad you could make it."

The Boss looks identical to how I always see him – in an immaculate suit, with his greying hair gelled to within an inch of its life. I thought Pixies had more of a toned-down dress code, but it seems to be a rarity to see him in anything other than business attire.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," I tell him.

"What do you think of the place?"

"It really lives up to expectations. It's beautiful."

And it really is.

When I look around to appreciate the interior again I meet Harry's stare. He watches the interaction with scepticism. There's another drink at his side with my name on it, since I already downed my first with surprising speed. I smile at the offering, determined to have a drink with him and flush out whatever this is between us.

As if he can sense my escape approaching, the Boss says, "While I have you, there's someone I want you to meet." Without giving me a chance to interject, he presses a hand to my lower back and beckons me forwards.

All the tables in the venue are within eyesight – a layout I bet was implemented so he could spot everyone's presence. Yet I'm led to a corner concealed by a thick curtain. The privacy is unlike the rest of the venue – whoever has the luxury of sitting here also has the benefit of not being watched by wandering eyes. A bodyguard lets us through, pulling back the curtain to display a large circular booth. Five men take up the space, all with a perfect view of the stage. I don't recognise any of them at first until intimidating dark brown eyes meet mine.

"Gigi, I'd like you to meet—"

"You're Hudson Anderson, right?" I ask, my interest piqued.

His smirk is cocky but far from the flashy kind. "You are correct, young lady."

Hudson fucking Anderson. I've seen him on the cover of *GQ* more times than I'd like to admit. I'm also pretty sure this is the only man my mum has ever envisioned her daughter with. Talk about the most eligible bachelor ... but untouchable in every respect.

Rumour has it that unlike the old men in this establishment, who are desperate for a bit of young ass on their plate, Hudson hasn't been spotted with a woman in public for years. Women practically throw themselves at him, but he's not interested. He's a true gentleman, some might say. He treats ladies with respect, and while a few of his friends' eyes drop to my cleavage, his gaze never falters.

The last time I checked, Hudson is in his mid-thirties, yet his dark hair is still impressively thick, matching the light stubble adorning the lower half of his face. Even from his seat I can tell he towers above six feet. I have to give it to him – he looks dashing dressed in designer from head to toe, from his *Tom Ford* suit to his *Gucci* shoes. The top few buttons of his shirt are undone to imply he's relaxed, but the three-piece suit says otherwise. I guess for people like him business never stops.

Supposedly, Hudson has more money than sense and could give even the Boss a run for his money, which probably explains why Richard's adamant to provide him with the VIP treatment.

"I've heard a lot of things about you," I say.

He stands up from his seat behind the booth, offering me his hand. When I hold it out to him hesitantly, he grips my fingertips, pressing my knuckles to his lips.

"Only good things, I hope," he says, genuine concern in his voice.

He doesn't break eye contact as he peppers a kiss on my skin. I smile quickly, hoping to hide my flushed expression as I politely drop my hand from his grip.

"Are you busy?" he asks. "Please, sit."

"Oh," I say, taken aback by the kind gesture.

Someone pushes a chair against the backs of my knees, forcing me onto it. I fall against the fabric with a huff, and Hudson is

nothing but smiles as the Boss eagerly takes a seat beside me.

“Rich, did you see the latest heist hit the papers this morning?” he asks. “I really admire that person of yours who’s stopping all this from leaking to the police.”

“I only allow the best in this company,” the Boss says, his words lingering in the air.

The men start discussing their latest business, and I sit in my seat, listening with intrigue. From what I’ve gathered, several heists are occurring at once. Some have been years in the making, while others take nothing short of a few days. No wonder they say it’s a life worth dying for. The Circle isn’t just an occupation – it’s people’s livelihood.

“Will you be working here?” Hudson asks, breaking me from my trance.

I blink, surprised by the question. I chance a look at the Boss, and he raises a brow, waiting for my answer.

Why’s he giving me the opportunity to speak? I thought only society members worked here.

“Oh ...” I force myself to swallow. “I’m not sure.”

“Ah. You’re not part of their inner group yet, are you?” Hudson asks. When I shake my head, he grins and turns to the Boss.

“Aren’t you going to help the girl out? Give her a little bit of a heads-up, for crying out loud.”

“I don’t give special treatment. No matter what legacy she has to live up to.”

Hudson nods slowly, stating, “She’s a Thomas.”

I shake my head in disbelief at the idea another person is withholding secrets about my own blood. It’s becoming difficult to keep up at this point.

“You knew Jack too?”

Hudson smiles, ignoring the question as he says, “I hope you have a magnificent night, Miss Thomas.”

I sit in silence, pondering the sudden farewell. This isn’t the only time people have brushed off my mention of Jack. It’s getting tiring. Harry even acknowledged that I haven’t pressed further about him ... I fear I’m losing my determination to find answers in chasing this new lease of life.

By the time I’ve left the booth I find myself with more questions than I started with. When I reach the main bar and approach the others, Harry’s eyes run over me with concern. “What was all that about?”

“Nothing,” I say.

Peering over my shoulder, I look towards the concealed booth, feeling an unnerving suspicion that someone’s eyes are on me.

THIRTY-ONE

Harry

Hudson fucking Anderson.

There's only so much hiding a guy can attempt. It cost me a sensible bribe – just shy of a grand – to have Whizz Tech Dan hack the security footage. The CCTV should be foolproof since it uses some of the most ruthless software known to man, but thankfully, Dan set it up, meaning he's the only person in existence who can gain access.

The interaction seems pretty fucking civil as I watch the footage. Christ, Hudson looks like a sound guy ... until he taints Gigi's skin with his lips. An anger so intense it could only be treated by spilling blood swarms my body at the sight. Luckily, Richard has someone down in the cellar that he needs information extracting from. I welcome the opportunity with open arms. It's been some sweet and sick torture not having an outlet for my rage, especially since my case of blue balls is becoming increasingly tiresome.

Andy passes me the paperwork as we pace down the halls towards the interrogation quarter. Ours are unlike any other – they're a lot more ... sinister. We've chosen the smallest of the bunch, a vast space of approximately one thousand square feet. Rubble is scattered on the concrete floors and graffiti decorates the walls, allowing our victims to assume we've escorted them to an abandoned building. Little do they know, they're in our fucking territory.

I run my eyes over the paperwork, picking apart the crucial information as Andy unlocks the heavy fireproof door that leads us to the floor below.

Russo De Luca.

Some descendent of the Mafia who got caught snooping at one of Richard's offices in South London, no doubt searching for information the Italians could use to blackmail him.

That's the problem when you're in a position like Richard's: someone will always be itching to fill your shoes. Luckily, he's always one step ahead of them. The cruel reality is, I wish they had extracted a juicy fucking tell. Hell, I'd praise them for it, but I'm not supposed to get involved in politics. My job is to extract the information out of this guy by any means necessary.

"The Boss isn't going in with us on this one," Andy says, a calmness to his voice as we walk down the hall. "Whizz Tech Dan caught CCTV footage of him on the phone with a man named Paolo. Records check out as a distant uncle who's hired us before for an assassination."

I nod.

"Richard said to have fun trying to extract the information, but otherwise he's useless."

This doesn't surprise me. It always tends to be snakes we've worked for in the past who are intimidated by our work, wanting to tear apart our society from the inside out.

I pocket the paperwork in the back of my jeans, preparing for business. Richard would have visited him shortly before our arrival, alerting Russo of our incoming presence. He'll know he's going to die today.

As we unlock the wrought iron door into his interrogation room, the stale scent of urine fills my nose. Turning the corner, I jut out my bottom lip. The poor fucker has pissed himself. We haven't even started yet.

Andy and I simultaneously approach the table littered with torture devices. Ignoring the victim's presence is one of the most crucial parts of the process – it's jarring and will stray their attention from withholding information.

Russo says nothing except for a few grunts as he struggles in the lone wooden chair in the centre of the room. He's restricted with iron cuffs since we found out rope was prone to burning during the odd torture method.

"What about these?" my friend asks, holding up the pliers.

We both turn to Russo, and his eyes balloon in fear. I cock an eyebrow but shake my head, turning back to the table. The pliers are normally one of my favourite methods, along with ripping out a few teeth, but seeing as this guy has replaced most of his molars with gold, he's probably immune to extraction.

Besides, I'm more in the mood for getting my hands dirty today.

We are looking to spill blood after all.

People may say otherwise, but nothing beats a knife. It fits comfortably in your hand, and nothing quite surpasses the feeling of a staggered pulse in your palm, vibrating against the blade.

Once I've opted for a simple switchblade, I nod at Andy to get started with the interrogation.

As I dry my hands with a cloth for no other reason than to heighten suspicion, eyes burn into the back of my head. I turn around to watch Andy trudging towards Russo, dropping the bucket of water at his side with an echoed clunk and causing water to spill over the rim.

Andy kicks the top of his chair and Russo's back falls to the floor. He's barely able to spit pleas of mercy before Andy covers his mouth and nose with a cloth, pouring the bucket of water over his face. Our victim thrashes back and forth, stuttering for breath against the rag, but he'll only find himself suffocating due to the water.

Leaning back against the table, I cross my legs at the ankles and fold my arms over my chest, watching my friend do what he does best as the excess water pours down the grate below his feet. Just when Russo is on the brink of unconsciousness, Andy drops the bucket and pulls the chair upright.

Spluttering water up from his throat, Russo vomits, spoiling the ground. Andy's face drops all emotion with impressive speed.

"Let's cut to the chase, Russo," he says. "You tell us what you were doing in South London, and we'll let you go."

"Y-yeah, right." He pants, his harsh cough stained with spots of blood.

"I'm a good man. You have no reason not to trust me."

"You almost fucking killed me!"

"I don't like being spoken to like that, Russo. Maybe my methods weren't harsh enough." Andy places his thick boot on the top of the wooden chair, ready to continue with the torture, but Russo's eyes widen.

"Wait, wait, wait!" he yells. "I was collecting information."

"What kind of information?" I ask, butting in.

"I don't fucking know! My boss said I'd know it when I saw it."

"You're talking about Paolo Ricci, right?"

He nods his head slowly.

My brow furrows as I say, "It seems highly unlikely your boss would send you to all that trouble without being more specific. Having worked with him before personally, I know he's extra precise with how he wants his jobs done."

I take my steps slowly, and Russo turns rigid the closer I approach. His dull eyes are now frantic as I stand less than a metre from him.

Andy chimes in. "He liked the torturous methods the most. The ones where our targets plead for us to kill them because the torment is too much."

Losing composure, a roar tears free from Russo's throat and he starts to thrash against the cuffs, the iron slicing his wrists to shreds. "What's the point in fucking telling you anything? I'm a dead man anyway!"

True.

I crouch down beside him, toying with the knife's handle, before I grin and say, "Entertain me."

"Fuck you, man!" he spits, fighting against the restraints with all his might.

Catching the handle in my palm, I lean up and run the tip of the blade over his jugular, towards his shoulder.

"I'll ask you one last time. What information were you looking for?"

I push the tip of my blade into his shoulder, piercing his flesh.

He screams.

I smile.

My knuckles tighten with tension as I imagine twisting my wrist and watching his body flood with panic. Blood would spray from his neck if I assaulted his carotid artery with my blade. It'd be fatal enough to kill him, but slow enough to ensure his death would be long and painful.

As I'm preparing to strike, a cold chill rakes up my spine as an echoing creak fills the space around us.

Mine and Andy's eyes lock.

Who the fuck is that?

I whip my head towards the source of the sound, my eyes landing directly on the door. Strands of long brown hair peek through before a face – one belonging to an angel who just stepped into the depths of hell – peers around the corner.

You've got to be fucking kidding me!

My arms start to vibrate, struggling to keep the composure settled under my skin, as Gigi takes in the space in front of her, looking from Andy, Russo, and me to the rubble beneath our feet. Just as her eyes are about to land on the table full of creative equipment, my composure cracks and I launch my switchblade. Her breath catches as the knife lands in the wood with a *swoosh*, positioning itself just a few inches from her creamy skin.

"Outside. Now!" I demand.

Ignoring my threat, she asks, “What are you doing?”

I’m already storming over to her, blocking out Russo’s pleas of innocence and hoping the little wench in front of me will be his saving grace. I’m enraged to see her eyes alight with intrigue rather than fear.

Pulling her out of the room, I drag the heavy door closed behind us. My hands grip her shoulders. “What the fuck are you doing here!”

“I followed you.”

“What on earth would make you do that?”

She gnaws on her bottom lip, her doe eyes aching to break down the walls of my fury. “I wanted to watch.”

“You wanted to watch,” I repeat sarcastically.

She should be running for the hills after witnessing what occurred behind the door, but instead she wants to stay and watch. What if she’d stayed to witness me plunging my knife into Russo’s throat? Jesus Christ.

As my thoughts become docile I finally notice Russo’s pleas have ceased. Andy must have finished the job. With the intrigue on Gigi’s face, she must have come to the same conclusion. Her eyes flicker to the closed door over my shoulder.

My jaw tightens. “You are not ready for this.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, her cheeks go red with warmth. “You’re scared of what I’ll become.”

“Of course I’m fucking scared!” I say in a hushed whisper. “This is not the life for a woman.”

She retreats a step, stammering, “There’s other women here.”

True, but they’re not my woman.

With my silence angering her, Gigi demands, “What about Poppy?”

I scoff. “I don’t even think she’s human at this point. She’s an anomaly.”

“Then let me be one too,” she pleads, touching my hands, which still rest on her shoulders.

At the realisation I’m stroking my thumbs over her skin, I snap my hands away. Words can’t do my anger justice, so I simply shake my head. And while I’m at it, I stand back to physically distance myself, because her touch is too damning.

I can’t accept her in this life. It goes against everything I’ve ever fought for since I met her. I’m not a fucking gentleman, but I’ve always prided myself on the fact I’d protect this woman until the very end.

And I’ll continue to do so even if I die trying ... but I can feel my lifeline faltering.

THIRTY-TWO

Bigi

I think I'm in love with Oliver Lark.

He's the perfect father figure to his little boy, and it's seemingly the cherry on top of the cake. Watching him like a lovesick fool, I press my cheek into the palm of my hand as he talks with his heart on his sleeve.

"He's a little terror, but I love the little rascal."

"How old is he again?" I ask.

"He turned five a few weeks back. He just started primary school, but the wife and I are taking him to Disneyland in the school holidays."

My heart swells with warmth as I insist, "He'll love it!"

The corners of his lips lift into a smile, the apples of his cheeks reaching his eyes with the movement. "A few more months and I'm out of here. I'm ready to be the best husband and father possible—"

"Thomas!" someone bellows.

It takes me a second to recognise the voice shouting at me. When I crane my neck to look over my shoulder, Harry's storming through the food hall. He has a gym bag slung over his shoulder, and he barely spares me a glance as he says, "Meet me in the gym in ten minutes."

Blimey, what's got his knickers in a twist?

The door bounces on its hinges as he leaves the room, and I stand there in a huff.

"I guess that's my cue to leave."

"Go ahead. You don't want to get on the wrong end of St. James – especially on one of his bad days."

"Trust me, I know," I say, hoping he doesn't pick up on the insinuation in my voice.



I'm in one of those private rooms – the kind with mirrors covering every wall – that Harry and I have been using for our sparring sessions. I'm thankful for the privacy, yet the glass door won't stop wandering eyes from noticing my blush as he gets all alpha during training. While I'm in the middle of tightening the straps on one of my gloves the door swings open.

"Take off the gloves," Harry orders, storming over to the corner and dropping his bag. "We're changing things up today."

There's no comfort in his voice. He speaks with the authority a teacher would use with their student. I catch his true reflection in the mirror and notice harsh lines etched between his brows as if he's fighting his true feelings.

I grin and pull the gloves off. "It's about time."

With his back still turned, he says, "You want hand-to-hand combat, I'll give it to you."

I walk to the centre of the room and jump around on the tips of my toes to psyche myself up. Yet nothing can prepare me for the way he pulls his T-shirt over his head and discards it on the floor. As he approaches me in the centre of the room I take a step back warily, my eyes dropping down to his naked chest. Have his muscles *grown* since the last time I saw him? My eyes dart back to the glass door, feeling as if what I just witnessed was illegal.

I fight the desperate urge to spare him another glance and ask, "Is that really necessary?"

"You wanted this, remember? I won't hold back."

Are we talking about the hand-to-hand combat still? Because I'm certain there must be a catch. After he caught me snooping in the basement, there's no way he's willing to give me what I want.

My eyes flicker back down to his chest and the tattoos stretching to his muscled abdomen.

I'm ripped from my trance when he demands, "Hit me."

Right, he's having me on. Hilarious.

A flicker of amusement washes over his eyes, causing the edges of his lips to twitch into a grin. While I've thought about punching Harry more times than I'd like to admit, I doubt he's suggesting I hurt him out of self-satisfaction.

"Tempting."

"I'm being serious."

Hmm.

Well, that changes things then ...

"It's your funeral," I say.

He laughs, and the sound goes straight through me, rattling my bones. Does he not trust that I'll hurt him? As anger helps the precision of my shot, I protect my thumb in my curled fist and aim it right at the idiot's irresistible fucking mouth.

He shoves my forearm away before I've even made contact.

"Again."

My legs stumble from the missed shot, but I shrug my shoulders as if I'm brushing off the failure. "This is stupid."

"Is that what an attacker will say when you've been tortured and held captive? Will he tell you it's fucking *stupid* that you're trying to hit him?"

I thought we were training for my initiation – why's he throwing real-world scenarios into the mix? Where has all this come from? *Captive? Attacker? Torture?*

"What's gotten into you?"

Ignoring my question, he insists, "Again."

Refusing to argue, I draw my arm back and aim to punch him once more, but he blocks the move, catching my attempt before I've even come within a few inches of him.

"Again!"

My lungs tire as I try again.

He grabs my fist, halting my movements.

So I try again.

He blocks and exhales a sigh. "Again."

My rage increases. With each attempt I feel my throws getting slightly stronger, and now I really want to hit the bastard. Heat starts to prick the back of my neck, and I can feel the hairs at my nape sticking to my clammy skin.

Catching my breath with yet another hit, I throw my arm out. It's the closest I've come to making contact, but he blocks the hit with ease.

"Better. Now try again."

I suck in gasps of air, resting my hands on my knees, my eyes travelling over his naked torso. The exhilaration of the workout and the thick determination of wanting to hurt Harry completely distracted me from his muscular chest. It's light work for him, but regardless, his skin glistens with a light sheen of sweat—

A palm hits the side of my head.

"What the fuck!" I pant.

"You're distracted."

"That's unfair."

He tilts his head to the side like the cocky bastard he is. His smirk is as clear as the trail of hair leading from his belly button to the waistband of his shorts as he asks, "How so?"

"You got shirtless on purpose!"

And suddenly I'm pushed against the wall of the gym, my arms caught in Harry's strong grip on either side of me. He presses his body to mine, his bare chest flush against my bra-cladded one. We're caught in a hot and sweaty mess of flesh and panting breaths.

Is that ... hunger in his eyes? I'm tempted to second-guess the emotion, but it instantly solidifies when he firmly presses his hard cock against my stomach. All butterflies are preparing to jump ship, sensing he's just seconds from screwing the rules and everything we've worked for.

"You're distracted," he repeats.

"I want a new trainer," I demand, feeling my composure withering.

His face melts into a buttery smile. "Not a fucking chance." His eyes drop to my mouth. "Hit. Me. Again."

Fuck this.

I kick out my leg, hoping the element of surprise will shut him up and hit him right where it hurts. Instead the fucker grabs the underside of my knee and pulls it flush against his hip. He thrusts his hips forwards once, pulling a high-pitched whimper from the back of my throat as he rocks his hard-on against my core.

My eyes squeeze shut, feeling my underwear quickly dampen with arousal.

“Again, baby.”

“I ... I can’t.”

“You can’t ...?” he repeats, cooing sympathetically. “I thought you wanted this?” Torturing me, he hikes my thigh up higher against his hip. His other hand slips up my chest until he’s gripping my throat, his thumb and forefinger squeezing my pressure points and lightly constricting my airways. As I struggle to inhale a breath he grinds his stiff cock torturously between my legs.

“Open your eyes,” he demands, his voice rougher now.

I squeeze them closed even harder, shaking my head. If I don’t look, I’m denying how good it feels to be touched by him.

“Someone will see,” I say, panicked.

He slips his hand underneath the waistband of my leggings, and when he starts to drop his touch lower, to where I crave him, my eyes shoot open. His long fingers run over my damp underwear, and a groan vibrates his throat as a moan falls free from mine.

“Do you feel that?” he asks.

My eyes flicker over to the door as someone walks past, oblivious.

“You’re worried that people will see how your body weeps for me?”

“H-Harry,” I plead, not entirely sure what for.

From the angle of the door, Harry’s body is blocking mine so no passers-by will see what’s happening, but that doesn’t decrease my fear. As if he’s trying to prove his point, he runs his fingers tortuously over my slit covered in cotton.

“What is it, baby?”

When I turn back to him, our faces are just centimetres apart, and I can practically taste him on my lips. While a part of me begs to catch his mouth against my own, an even bigger part screams that this could come with the biggest of punishments.

“You want me to play with this”—he presses his thumb tightly against my enlarged clit—“pretty pussy until you come?”

He pushes my underwear to the side, slipping a finger into my entrance and eradicating all sensible thoughts. With my legs shaking, Harry puts further pressure on my neck, forcing me to arch my back and thrust my hips into his touch.

“I’ll give it to you if that’s what you want. No holding back.”

He’s punishing me.

He’s fucking punishing me.

But I shake my head, perhaps wanting the torture.

My walls clench around his finger, my body betraying me as it aches to kidnap his touch so he never leaves. His fingers on my throat flex, warning me he’s about to tighten his grip, and I suck in a breath. He squeezes and my hips stagger, meeting the thrust of his finger as he pumps it in and out of my entrance.

He thrusts in a second, curling the pair into me and creating a swarm of heat in my lower stomach. I throw my head back, a strangled moan releasing from my throat as he catches my chin between his teeth and nibbles.

My vision is dazed with stars.

Fuck, I feel like I’m going to pass out, but I’m not sure from what first.

Harry thrusts his fingers into me in a deep, torturous impalement, practically pulling an orgasm from me at lightning speed. His fingers are knuckles-deep, and he hooks my leg over his forearm to fuck me deeper.

“You’re fucking soaked, baby. Is that all for me?”

I whine.

He raises his head, bringing his face just inches from mine to stare at me intently. I try to look into his eyes, but the feeling is too strong, the intimacy too intense. When my head starts to lean backwards to break the trance, he releases the hand from my throat and brings it to the back of my neck, forcing me to face him.

He presses his forehead to mine, maintaining eye contact.

I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.

A whimper shakes my lips, pleading for him to break the physical and mental hold he has on me, but my fight is pathetic, my stomach tightening with liquid flames. I can feel myself nearing the crest of my orgasm, only moments away from coming undone.

“I want you to come all over my hand. Can you do that for me?”

His thumb strokes my clit, and my walls tighten around his digits as he pumps them faster.

With how his stare scrutinises mine, I can’t bear to say the words aloud.

Please. Please. Please.

Just like that.

“You’re going to do as I say,” he says. “And you’re not going to stop.”

Hips vibrating under the pressure, I feel the tightening in my stomach expand to my chest as my whole body prepares for the inevitable crash.

Throwing my head back, my skull meets Harry’s hand, and my jaw drops open in a silent cry as I reach the peak of pleasure.

His eyes drink the look on my face and his lips part as if he can physically taste my bliss. He wraps an arm protectively around my waist, concealing this moment in the privacy of our cocoon.

But he doesn't stop there.

"You're going to come again."

I shake my head.

Harry grins, amused.

He pushes a third finger into me, thrusting it in harder and without remorse. As he curls his fingers upwards my hand squeezes his wrist.

It's too much—fuck, it's too much.

My body shudders with aftershocks and my legs threaten to give way beneath me, yet my stomach curls with the intent of chasing another dose of unfathomable pleasure as the next orgasm nears.

"H-Harry!"

He growls in response to the sound of his name, slapping a hand over my mouth to conceal the moan, but even his palm struggles to stifle the sound. I grind and come on his fingers, drenching his hand as he continues to work my body through my orgasm.

I continue to come with every thrust of him inside me, feeling a build-up of adrenaline that refuses to stop. Vibrating as if under the influence of a harsh drug, I fight myself to catch Harry's lips and drain the life from them like he just did to me.

But that's not who we are.

We don't kiss.

And we most certainly don't get each other off for pleasure.

What have I done?

THIRTY-THREE

Harry

It's the morning of Gigi's first initiation test, and I spent yesterday bringing her to orgasm rather than teaching her last-minute techniques – like the fucking cunt I am. That's why it's 5 a.m. and I'm at the shooting range practising my aim with a firearm. The earmuffs are discarded at my feet, the piercing ring borderline sore in my ears but a welcome distraction from my bad decisions.

I'm not sure why my favourite stress release is violence.

Notice someone touching my woman? Forced to spill blood and torture a man.

Torture said woman into oblivion with multiple orgasms? Shoot bullets at a dummy corpse.

An even bigger worry is that my anger hasn't lessened my skill. I've shot the full magazine of bullets with perfect precision right in the heart of the target as if it'll help to ease the ache in mine. Christ, how pathetic.

I keep pulling the trigger even when it's clearly fucking empty, the lone barrel drilling with each shot until I drop it to my feet when I can't stand it anymore. I reckon my aggravation has a lot to do with a five-foot-nothing brunette who should be miles away from this place rather than chasing the opportunity to be a criminal as if it's a fucking sprint.

Her screams after I stained her skin with a poker taint my dreams. That should have been enough to fuel my determination to keep her away, but I'm fucking selfish, and I wanted her close. If she refuses to leave, I have no other option than to keep her near. But it's all come around too fast.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end when the door to the shooting range opens. No one should be in here this early. There are no heists today where extra practice is required.

Crouching to my feet, I hesitantly pick up the firearm as a form of defence even though it's lacking bullets. When Richard rounds the corner, I find myself frowning even further. Still, I straighten my shoulders in greeting.

"Rich—Boss, what are you doing here?"

If he notices my slip-up, he refuses to pick up on it. "Please don't tell me you were going to shoot me, St. James."

"I think I'd die before I even attempted to kill you, sir."

He chuckles, but we understand the truth in the statement. I wouldn't be leaving this room alive if I attempted to assassinate Richard ... no matter how much I fucking ache to.

"It's not like you to be at the range so early in the morning," he says, and my teeth grind as I await what he'll say next. "Something on your mind ...?"

There's no point lying to him. It's one of his worst traits, his ability to sniff a liar from a mile off.

Picking my words carefully, I say, "I think we both know why I'm down here."

He nods. "I imagine it has something to do with someone's initiation later today."

"I suspect she's fighting Green."

He cocks a brow. "Have you told her?"

I shake my head.

I've been sworn to secrecy – he knows that.

Richard takes a few steps closer towards me, and my hands start to shake with the force it takes to refrain from decking him right in the face. He leaves a torturous pause before saying, "If there is any misconduct between you and the Thomas girl, I'll know."

I stop myself from grinding my teeth out of fear he'll hear. "Something tells me we're not talking about the initiation."

He grins, displaying his teeth, but I struggle to see the emotion. "Don't let me down, St. James."

And then he walks away.



Hours later I'm standing on the outskirts of the ring with my arms folded over my chest. Andy stands close by my side, muttering nonsense about some bloke on the undercard having a good right hook. According to the handbook/codex/whatever the fuck it's called – the one we receive when we're accepted into the Circle – recruits are allowed to call on one another to fight out their differences. The cockiest of the bunch tend to use events like this to publicly display their hatred for one another.

Said guy with the good punch knocks his opponent to the floor, and the crowd erupts in chaos. The ref starts counting down from ten, but it's obvious no one is getting up from a shot like that. Poppy stands at the ringside, jumping around on the balls of her feet in preparation. Meanwhile Gigi is in her changing room. I stood outside her door for close to an hour debating whether or not to face her, but I'm a fucking fool, and I chose not to. As soon as the handle twisted, I bolted in the other direction and kept my head down.

The boxing ring isn't square like in typical sports – it's circular in a nod to these people's roots. The whole thing is fucking corrupt, but I can't deny I was an intrigued man once, and I fell for this sort of crap too.

The idea of fighting someone to see whether you're a worthy candidate is fucking cruel, but I'd rather that option over Gigi stripping down naked at Pixies or killing a man like I was forced to.

Before I know it, Andy is tapping my arm as Poppy ducks under the ropes and steps into the ring, waiting for her opponent.

"Who you got money on?"

"Fuck off," I tell him.

"Wouldn't put it past me if Poppy put some illegal shit in her gloves," Oliver says, approaching my side.

I like the guy, but having two people on either side of me sets my teeth on edge, giving me the impression I'm being stared at from all angles. I've yet to see where Richard is hiding out, but it's like I can feel that creep's haunting gaze from a mile off.

Gigi ducks under the ropes and steps into the ring. Without even realising, my right foot is bouncing like I'm some kind of nervous wreck. She's small, especially compared to Poppy, but I don't doubt that with enough training she'd be a fucking warrior. Have we done enough though? I highly doubt it.

Her eyes don't find mine, but I imagine they'd tell me she's nervous too. It doesn't take a genius to know that having a crowd people to witness you potentially getting knocked out is stressful.

"Dude, stop," Andy says, referring to my jittery body.

My heartbeat thumps so loud I'm convinced that if anyone steps much closer, they'll hear it. As if the redhead already has, Poppy turns to me, and she displays her signature fucking smirk.

When the bell rings to signal the start of the fight, I find the rounds go past quickly. The first few minutes, however, feel like fucking hours as I watch from the sidelines. In the first round I genuinely think Gigi might stand a chance. She's blocking punches and throwing jabs in rapid succession, even throwing a few combination shots into the mix. If she doesn't manage to knock Poppy out, then she'll definitely be able to hold until the final whistle.

The second round goes past steadily. She gets a few punches in, and when she busts open Poppy's lip the crowd roars. Her grin is contagious, and I feel my lips spreading like a magnet.

Fuck, this beautiful fucking woman might actually win.

But my hopes are shattered when Gigi turns around after the third bell and suffers a knockout punch to the back of her skull that sends her body folding to the floor.

THIRTY-FOUR

Sigi

That fucking bitch!

The doctor in medical tells me I have lingering signs of a concussion, but above all else I'm fit and healthy. Harry sits at my bedside asking the medic further questions, but I can't hear clearly past the rage muting all noise.

Poppy made an illegal shot after the bell, but the ref ruled the fight in her favour. I blacked out from the hit and woke up five minutes later in a hospital bed. Due to the loss of consciousness, I was forced to receive medical attention. I'll be sent on my merry way soon, with clenched fists and a few painkillers.

I don't realise the doctor has left until Harry turns and says, "Did you hear any of that?"

"Yes," I grunt.

"Is everything okay?"

"Will I get kicked out now?" I query what's really on my mind. "I should be given a fairer chance. That bitch—" The machine I'm strapped to starts to beat frantically with my racing heart, and I tug haphazardly at the wires, ridding myself of them as if they're an itchy layer of skin. "Fuck!"

"Calm down," he says, placing a hand on my knee.

I shove him off. "Don't tell me to calm down. This is all her fault!"

"We'll talk to Richard, don't worry," Harry assures me.

"Talk to me about what?"

The Boss walks in on cue, hands pressed deep into his suit pockets, something akin to disappointment crossing his face. It's a bitter realisation I'm forced to swallow as words become useless.

"Surely, that fight is void," Harry says. "We'll have to call for a rematch."

"How so?" the Boss asks, causing my jaw to clench. "You saw the ref crown our champion. I don't know what else there is to tell you both."

I whip my head towards Harry, pleading silently that he'll make this right. His green-eyed stare meets mine before he turns back.

"The shot was called after the bell! She fucking—"

"And what rules are you referring to, St. James? From what I understand, none were clarified before the start of the round, meaning Poppy's shot was technically within legal limits. Neither I nor anyone in the ring referred to it as a professional boxing match."

No. No. No.

This can't be happening.

"So, what ...?" I answer quickly over my choking, beating heart. "That's it? I'm out?"

The Boss shakes his head, pausing for a beat for a reason I imagine is only to increase my worry. "I will give you one more chance to prove yourself, Thomas."

Oh, thank God.

"You will join the Weathers Bank robbery heist on Friday."

My mouth twitches into a grin. I get another chance at redeeming myself – this is great! Yet the look on Harry's face suggests otherwise.

"But it's Monday," he interjects.

"Are you saying she needs a new trainer?"

Harry stills momentarily, and panic settles in my stomach. "It would help if she knew—"

"If this were a real-world situation, she might have no time for preparation. Consider yourself lucky that I've given you both this advantage." Turning to me, the Boss adds, "Two strikes and you're out, Miss Thomas. This opportunity does not come

lightly. Those in the Circle understand this is a life worth dying for, and if you're not fit for the job, then I see no other option than to revoke your right to be here."

I gulp, nodding my head submissively. "I won't let you down. I promise."

He steps back. "For your sake, I hope not. I hope your recovery goes well."

My eyes track his movements until he's stepped out the door. As soon as he's disappeared, I shoot up from the bed, but Harry shoves me back down against the scrawny sheets by the palm of his hand.

"Not so fast."

"You heard the man – I only have four days until my next test. What are we waiting for?"

"What are we waiting for?" he stammers as if what I just said was utterly barbaric. "You just got knocked unconscious!"

"By an illegal shot. It doesn't count."

He growls, bringing his hand down his face. "Of course it fucking counts."

During the next few minutes of silence I watch over him. My anger cools at the memory of waking up in this bed, Harry's face the first thing I saw. His panic was overpowering, and his hand hovered over my face as if I might fracture in his very palm. Seeing him in that state caused my stomach to swirl with an emotion so deep it almost knocked my head back into darkness.

As if he can read my thoughts, Harry brings me out of my torment, saying, "You're going to be the fucking death of me."

I look up at him. "It's a life worth dying for after all."



Harry convinces me to stay in the recovery room for a full twenty-four hours before my constant pestering to leave becomes unbearable torment. A few days later, my injuries are limited to a bruise blossoming on my cheekbone.

While there's little training that can be done days ahead of a heist, I've learnt my way around a firearm. I spent the first two days out of the recovery room going over the basics. When asked if I knew how to use the safety – only to question what it was – I thought Harry was going to kill me with the very weapon. Turns out it's like some dummy clip to make sure you don't fire an accidental shot. Not that it's a big deal or anything.

Holding a gun caused a strange foreign feeling to curl in my gut. It felt powerful, and I grew to like it relatively quickly. I snuck the gun into the waistband of my jeans, debating whether to use it on Poppy, but I was met with Harry's ruthless stare and felt like I was being forced into orgasm all over again. All weapons are accounted for, otherwise it would've been a good idea.

If all goes well tomorrow – as in, we meet the money goal with the bank robbery, no fatalities are recorded, and I exit unscathed – I practically have a solid pass into the Circle. I don't see how that could be a problem. All I have to do is hold up a gun and tell people to stay down.

And if the criteria isn't met ... well, I'm not thinking about that.

Harry leads me into a room that looks like an upscale version of the one in his own house – from the large television screens lining the walls projecting CCTV footage to the detective-like boards detailing their plan for Friday. "WEATHERS BANKS" is printed in the centre, alongside numerous photos that also feature security guards and employees. Beside each image is their age and a rota of work shifts.

Catching me gawking, Harry says, "Everyone needs to be accounted for. We can't risk having some employee dashing off and calling the police before we've even got what we came for."

When I turn to him, he's leaning over a large wooden table scattered with paperwork. His weight is on his hands, causing the veins on his forearms and biceps to strain. He winks when he catches my eye.

"Fuck you," I mouth.

He smirks.

"Not that they'd ever get a chance anyway," Whizz Tech Dan chimes in. "We use a signal jammer so people can't make any emergency 999 calls. I'll also cut the circuit breaker, so any panic buttons will cease to exist." He makes a fake explosion with his hands, and the corners of my lips twist.

"It's always good to be on the safe side," Harry adds.

Turning back to Dan, he drops his voice to a whisper, concealing his mouth with the palm of his hand. "He doesn't trust my work."

I lean closer to hear him, stifling a laugh as I glance back to Harry. His smart-ass grin has dropped, and his eyes are cold as he runs his finger over his throat.

"I saw that," Dan says even with his back turned. "I have cameras all over this place. I know everything that happens here,

and in most of London for that matter.”

Harry rolls his eyes.

We sit around the large table, along with some of the team who’ll be joining us. Andy, Whizz Tech Dan, and Oliver are among the people occupying the chairs. The others are people I recognise from passing them in the halls. Harry stands, detailing the plans, and it’s hard not to be turned on by him being so alpha. His beady eyes normally catch my intrigue, but he’s thriving in his element. People watch him with the fascination they’d have for the Boss, and I strive to be like that – to be adored as he is.

This heist has been months in progress, which is apparently on the shorter end of things. We’re heading to Weathers Bank on Oxford Street early morning, shortly after the bank’s opening, so we can avoid the lunchtime rush and hopefully encounter as few people as possible. Due to the footfall analysis, including staff, it’s looking like we’ll encounter eleven people total.

Our weapons are intended just for show and will not be used to hurt a civilian unless absolutely necessary. Harry says it’s been close to three years since someone got injured during a robbery, but he doesn’t elaborate further than that.

While he speaks I press my face into my palms, watching him with rapt attention. Since it involves the least work, he declares I’ll stick by his side guarding the front entrance. Andy and a man named Leroy will work on infiltrating the safe, and so on.

“Any questions?” Harry asks.

The crew shake their head.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow morning. Everyone get some rest.”

I nod, obeying his orders like a submissive. Collecting my belongings, I stand up to follow the others out the door, but Harry steps in front of me, blocking my path.

“Except you,” he says. Once the room is deserted, he double-checks the door is closed. “How are you feeling about tomorrow?”

“I’m excited to be involved in all the action.” I gnaw at my lip. “I’ve never seen you in your element until today. You really know what you’re doing.”

“This has been my life for years,” he confesses. “But I promise you, it’s not all it’s painted to be.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

It’s amazing to think everything has been leading up to tomorrow, all my training – physical and mental – in aid of what’s about to occur. I feel devoted to the Circle, so I’m not sure how I’ll face the downfall if I’m rejected. I’ve spent the past few years desperate to find my calling, and now I’m within arm’s reach of it, letting it slip through my fingers isn’t an option. My eye is on the ball ... until I notice how close Harry’s body has become.

We’ve naturally gravitated closer, his heaving chest just a few short inches from mine. Despite how much I’m drawn to his presence, I can’t afford any distractions when I’m this close to the finish line. I allow myself a second to selfishly enjoy his closeness, then I take a step back.

“I should get going. Long day tomorrow and all.”

Harry nods, clearing his throat.

“I’ll see you in the morning—”

“Wait.” His jaw strains as he struggles to say, “Stay with me tonight.”

“Harry,” I sigh.

“Please.”

“You know we can’t do this. You’re one of the last living people I truly care about, and I can’t suffer the consequences if we’re caught doing something we shouldn’t.”

He groans, running a hand through his hair. “If you care that much, you’ll either quit or stay with me. Pick a side.”

“Don’t take this opportunity away from me, Harry. Whatever happened in the gym was a mistake. It wasn’t worth the risk of losing what I have here.”

His eyes crease in the corners, his teeth grinding. All the while I fight a grimace at my words, feeling the toxicity of them on my tongue.

I reiterate what he once told me. “Have some mercy on me.”

He laughs, but the sound is bitter and harsh, causing my stomach to drop. Taking a step closer, he whispers, “Fine, princess, have it your way. I swear on your life, I won’t touch you again without your permission. But I promise you, that day I made you squirt all over my fingers will not be the last.”

THIRTY-FIVE

Gigi

I've been restless all night, and as the blue light of dawn peeks through the curtains my concerns should be on the Weathers heist, but Harry plagues my thoughts. The dirty, rotten bastard is so confident I'll come crawling back to him, but he has something else coming.

I won't succumb to his pressure ... although thinking about him won't hurt. As I lie in bed in my studio apartment on what may be my last day here, my fingers drift between my legs and I think of Harry St. James.

I imagine how my fingers would run through his tousled black hair, threading them against my skin before I'd tug, demanding his touch everywhere.

We'd be in the comfort of the black silk sheets of his house, and he'd prep my body with an abundance of bites and nips of the skin. He'd flip me over onto my stomach, pull me up on all fours, and push inside of me in one harsh thrust that would feel nothing short of heaven.

My imagination runs wild, and I hit my peak, my back bowing off the bed as I stroke my clit faster and roll my nipple between my fingers. Body quivering with aftershocks, I fall back against the mattress with a huff and a heavy exhale.

Thoughts don't suffer consequences, I think.

Pretty pleased with myself, I shower and dress in the combat gear that was left aside for me. My new revelation instantly becomes the worst thing in existence when my eyes land on Harry in the courtyard as the team prep the truck.

When I see him, I think, *Thoughts have bad – very bad – consequences*. Because now I'm thinking of how good he fucked me this morning.

If I thought he looked good yesterday, when he was asserting his authority on the group, he looks delicious right now. The whole team are in protective armour, yet on him it looks ravenous. He looks like some muscular security guard in the dark uniform, with a balaclava hanging out of his back pocket. His arms are crossed tight while he discusses final details with the Boss.

Andy double-checks the weapons as they're loaded into the armoured truck. It's metres-deep, and the interior has built-in seating on either side, where a few people sit casually, laughing as if today is a breeze for them. Meanwhile I recite everything I know as I hold the pistol in my palms like a school entry exam.

"Safety," I say under my breath, brushing the pad of my thumb over the small switch.

"Hey, Gigi." Oliver jogs over to me, holding some black tank top-like thing. "Thought you wouldn't have one yet, so here. When you join the Circle, you'll have one specially adapted to your body shape, but for now it's just a generic size." He hands it out to me, and I take it cautiously.

"Uhh, thanks ..."

Clearly noticing my scepticism, he smiles. "It's a bulletproof vest."

Hiding the shock in my eyes, I nod and pull it on over my head. "Of course. That's exactly what I thought it was."

Dropping his voice quieter, he says, "Don't worry. I had no idea what one was when I joined my first heist. You'll do great."

"She might not do great," a feminine voice says.

Fucking Poppy.

My teeth grind on her approach. I haven't laid eyes on her since the boxing ring, and I feel about ready to hit her again. Concealing my frustration, I squeeze my fists and welcome the feeling of nails biting into my palm. She wanders over, struggling to hide her smirk as her gaze lingers on the yellowing bruise on my cheekbone.

"Good luck today, Thomas. You're going to need it."

"Leave her alone, Penelope." Poppy snarls at the use of her full name. Oliver does a double-take of her clothes. "You're not on the schedule for today. What are you—?"

"What the fuck is she doing here?" a voice booms. Harry storms over, pointing an accusing finger directly at Poppy. The

exact finger I imagined—

Nope. Not going there.

His fury is lethal, and I imagine if I were to touch his skin, it would be scorching with heat, so I purposely step aside as he stares her down with accusation.

“Who gave you orders to be here today?”

She smirks, her voice turning sweet and innocent. “I’m taking Leroy’s place.”

Harry reaches to the floor of the truck, taking a clipboard and scanning through the paperwork quickly. His body is rigid, and the muscles in his neck strain, his upper lip curling into a snarl. “Why wasn’t this relayed to me this morning? You know the protocol – all information should have passed me first before decisions were finalised.”

She shrugs, acting disinterested, but the amusement in her features is a dead giveaway of her real feelings. “See you on the field, Thomas,” she says, pulling herself into the back of the truck and occupying one of the seats in the far corner.

Andy’s voice breaks the tension as he shouts out to those lingering around the back of the vehicle, “Ready to go! Load ’em up!”

“Fucking unbelievable,” Harry mutters under his breath.

“Everything will be fine, man. Don’t worry about it.” Oliver pats Harry on the shoulder reassuringly before following in pursuit of Poppy.

Just as I’m about to grab the railing to pull myself up onto the truck’s lower platform, Harry grabs my bicep. “Not so fast.”

His eyes drop to the bulletproof vest swamping my chest and his lips turn down in a sad smile. Pulling on the sides, he fastens the straps. They’re secured tightly, yet his touch lingers.

Keeping his gaze down, he asks, “If I asked you to stay behind, would you?”

I shake my head, and I can tell he catches the action in his peripheral because he exhales, defeated, dropping his hands.

“Let’s get a move on then, princess. We don’t want to be late for your special day.”

We climb into the truck, and after doing the final checks we’re en route. Including rush-hour traffic, it’ll take us just short of fifty minutes to reach our destination. The whole team, myself included, are sitting in the back of the truck looking like a SWAT team in our matching outfits.

There are eight of us in total on today’s heist. The Boss would never attend a robbery – pretty self-explanatory, really. Andy is here, as well as Poppy and Oliver, Whizz Tech Dan too, but he’ll stay in the back of the vehicle. A few of them smile sympathetically at me, while others avoid me with impressive determination. Despite what lies ahead, my body pounds with a mixture of adrenaline and exhilaration, causing me to fist the gun in my hands like a safety blanket.

“Ten minutes out,” the driver’s voice echoes through the speakers.

My heart rate spikes.

Harry stands, dishing out final orders for the team, and the action is so attractive it should be illegal.

It kind of is ... but I choose to willingly forget that detail.

He’s all stern-looking. Dressed in uniform. Like a leader. His brows are pinched, and the veins in his arms protrude as he holds onto the bars above his head, his body rocking with the dips in the road.

The fixation of wanting to kiss him so badly briefly eradicates any fear.

“You should all know the plan,” he says. “I don’t want any fuck-ups today. We get the job done, and we’ll be in and out in less than twenty minutes. You all have your designated workstations. We stick in our pairs. Gigi, you’re with me. Andy with Poppy since Leroy isn’t here ...”

I lose track from there.

Instead of listening to Harry, I’m mentally reciting that the weapons are only meant for intimidation. People will submit to anything when they have a gun aimed at their head – or so I’ve heard. The pistol feels heavy in my hands, but it’s nothing compared to the much larger weapons the rest of the team have slung over their shoulders. It seems reasonable enough since I’m the trainee here.

“Two minutes,” the same voice says again.

Harry finally sits down by my side, the warmth that radiates from his body enticing me to lean closer. His knee brushes against mine, and I know that’s the most comfort I’ll receive. Leaning down to fasten his shoelace, he says under his breath, “Don’t leave my side. No matter what happens.”

I nod my head.

“It’s not too late to stay in the van.”

I look away. “Not a chance.”

My eyes land on Poppy as she shoots daggers from her end of the truck. I smile and wave. She scoffs, turning away, busying herself with the weapon in her hands. It looks like a machine.

The van slows on approach.

“No turning back now,” I mutter.

Harry forcefully swallows and squeezes my knee before getting to his feet and relaying orders to us all one final time. My

heart accelerates as if I'm running for my life. I reckon if I were wearing a smartwatch, it'd tell me to calm the fuck down.

But there's no time to catch your breath when you're the criminal.

The van pulls to an abrupt stop, causing my whole body to move on the seat. Tugging at my elbow, Harry pulls me to my feet, and if he can feel the nervous sweat breaking out on my skin, he doesn't mention it.

Everyone pulls down the balaclavas, and I do the same, concealing everything but my eyes and mouth. The first thing I can think is that it's fucking hot under here. I need to find a way to control my breathing, but I'm barely able to consider the possibility as the truck doors fly open.

"Go! Go! Go!"

FUCK.

I jump down from the platform and onto the pavement with a thud, sticking by Harry's side like a lost puppy. Andy throws open the bank doors, and the crew run into the building with all guns blazing – literally – making people duck to the ground and hide their heads, with flailing arms and high-pitched screams.

Harry tugs his trigger, sending a cascade of bullets into the air.

That's the first lot down, the only bullets we're meant to use – the ones that announce our presence and signal we mean business.

"Stay down!" he shouts. "Put your hands where we can see them! We're not here to hurt you."

They obey his orders, dropping to their knees and raising their arms like a white flag of surrender.

While I thought I'd be terrified by the prospect, there's authority in having people practically bowing at your feet. Understanding the euphoria that criminals chase, I find myself looking at Harry with new admiration as he shouts his orders. My hands start to shake, and I feel the toxicity surging through my veins and threatening to take over my body. I fight it, unprepared to give in to the temptation of lethal power.

Breathe.

Poppy and Andy's job is to get the money from the vault. They'll then pass it to Oliver, who's guarding the doorway, and then to Harry and me at the entrance. The plan is well-executed, and since I'm the rookie, it's best I intervene as little as possible.

So I'm understandably surprised when Poppy rushes over to me in a state of urgency and starts tugging at my elbow to have me follow her.

"Thomas, come on!" she hisses, her stern gaze allowing no room for argument.

Breathe.

Breathe.

This was *not* part of the plan.

I turn to Harry in a panic, and his face is equally confused. His green eyes narrow into slits, and he wraps his hand around my bicep as if he's attaching himself to me.

"Fuck off. She's not leaving my side," he growls. "We stick with the original plan. You're with Andy."

"It's easier if she comes with me. I can keep a lookout to make sure no one infiltrates either of us, *and* she'll fit in the space much easier than Andy will. You know she's the better option." Poppy tugs again at my opposite arm, and I'm pulled from pillar to post like a game of tug-of-war. "You're wasting time!"

My throat constricts, my heart smashing against the inside of my chest with each rapid beat.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Harry exchanges glances with Andy and squeezes his eyes shut tight in his inner turmoil. My gaze drops to where he holds his gun. His knuckles are starting to turn white, and the weapon looks like it'll snap in half.

Gnawing at my bottom lip, I whip my head between the two of them as if I'm watching a tennis match. Perhaps this could be the perfect opportunity to assert my authority within the Circle. I have my gun, I'll have Poppy, Harry will be close by ...

"I'll do it," I rush out. "We're wasting time. Let's go."

I pull my arm from Harry's hold. If he wants to fight me on the decision, he'll have to do it another time, because the hold-up is quickly eating away our twenty-minute timeframe.

He huffs, ushering me away quickly. "Fine! Go. Hurry."

"Follow me," Poppy says.

Harry shouts, "Look after her!"

I follow Poppy, not having time to consider how ethical my decision is. Despite our differences, I can only hope she's being authentic. She weaves us through a hallway, past petrified customers who shake with fright, and in through a door that leads to a tiny room.

"In here," Poppy calls over her shoulder.

The room is loaded with filing cabinets and a desk that fits snugly in the corner. It's tight, and there's barely enough room for two of us, so it seems she wasn't lying about there being limited space. The vault is behind another closed door, but she

encourages me to keep a lookout as she says, “Let me check the coast is clear. Stay here.”

I nod, drawing my gun to my chest as my eyes flicker to the open space outside the door. While I’m waiting for any sign of activity a flush of pride warms my chest. If committing to a change of plan during a high-scale operation isn’t worthy of gaining access to the Circle, I don’t know what is. The Boss will be so proud that I voluntarily stepped up – especially at such short notice. I’ll even have to thank Poppy for encouraging me to come with her despite any ulterior motive she might have.

Exiting the room, she steps aside to let me pass.

“The coast is clear,” she says. “Go ahead.”

HARRY

What the fuck is Poppy playing at? *It’ll be easier*, my ass. I’m not sure what that bitch is up to, but I don’t feel comfortable with it. If this is her way of trying to piss me off, it’s fucking working.

Bile creeps up my throat, but I force it back down, never letting my concentration sway – not on a job. I thought it would be in Gigi’s best interest if I didn’t take my eyes off her today, and since she’s no longer in my sight I can feel my blood curdling with worst-case scenarios.

Apparently, I’m not the only one who can sense my eye is off the ball.

Andy approaches my side, hissing under his breath, “She’ll be fine. If you’re already losing focus over that woman, maybe having her around isn’t a good idea.”

I bite my tongue, withholding my truth.

A civilian walks a little too close with their arms raised, and Andy immediately shakes his gun.

“Step back!” he roars, pointing the weapon at the man’s chest.

I keep darting my focus back to the door Poppy and Gigi disappeared through, waiting for a flicker of movement to reassure me everything is fine. Checking the large clock positioned on the wall of the bank, I realise we’re less than five minutes from needing to be back in the getaway vehicle.

What the fuck is taking them so long?

Perhaps everyone wasn’t accounted for. Maybe there’s a problem ...

But there couldn’t have been. Poppy would have had to check everyone—

My stomach plummets with dread. Fucking *Poppy* would have counted.

Mentally reciting the number of people in front of us, I scan the front entryway.

Three customers, a security guard, and a member of staff.

That makes five.

I spin to the wooden desk where Oliver’s standing watch. There are three people cowering underneath it.

That makes eight.

Whipping my head to the left, I find another two members of staff standing by the back door, working on the miniature safe that’ll hold no less than twenty thousand pounds in cash.

That’s ten ... but where’s the eleventh—?

BANG!

A gunshot rings, and my body stills.

Everything grinds to a halt. My mind silences the ear-splitting echo of screams.

There wasn’t meant to be any gunfire except for our entry.

My hearing kickstarts, grinding into overdrive, and the screams are like a deathly siren call. Andy and I exchange a sudden look, and my heart races a mile a minute, my head screaming to move as I catch the fear mirrored in his eyes.

“Guard this fucking door!” I shout, pointing at him.

He nods, and I raise my gun as I follow the source of the lone bullet. Through my pursuit I curse, spit pleas, and send a silent prayer up to the man Himself that my girl isn’t hurt. Not that he’d listen to a fucking criminal.

I reach a hallway, struggling to know which way to turn, but when I hear the whimpers similar to those of an injured puppy I proceed with caution and overwhelming anxiety.

Throwing open the door at the far end, I almost stumble over at the sight.

Gigi’s back is pressed up against the wall, and she’s visibly paling by the second. The cause is as obvious as the blood pooling around her lower body. Her lower lip quivers, and she clutches onto her thigh, which frantically spills red liquid like an overflowing tap. A man – who I recognise as a member of staff from his tailored suit and nameplate – sits in the entryway to the vault, shaking his hands in surrender, dropping the pistol to his lap.

My throat goes raw. “You fucking shot her.”

I see red.

I raise my gun.

“No, please—”

I don’t give the cunt a second to fucking breathe, much less the chance to beg for his pitiful life, before I pull the trigger, mowing him down in a rain of gunfire, until his body goes limp. Even then I charge over to his body, forcefully pull down the

dead man's chin, and send a bullet through the roof of his mouth into his fucking brain.

The impact causes blood to spray onto my face, tainting my skin with the fuckwit's DNA.

Before I succumb to the darkness I throw my gun over the strap on my shoulder and rush to Gigi's aid. In her agony she sounds like a weeping kitten, and it fucking breaks my heart to hear her like that. Tears prick my eyes, and when I pull her into my arms she exhales the most soul-breaking noise.

"I've got you, baby. Shh, it's okay."

She whimpers, ducking her head into my chest, her body starting to shake with adrenaline from the blood loss. I halt when I see the amount of blood staining the marble floor.

So. Much. Blood.

I start to have flashbacks to my first initiation.

I killed a man—

I shake my head no. This is not the fucking time.

"Harry," Gigi cries.

SHIT.

I don't bother looking for that fucking redhead before I'm racing out the room to the exit of the bank. I storm through the double doors, bellowing to Andy over my shoulder that he needs to wrap up the job because we're leaving *now*.

The van pulls up out front and Whizz Tech Dan throws open the back doors, shouting, "What the fuck happened!" as I step into the back with Gigi still in my arms.

I shake my head, struggling to put the betrayal into words.

Thankfully, Dan's head is more in the game than mine, and he comes running over with a pile of gauzes, putting pressure on the wound to act as a plug for the bleeding. A cry breaks free from Gigi's throat, and like the fucking pathetic man I am, I struggle to even look her in the eyes. I rock her close to my chest, reciting all the reasons why I'm to blame.

This is all my fault.

This is all my fucking fault.

Barely a minute passes before the remainder of the crew jumps into the back of the truck. The doors slam closed, and we jolt forwards as the tyres screech along the road, but the sound is nothing compared to the echoes of pain that slip from Gigi's lips.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Oliver says, stumbling over his words.

When I raise my head I watch him with a half-lidded expression. His eyes, along with the team's, are scanning the blood pooling at my feet and dripping off my fingers like I've just traipsed through the depths of hell. The rage and anger alight my senses as I catch Poppy watching us in my peripheral, motionless.

Andy sits to my left, taking over the spot from Dan as he presses harder on Gigi's wound. With tunnel vision, I pass her body over to his, ignoring her dainty hands trying to grasp at the front of my shirt, desperate to keep me close.

"H-Harry," she pleads, voice weak.

But I'm seeing red again.

Standing to my full height, my fists tighten as I lock eyes with Poppy. "What. The fuck. Happened?"

She shrugs.

Her face morphs into that of the man I just killed. The man responsible for shooting Gigi, because I just fucking know she was responsible.

Composure cracking, I storm over to Poppy, slamming my palm onto her forehead and smacking her head against the interior wall of the truck with a bang similar to a bullet.

She shouts, "What the fuck—!"

"YOU FUCKING CUNT!" I roar. "You knew he was in there, didn't you?"

She says nothing.

Fury fires through me as I scoff, "Did Richard set you up to this?"

"What?" she asks, bewildered. "No!"

Despite her denial, I see the way Poppy's eyes dilate until I can only see a small ring of blue. They dart around the truck, looking everywhere but at me.

"Fucking answer me!"

Her gaze clashes with mine and her nostrils flare.

I'd put my life on the line to bet she's hiding something. There's something she's not telling me, and I fucking know it. It's evident through her accelerated breathing making her chest fall rapidly, and the sheen of sweat that's quickly forming on her brow.

"Did. He. Do. This?"

She stares straight through me and grits, "No."

I never thought I'd put my hands on a woman, but I'm not entirely sure Poppy's human at this point, so there's my fucking exception. Before I can even wring my hands around her neck and squeeze the truth out of her, Oliver pins my arms behind my

back and tugs me backwards.

“You don’t want to do that, mate.”

I fight against him as I spit, “I think I fucking do.”

I’m about ready to disarm Oliver of his weapon and direct it right at her skull when Andy’s panicked voice cuts through the tension.

“Harry!”

Tearing myself away, my hands are finally unleashed, and I turn to the voice calling my name. My best friend’s eyes are full of panic, and it doesn’t dawn on me why ... until I look down at the limp body in his arms, Gigi’s arms lying at her sides without motion.

Everything suddenly feels bitterly cold.

Torn between whether to race to her side or take my steps carefully, I fucking freeze.

“She’s got a pulse,” Andy assures me.

As if that’s the motivation I need to save her life, I rush over to him and tug her into my arms. Pressing my ear against her chest, I force myself to listen to the little heartbeat that pads softly. My throat is swollen as I stutter, “H-hey, Gigi. Keep your eyes open for me. Come on. We’re almost there.” Calling to no one in particular, I shout. “How much longer?”

There’s mumbling from the other end of the van until someone responds, “Forty minutes out.”

Looking down at her frail body, my voice cracks as I whisper, “I’m so fucking sorry. Please don’t leave me.”

THIRTY-SIX

Gigi

My eyes carry the weight of a thousand decisions, struggling to open. They hurt. Sting. Ache. But they find the strength to power through, feeling the call of eyes as green as freshly cut grass. The sight brings weightlessness to my chest, making me feel like I'm dancing on the whitest of clouds.

Harry.

Those eyes are always beautiful, yet this time they're downturned, sad, and duller in colour, with harsh lines underneath them.

I ... I don't understand.

As I scan his features a piercing ring echoes in my ears like a deep-rooted headache, warning me of his appearance. My smile from seeing him drops into a frown. He looks utterly exhausted, appearing as if he hasn't slept in a week. When he blinks a few times, I falter at the glimmer of tears glazing his eyes.

"What happened? Was the Boss happy? Did I make it in?"

His hand clasps mine on top of the bedsheet, squeezing.

"Harry?" I press, trying to encourage a response. "What did he say?"

He groans under his breath, and his grip twitches on my hand. Despite wanting to pull away, his touch remains. He drags his spare hand down his face, puffing his cheeks with air and then releasing a heavy breath.

"Gigi, you're out."

I shake my head no.

No.

No.

NO!

"Th-that's not true."

Harry's eyes are sympathetic, but distress outweighs the emotion as he says, "Gigi ... you could've died."

The events play through my mind like a movie reel, coming through like flashes. Poppy. The man. The bullet. My knight in shining armour – Harry. The wound is no doubt numbed by pain relief, yet it feels like nothing compared to my utter heartbreak.

It wasn't my fault.

The Boss can't kick me out.

There's no other option for me than this.

"Isn't that the point? Isn't that everything you strive for? A life worth dying for? I ... I want to stay."

"I told you to stay in the van."

I rear back, ripping my hand from his. "Why would you even say that?"

"Because it's all my fucking fault!" He raises his voice, but it's still hushed enough to keep our conversation private.

I shake my head. "It was Poppy's."

"You don't get it, do you? If only I'd kept you away from all this like I promised. Instead you carry a burn mark on your back that was caused by my own hands, and you suffered a bullet wound. Both of which I could have prevented ..." He drops his face to his palms, and I hear the strangled breaths behind them. His palms shake, and he presses them tight to his skin as if he's trying to hold himself together.

"But I'm here – I'm fine. He'll change his mind. If I can just talk to him—"

"What are you trying to prove?" Harry pulls his hands from his face. "You've been given an out. Fucking take it. You don't want this life."

"But ... I do."

I finally feel a purpose here.

There is nothing else for me anymore.

“Is this all because of Jack?” he asks, surprising me. “Is that why you’re so insistent on being here?”

I sputter. “Wh-what? No!”

“If you’re trying to chase after a ghost ...”

How dare he say that!

He’s been fighting with me non-stop, insisting I throw this life behind me. I can take the back-and-forth, but insinuating I’m chasing after my dead brother ... that’s the final straw. This is so much bigger than he ever was.

The machines I’m attached to beat frantically. “God, Harry, why is it so hard for you to understand that I want this? You were young once too and saw the potential in this new life, so stop trying to bend me into something different.”

Before he has a chance to respond, a nurse runs into the room in a panic. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a tight bun.

“Is everything okay, Miss?”

“Yes, everything is just fine.” Turning to the man beside me, I watch the emotion drain from his face as unexpected calm washes over me. “St. James was just leaving.”

The words tug at my chest the instant they leave my mouth.

Harry’s smile is forced and lacks all his real emotion as he collects his jacket, shrugging it on without a fight to stay. “It’s your funeral,” he says, voice gruff as he throws my own words back at me.



Seven weeks later

“Jab, cross, uppercut. Let’s go!” Oliver shouts, holding the punching bag with tight hands, no argument in his tone. “Eyes on your footwork.”

I hit the shots in rapid succession, my chest spiralling with exhaustion as I land the heavy punches, repeating the combo again and again. And *again*.

“Right hook!” he shouts, hoping to catch me off-guard.

I smirk behind breathless lips, having trained for weeks for these scenarios. Swinging my right arm in a burst of adrenaline, I finish with a final blow. Drawing back my leg, I launch the sole of my shoe into my target, causing Oliver to stumble over his feet and fall to the floor from the heavy impact.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry!” I say, reaching out to help him up from the floor.

He sits down on the padded mat, accepting his defeat. Wrapping his arms around his knees, he cackles with laughter, the sound causing me to smile.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

Oliver shakes his head, his lips stretching into a grin before he finally takes my offering, pulling himself to his feet with a heavy grunt. Rubbing my upper back, pride engulfs his voice as he says, “I’m impressed.”

The statement threatens to knock me off my feet.

He’s ... impressed.

It’s like I’ve been waiting a lifetime for someone’s approval, and finally, right when I’m craving it the most, it hits with such meaning I feel close to tears. Everything has been leading up to this.

It’s been almost two months since the Weathers heist. The doctor at medical filled in the blanks once I was awake, and Harry was right – I came close to losing my life. I lost more than two litres of blood and required three blood transfusions to counteract the loss. Thankfully, the bullet provided a plug to stop most of the bleeding before any major damage was done, narrowly missing my femoral artery.

While the shot has scarred to no bigger than a two-pound coin, I look at it with pride, as I do with the burn covering my neck. They’re both trademarks to show how far I’ve come.

My recovery has been long and painful. Working on my physical strength was a challenge, but working on my mental health is more tiresome. I’m still struggling to differentiate my life from the Circle, having never considered I wouldn’t be accepted. The Boss gave me a two-month deadline from the date of the incident to pack up and leave, and it’s narrowly creeping up on me.

At any given opportunity I’ve been at the gym working my muscles sore. From the moment I decided I was willing to turn my life around, it was clear I required additional aid. One night, when I was passing Oliver in the hallway, I pleaded with my life for him to help me. As one of the only people who could relate to my torturous inner drive for success, he reluctantly agreed.

I’ve been training every morning and every night like clockwork. Since I didn’t want to tear Oliver from his wife and child at home, he agreed to meet with me for an hour daily, helping me grow muscle in places I never thought I could. With each

burning, sore limb I feel my strength increasing.

“You’ve come so far,” Oliver says, pulling me back to the present. “I’m proud of you.”

“She certainly has.”

Turning towards the source of the noise, my intake of breath is sharp as the Boss enters the gym. No amount of training will dull my determination to seek his approval. No matter if he’s just a greying man in a business suit, he holds the meaning of my life in the palm of his hands.

He strolls over, hands pushed deep into his pockets. Straightening my spine, I nod in greeting.

“Boss.”

His lips curl at the sides in a rare smile at hearing the name I chose for him. Maybe the more times I speak it into existence, it’ll finally come true.

Cracking my composed façade, he says, “You’re leaving in a few days.”

I force my throat clear. “I am.

But I don’t want to.

“I’ve been watching you train relentlessly this past month. All the sessions you’ve been putting in with Oliver of your own free will. It shows you have what it takes to become a good recruit. It’s a shame, really ...”

My heart rate spikes, silently pleading for another chance. But I know better, and I’m expecting the rejection as he adds, “But rules are rules, and I promised not to go easy on you, Miss Thomas.”

A bitter truth I’m forced to swallow no matter how much I’m blind with need.

Smiling through true emotions, I say, “I understand. Perhaps in another life I won’t let you down.”

His lips downturn as he ponders the statement. “Perhaps.”

Well, that settles it then.

For the sake of my sanity, I choose not to press further. Oliver squeezes my shoulders and bids farewell to the Boss and me, having to rush home to put his son to sleep, and he leaves the two of us alone. The old Gigi would relish this time and push for another chance at forgiveness, but I don’t beg. Not anymore.

“It really is a life worth dying for,” Richard reminds me.

I draw in a short, measured breath, but his face refuses to give away a fraction of emotion. I know I must choose my words carefully.

“Yes,” I state. “Your most honourable rule.”

His face remains still, but there’s a slight flicker of pride in the way his eyes crinkle. Without speaking, his expression changes ever so slightly. It’s as if the tinged emotion in his eyes encourages me to read between the lines.

... As if he’s sending me a private message.

Bowing his head, he takes a step back towards the door. “Have a good night, Gigi. And good luck.”

Good luck?

Before my mind starts to spiral with possibilities, I hurry to pack the rest of my bag. On my pursuit to exit, the door opens, and the only man in existence capable of stealing every bit of air from my lungs walks in. Halting my steps, I watch as he realises his mistake.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says. “I didn’t know anybody was in here.”

“It’s okay,” I say, my voice rushed. “I was just leaving.”

He raises his head, and our eyes lock.

And what pretty eyes they are.

I almost forgot how beautiful they were. From the moment Harry broke into my house, I knew his eyes were special. They make you feel like you’re the centre of attention and nothing else in the world matters. The feeling causes my throat to swell, having been without the sight of them for several weeks.

“Gigi.” He does a double take before stepping fully into the room, letting the door shut behind him. “You look ... you look ...”

“Different?” I offer. My physical appearance can’t be much different to the naked eye, but Harry always did notice me as if he were viewing me through a microscopic lens.

In response he smiles, though his expression says I’m completely off the mark. “Something like that,” he says. His eyes sweep the length of my body, and I teeter under his gaze the way I always do when it feels like he could undress me with just a look.

“I could give you a run for your money now. No playing it easy on me during sparring.”

He gives a half-smile. “Oh, I bet you could.”

Silence fills the space, but not the awkward kind. It’s never the awkward kind.

As I’m about to excuse myself, he puts his hands up in a fighting stance like a peace offering. He wants me to spar with him.

The action is overloaded with meaning. It’s his way of calling a truce, putting our issues behind us. But no matter how much the truth hurts, I’ll never be the person Harry wants. He wants to protect me from this society, and while I’m a different woman

now, my goal hasn't changed.

I strive to become someone like him. Consequences be damned.

"I never wanted to fight you, Harry," I say, so much more than the current situation laced in my words.

He drops his hands, nodding like he's trying to convince himself it's the truth. "I know you didn't."

"It was really good to see you."

I back away, towards the door, until I turn and leave the room.

But not because I want to finish the conversation ...

Because there's something I urgently need to do.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Gigi

“The Circle is a cutthroat industry. We only allow the best candidates entry on the understanding that they abide by my most important rule ... You think I’m willing to put our livelihood at risk by taking you at your word?”

“What’s your most important rule?”

“That my recruits understand this is a life worth dying for. It’s kill or be killed after all.”

Exhaling a deep yet short-winded breath, I reminisce the words and clutch onto them, digging my fingers in deep and refusing to let go of the sliver of hope. My lifeline.

If the Boss wasn’t trying to tell me something by reiterating the importance of “a life worth dying for”, right now would be a good time for the universe to tell me otherwise. Sure, this isn’t my most fleshed-out plan.

Best-case scenario: they let me in.

And the worst: I die.

The nighttime breeze cuts my cheeks, and my lower lip quivers as I look at the drop that’s no short of one hundred metres.

A life worth dying for, he’d said.

There’s only one place, one last chance, one final act – an impossible fight – that holds such significance that Richard will have no option other than to accept me into the Circle once I complete it.

“Jack put it there. He took one of the tiaras from Pixies and hung it on the rope, claimed he almost lost his life doing it. No one dares step up there to prove otherwise.”

Another gust of wind brings me back to the present. I stand on the very ledge that originally drew my attention that day, my toes curling around the end of the platform as I stare at the dainty tiara swinging in the breeze with abrupt clarity.

One. Last. Chance.

It’s only a matter of time before people catch onto what I’m doing. Whether the crowd will spur me on or shout for me to retreat, I can’t afford the distraction.

There’s no time to think about the likelihood of my survival.

I need to hurry.

A breath parts my lips, and I extend my arms slowly on either side of me.

I’m ready.

I take my first step onto the rope. Then my second. My toes bend around the woven threads, the soles of my feet moulding to it, and I flail my arms to catch my balance.

God, this so much harder than I thought.

Concentrate, Gigi.

Fucking concentrate.

It’s all about counterbalance and the perception of control. That’s it.

Slowly pulling myself back to level footing, my pulse staggers to miles above abnormal. I silently thank my mum for all the ballet lessons she forced me to attend when I was young. That much I’m grateful for.

Upon taking my next step I manifest seeing myself across the other side, and I manage to create a steady rhythm ... until I hear a commotion behind me.

“Gigi!” someone shouts.

Fuck. I thought I’d have at least a few minutes.

Braving a look over my shoulder, I hold out my arms for balance as I watch Harry racing up the ladder, skipping the last step and swinging his body onto the roof as if climbing the steps alone didn’t petrify me. His face is red as he storms over to the ledge. In my peripheral I see other people racing up the ladder too, but they’re several steps below him.

We have less than a minute until they catch up.

“Get back inside right now!” he roars, pointing a finger at me.

“Leave me alone, Harry.” I whip my head back around, focusing on putting my next foot forwards. “I have to do this.”

“I’m not fucking around.” His voice is near hysterical as he shouts, “Now!”

I toss over my shoulder, “There’s no other way.”

He curses, and I can feel him pacing behind me. I imagine he’s running his hand through his hair, trying to conjure all the reasons to talk me off the ledge. *Literally.*

But no one is changing my mind. Not today.

“I’m not going to watch you die!”

“Then leave!”

The minute is upon us, and a small crowd has started to form on the platform, muttering a mixture of different reactions. I hear “Who’s that?”, “What’s she doing?”, and the odd “Badass!”

“Gigi!” Harry shouts, distracting me as I take another step.

For a brief moment I squeeze my eyes shut to focus – until I remember that’s an utterly stupid idea. I ping them back open again and shout, “You’re making this harder than it already is!”

I can hear his sigh, feel it in my bones, as it tries to pull me back and eradicate my decision, even over the whistling wind attacking my hair.

“Please.” His voice drops to a plea. “Don’t do this.”

It almost breaks me.

Almost does its job of dragging me backwards.

There’s not much worse of a feeling than knowing someone you care for is on the cusp of desperation. Pressing my lips tight together, I shake my head and take another step. My toes burn from how tightly they’re curled, and I breathe slowly as if it will help me to focus.

“I can’t watch this.”

A brief look over my shoulder shows Harry pushing his way through the crowd and trudging the other way. Another person who thinks I’m a failure. Just like my mother.

Voices escalate with speculation, a series of yells and whistles sounding out. I focus on my target, blocking out the shouting. All it takes is balance and focus.

“You can do this. You can do fucking this,” I whisper, spurring myself on.

Counteracting my balance with the wind, I resume my mission. One foot in front of the other. I focus on my target, which is significantly closer to me now.

The tiara is almost within arm’s reach.

You can do this.

Just a little bit further.

For a fleeting moment I genuinely believe it’s possible. And so does my audience, who erupt in cheers of anticipation.

Then the elation comes crashing down.

As my foot slips.

A gust of wind blows so hard against my back that it screws my whole balance. My arms flail as I try to pull myself back to the centre, but it’s too much, the breeze too strong. Before there’s even a second of hesitation, my knees crash against the rope.

With only a second to brace myself before my body starts free-falling, I reach up and clasp my hand around the rope. I cry out as it burns my palms, weathering the skin raw.

I grip on with everything I have left in me. With each strain of my body I feel my muscles tearing at my sides, and I mentally picture the stitches of my bullet wound ripping apart at the seams, everything slipping through my fingers.

A scream tears free from my throat as I reach for the rope with my other hand.

But then my hand starts to slip.



Am I dead ...?

Life after death feels strangely ... normal. Your past self feels like some strange mechanical dream as you reminisce every life decision under a microscope, considering what led you up to this point.

You think, *Did I really do that?*

But this isn’t a dream. This is real.

I survived crossing the platform.

My hands curl so tightly around the tiara that the plastic gems start to prick at my skin. The pain brings comfort to my body, bringing me back to the present – a harsh reminder I’m really alive.

I’m alive.

I crossed the platform. I did it. I fucking did it.

I’m. Alive.

I retrieved Jack’s tiara, and I wore it like a fucking crown.

I stand in front of the closed door of the Boss’s office, my hand reaching for the doorknob. Every moment has been leading up to this. This cheap little tiara carries the equivalent value of the most priceless gold.

Not giving myself another second to back out of my decision, I exhale a breath, straighten my spine, and tip my chin before throwing open the door and storming inside without so much as knocking to announce my presence.

The Boss sits in his chair at a wooden desk. Several men sit in plush armchairs across from him, engaged in a heated conversation, which gets broken as I waltz closer. Richard shoots to his feet immediately at the intrusion.

I take the crown from my head, slamming it down onto the desk before he can speak. It lands with a thud, and the impact makes the plastic shake beneath my fingertips.

“What are you—?” he starts. His grip tightens around the edge of the desk, knuckles turning white from the pressure. They loosen when he sees what lies underneath my hands. His expression turns candid, confused. “What ... what is that?”

I lift my chin, trying desperately to hide my smug smile. “That’s my entrance. I’m in.”

Our eyes clash, and finally my lips break free, forming around my true expression.

“A life worth dying for.”

He says nothing.

Instead he carefully takes the plastic, touching it with the same caution he’d use on an ancient artefact as he turns it thrice in his hands. Utter shock spreads over his aging features.

Then he does something I don’t expect him to do ...

He laughs.

He laughs in disbelief. He laughs until it turns into a cackle. He laughs until he’s clutching at his chest to stop himself.

Placing the plastic back down on the table, he keeps his head down, but I can sense his smile growing at the corners. With his head still tilted, he lifts his eyes, watching me through dark eyelashes. There’s a menacing undertone behind them, but the emotion is as clear as day. It’s just what I’ve been aching for this whole time.

Acceptance.

The Boss holds his hand out to me.

I extend my palm. The moment he takes my hand and shakes it in his tight grasp I feel a flood of relief filtering through my body.

“Welcome to the Circle, Miss Thomas. It’s a pleasure to have you.”

Finally.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Harry

Just look at her.

She's fucking angelic.

Why the fuck did I ever doubt her?

Richard decides to host an event for the momentous occasion, and he opts for the most lavish bar in all of Mayfair. Just a few streets down from Grosvenor Square is Pascals, which is currently sectioned off with a thick red rope for our party only. And I'll give him credit where it's due – no one knows how to party better than fucking criminals.

The place is almost as elegant as the woman we're celebrating tonight. The walls are dressed in a dark forest green that complements the lavish gold bar. Velvet loveseats and sofas line the perimeter, perched underneath bay windows dressed with heavy burgundy curtains.

The glass chandelier – which looks like it cost no less than my monthly paycheck – shines a reflection of colours across Gigi's brown eyes. It knocks me out of focus as I take a second to stand and appreciate her. She walks with poise, her shoulders lifted, taking everything in her stride, with a smile capable of luring a sailor to his death.

She's magnificent.

It's just a shame Richard is pulling her from pillar to post like some kind of fucking trophy.

I clutch at my glass, taking another generous mouthful of spirit and welcoming the burn against the back of my throat as she's swept off her feet by Hudson fucking Anderson. The trail of her cream silk dress catches against her feet, and even through the clinking of glasses, the echo of chatter, and the strum of the live jazz band her laughter rips a layer off my heart, costing me a decade of my life.

When her hand lands on his chest to catch herself I feel the tips of my ears redden. If she hadn't almost died just hours ago, I'd fucking kill her for having her hands on another man. It'd probably be selfish of me to give her anything less than a few hours before forcing her to entertain the idea of death again. And besides, if I'm being honest, I'm thankful the bastard tore her from Richard's toxic claws.

He'll live.

For now.

As if she can tell her time is limited, she finds me across the crowded room. Our eyes meet over the shoulder of Hudson's probably stupidly expensive suit jacket. Her lips part as I watch her above the rim of my glass. That bastard with his hands on her hips must have said something, because I see her mouth form an apology as she breaks our gaze, turning to him.

Seeing her in the flesh, knowing she's alive and well, completely counteracts the raging anger I had when I found her walking across that fucking rope. I couldn't bear to see her life on the line, so I snuck into Andy's apartment and sat in a dark corner pathetically drinking myself into alcoholism until he came bursting through the door. He'd witnessed the whole thing, and I would've punched the smug grin right off his fucking mouth if he wasn't my best mate.

Like right now, as he spills his nonsense in my ear about how *cool* it was to watch her, as if she's a bloody gymnast. It's jarring, but I can cope with it. But I draw the line when Poppy comes over with a clear attitude.

Folding her arms across her chest, she huffs, "It wasn't even that impressive."

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?" Andy asks. "It was brilliant! The way she pulled herself up from the rope like some kind of titan. She was all—"

And I've had enough.

She's had two minutes too long with her hands on another man.

Downing the rest of my glass, I place it on the corner of the bar and stride over to the centre of the room, not giving a fuck if it looks like I'm staking my claim. My balls are so blue they're practically black at this point, so if Richard wants to threaten me with the fraternisation rule, I'd love to see him try.

“You don’t mind if I take her off your hands, do you?” I ask as I approach Hudson and Gigi.

While her brows are downturned in annoyance, he seems taken aback.

“I didn’t think so.”

Without allowing either of them time to fully register my intrusion, I attach my hand to Gigi’s hip and tug her forwards, into my chest. She stumbles from the sudden movement, bringing herself closer to me. Using it to my advantage, I slip my spare arm around her lower back and tug her tight. I whisper, “I don’t fucking share. Why haven’t you wrapped your pretty little head around that simple concept yet?”

She scoffs and tries to step backwards to distance our bodies, but my grip is stern as she hits my crooked forearm.

“Let me go,” she tells me. “Let me go, or I’ll scream.”

I tug her closer towards me, resting my chin on her shoulder. My lips drop to her ear as I move us in a slow circle, so it’ll appear to onlookers like we’re in some kind of enchanting dance.

“I think I’ll choose the latter, princess. You wouldn’t want to cause a scene at your own party.”

With her body so close to me, I can feel her heart thumping against her chest and onto mine. I truly think I know her better than she knows herself.

Yet she says, “You clearly don’t know me at all.” Gigi plays along, bringing her hand up my back to clasp the back of my suit. Her nimble fingers clutch my collar and tug, restraining the front of my throat and limiting my ability to breathe. “Besides, I’m part of your little clan now. You can’t boss me around anymore.”

I can practically smell her burning flesh like the very day it happened. It’s all an illusion, of course, the reminders haunting me when I least expect them. While she wears them with pride, the scars on her body are a constant reminder of my failure to her. I’ve devoted the past year to trying to distance her from this toxicity to no avail. Now she’s one of us. And she’s further from mine than she’s ever been.

If Gigi’s truly insistent about her life within the Circle, I can’t afford to have her out of my sight. I know something dark lies under the surface. Something far greater than the society. If she refuses to leave, then my obsessive tendencies towards her will have only just begun.

My attention strays as one of the recruits, Leroy, wanders in through the front entrance. The young lad walks in with a smirk, greeting those by the front with confidence despite the obvious hickey on his neck. His shirt is stained with a lipstick mark, and my blood curdles at his stupidity. Rumour around camp is that he’s been fraternising with one of the women – I’m not sure of her name. But he’s not being fucking sly about it. It’s only a matter of time before he gets one of them killed.

Gigi turns her attention back to me, and for a fraction of a second our lips are barely an inch from one another’s. Her gaze is on my mouth as she says, “N-no more of your funny business either.”

I smirk. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, baby.”

She hisses at the name, drawing back as if the word itself is venomous. “I’m being serious, Harry.”

I release my grip on her waist and allow her the impression she’s free to leave. When she starts to turn, I catch her wrist and force her to meet my gaze.

“And so am I, princess. Listen to me when I say I’ve devoted my life to you in ways you’ll never understand. You’ve ruined my past and you’ve ruined my future. So you can bet your pretty little head I’m going to ruin your present,” I say darkly, truthfully.

Her eyes widen, her pupils dilating until there are only slivers of brown. “Are you drunk or something?”

“Are you pretty?” I ask, and her nose crinkles. “Don’t ask stupid questions. Now feel free to run along to Mr. Anderson – I’ve got some revenge to plan ... like what I’ll put on his gravestone when we leave here tonight.”

Finally taking that step away from me, she points her finger right in my face. “You’re sick.”

I reiterate, “No. I’m fucking obsessed, baby. There’s a difference.”

THIRTY-NINE

Gigi

Harry lets Hudson Anderson live.

For now.

Not that there was any truth behind the threat, only pathetic bravado to try to wheedle me back into his life again. It's all fun and games when Harry catches me off-guard, but it's another story when his concentration is elsewhere.

It's not that I'm purposely trying to assault his feelings, but my unwanted opinions just happen to slip out, like when we're planning an upcoming heist. In fact, there are multiple we're working on at the minute. I keep hearing the words "Gold House" muttered in lingering conversations – an upper-scale heist on a large department store on Regent Street that's been almost a year in the making. There's been talk of the owners selling rights to the store, and according to our experts, that's the time they'll be the most vulnerable. So the team is preparing everything to hit them at short notice. But that's not today.

Today we're overlooking a smaller-scale operation that will only involve a few recruits – not Harry or me, but we're here trying to help solidify the plans.

The Boss's arms are folded over his chest as he paces by the desk, listening to our input on how we'll tackle the situation. Two people are set to infiltrate one of the men who helped lead the break-in at Richard's office. Russo De Luca, the original man was called. Or something like that.

While they're arguing about whether to take the front or back entrance into some Italian mansion, I realise something doesn't seem right. It's such a small detail. So insignificant it would be overlooked, but also the kind that could determine a heist's success.

Shaking his head, Harry tells one of the men, "No way. It's too risky. I'm not losing a member of my team because you want to go charging through the front door. Take the back entrance. It's safer, and you're guaranteed to face less security. End of discussion."

If we weren't bickering, I'd admire his authoritative tone.

"Everybody agree?"

While everyone else starts nodding I duck my head, remaining tight-lipped. I'm a new addition to this team, and I'm not about to start spilling my opinions with my big mouth.

"Gigi, do you have something to say?" the Boss asks.

My instinctual reaction is to freeze, but since there are multiple eyes on me I lift my head and feign innocence. "Oh, it was nothing."

"You might as well get whatever it is off your chest."

Harry watches me with scepticism, staring directly into the side of my face. Avoiding his pools of green, I gnaw at my bottom lip.

"I just think you're going about it all wrong."

"How so?" Harry asks, his arms crossed tight over his chest. "Only a fool would think about walking into a Mafia den through the front door."

"I'm probably wrong then."

"I want to hear what she has to say." The Boss watches, appearing genuinely intrigued. "Go on."

I exhale then ask cautiously, "How many guards are positioned at the front of the property?"

"Five," Harry says.

"And the back?"

"Two ..."

"Do you not think they could be using more security at the front just to deter you? I might be wrong, but surely, if they know they're being targeted, they're expecting a stealth approach – just as you're planning. You're choosing the back entrance as it's

easier, but don't you think they took that into account?"

Without a second of breathing space, the Boss points to Whizz Tech Dan and says, "Research it now. See if she's onto something."

"You could potentially be going against two of the highest-trained guards in London or five highly untrained individuals," I add.

The next few minutes are spent in tense silence, the pressure weighing on my shoulders like a heavy boulder. We turn to Dan when he perks up, his laptop perched on his knees.

"She's ... she's right."

Oh my God.

"The two men positioned out back are ex-marines. One served in Afghanistan for a decade, and the other is an ex-bodyguard of some former president in the States, whereas three of the men at the front have been fired for negligence in the past. And there's no history on the other two. They're rookies."

Pride overwhelms my body like an invading parasite, and my shoulders lift in triumph. Surprise flashes over the Boss's eyes, but something else – stronger – shines under the surface.

Meanwhile Harry looks as if he wants to gut me like a pig, and not in the sexy double-penetration kind of way. I stick my tongue out at him and instantly retract it when his eyes light up with a fire, like he's picturing all the things he wants to do with it. That's *definitely* a distraction I can't afford.

"We're done for today. We'll regroup tomorrow and go through the new plan. These fuckers don't know what's coming for them," the Boss orders, dismissing us like schoolkids.

As I'm preparing to exit the room, people walk past and applaud me with the odd "good job" and "good thinking". It makes me feel victorious.

It's difficult to hide the smile that stretches from ear to ear, so I wear it with pride like my scars and strut towards the door – until a hand presses on my shoulder, pulling me back.

"Good thinking today, Thomas. I'm really impressed." The Boss adds, "I knew you had it in you. I guess you're more like your brother than I thought."

What I really want is to cry from the heavens, but instead I return, "That means a lot, thank you."

"I have something for you."

Popping the locks on a case sitting on the table, he pries it open and retrieves the contents from the protective foam. It's silver and roughly the size of his palm, but it isn't until he fully turns to me that I realise it's a gun. If a normal person had the weapon pointed at them, they'd raise their hands in mercy and run for the hills.

But I never claimed to be normal.

I stagger forwards with intrigue and ask, "Is that for me?"

He nods, handing it over to me. "It's just your standard Glock. It's a great beginner gun, easy to shoot. You might find it weighs a bit, but it's nothing that won't take a bit of getting used to."

I blink in surprise, taken aback by the generosity. It's the first gift he's given me, excluding the leather-bound Codex – the handbook everyone follows once they enter the Circle. It contains various information about living in the apartments, what we strive for, and the no-fraternisation rule, but for the most part it's relatively simple stuff.

Wrapping my fingers around the grip, I press my forefinger flat against the neck and turn it over in my palm. "Wow, I really don't know what to say." I meet his eye. "Thank you, but what's it for?"

He smiles slowly, a laugh catching in his throat as if it wasn't intended to come out. "I know I said I wouldn't take you under my wing, but I guess I'll always have a weak spot for a Thomas."

Now I'm receiving special treatment *and* gifts? Screw letting everything get to my head – I'm basking in this feeling.

I return his smile. "Now I just need to find an opportunity to use it."

"And in time, you will. I'll make sure of it."



The gun becomes a kind of trademark look, holstered around my thigh, reminding people I mean business. Declaring I have a right to be here. Even when we attend galas or events that call for formalwear, I purposely choose dresses with a slit up my thigh, allowing my new present to sparkle in all its glory. One wrong move and *POP!* goes the weasel. I'm yet to use it on the field, but if practising in the shooting range tells me anything, it's that I feel powerful. I like the fact I always have something so dangerous so close.

When I say it's holstered around my thigh, I don't mean in something dainty like a stocking or a garter; I'm talking about a gun

holster. If I'm always wearing this baby, I don't want to risk it falling.

Like right now, as I stand at one of these fancy galas undertaking an abundance of introductions as the Boss presents me as his latest recruit. I laugh. I smile. I even crack a couple of jokes, and everything goes swimmingly. I finally feel acceptance – something I never felt at home, with my family. I now know why Jack lived for this life and died doing what he loved best.

The only – and pretty major – issue is Harry. Harry with the lingering glances, looking drop-dead gorgeous in a suit. I catch him in formalwear more than I do in casual clothes at this point, but fuck, does he wear the shit out of a blazer.

Tearing my gaze away from where he's standing across the room, I go back to the reality that we've been avoiding each other. I'm thankful for it after his little revenge speech, and I hate how my body is naturally drawn to him in a crowded room. It's better that I treat us as nothing more than colleagues.

"You don't mind if I steal the lady for a sec?"

A saving grace breaks through mid-conversation with two elderly twins. I turn to Oliver, grateful for the getaway.

"The lady of the hour looks like she could use a drink," he says with a charming smile.

"If you'll excuse me."

I retreat from the Boss's friends, whose eyes linger on my body for a fraction too long. While they're probably eyeing my weapon, I can't shake the discomfort that comes with their attention.

I take the champagne flute from Oliver's hand, rushing to keep up with his steps as we retreat from the odd pair. "You're a lifesaver," I say, taking a heavy gulp of the bubbling liquid.

"I know when a lady feels uncomfortable. It looks like I came about five minutes too late."

"You came at the perfect time. Thank you."

My lips find the glass, and I moan softly at the sweet taste on my tongue as the bubbles pop, tingling my tastebuds. While I soak up the interior of the room, seeing the exquisite furniture I've grown accustomed to, I don't realise the man next to me is preparing to get sentimental.

"I'm proud of you, kiddo," Oliver says.

I laugh, almost sputtering on the liquid. "Don't call me that. You make me feel like a baby."

It's difficult to describe mine and Oliver's relationship, but in those weeks that we trained every single day I felt as if I'd secured a friend for life. He's not just a friend; he's practically family at this point. He pulled me from my lowest depths and transitioned me into the woman I am today. There's no simple way of putting it. I owe him my life.

"I am a father after all, and I feel like you're my protégé."

Wrapping his elbow around my head, he brings me into a chokehold like we're a pair of stupid teenagers. He rubs his fist into the top of my hair, ruining the neat strands like I didn't spend an hour straightening them.

"Mercy! Mercy!" I laugh, repeatedly tapping on his arm. "Fucking mercy, Jesus. Get off me, you lunatic."

His FaceTime ringtone breaks through the chaos. Releasing me, he retrieves his phone from his pocket, his smile contagious.

"I have to go." He jogs a few paces away before answering the call. "Daddy'll be home soon."

Before I even have a second to powder my nose – or whatever the ladies do – the familiar scent of mint and leather swallows me. Harry steps around my body, taking up my view with his broad frame.

"Are you drinking this?"

"Yes, I—" I start, but the glass is already taken from my palm.

Holding the flute stem between his fingers, Harry turns the glass and raises it to his mouth, pressing his lips directly over my lipstick stain. His eyes are dark, tormenting my insides, as he watches me over the rim.

Forcing myself to swallow, I ask in a voice far too shaky, "Aren't people meant to avoid the part you've drunk from?"

"If this is the closest I'm getting to your mouth, then I'm taking it."

He takes another sip, directly from the same spot, smirking against the glass.

Despite my insides betraying me, I roll my eyes and act unfazed by his flirtation.

He pulls the glass from his mouth with an audible "mmm" and then asks, "And who else are you sharing your fucking drinks with?"

Scowling, I snatch back my glass. Opening the clasp of my clutch, I retrieve a napkin and purposely wipe where his mouth was, though I silently hope I'll leave behind some remnants of his touch.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Apparently," I say.

As I rid myself of the napkin, I sense his amusement at my turmoil as I turn to a fresh part of the glass and take a sip.

"Is there a reason you're interrupting my perfect evening?"

"Perfect?" he scoffs. "That's not what you were thinking when the twins were eye-fucking you just now."

I pause mid-drink, finding his eyes slowly. "I ... I didn't realise you were watching me so closely."

"There's no better sight than you, princess."

My cheeks flush with heat. "Why are you really here, Harry?"

"Richard has pulled the two of us onto the assassination heist tomorrow."

“You’re joking.”

He shakes his head. “Turns out your little security-guard stint a few days ago left him rather impressed. He thought there were no better people for the job than you and me.”

Well, I can’t say I’m surprised.

“What about Leroy?” I ask.

As if on cue, the young recruit is escorted in by two heavy-duty security guards. They pull him by his upper arms, and he thrashes against them. The music cuts out, and Harry instinctively grabs my arm, pulling me behind him as if he’s some sort of human shield.

I say in a hushed whisper, “Hands off.”

“Don’t fuck around. Stay behind me.”

At the sight of Leroy, the Boss’s smile spreads, and he waves his hand in the air then clinks the top of his glass with a spoon as if the sight is something to admire. He calls upon the guests as the ring echoes.

“If I could have all your attention, please. I apologise in advance that you must see this, but some of my recruits have forgotten the vital importance of the rules I set in place. And a display of public degradation is the only way I’ll get my point across.”

Leroy keeps a smug look on his face. His eyes are wild and his hair untamed, making him look intoxicated. Even when forced to his knees as if this is a public beheading, he watches the Boss with nothing short of a smirk.

Richard passes his beverage to a nearby waiter. “Leroy has been having an affair with one of our female recruits.”

Hushed responses filter around the room, taking a minute to calm down.

“If people don’t treat my few rules with respect, I consider it to be the ultimate betrayal.”

Nerves keep down me grounded, and I suddenly feel as if I’m the guilty party. When my hands start to shake I clutch them to my chest, fearful that the movement might give me away.

Dropping my voice to a whisper, I lean towards Harry’s ear. “And this is why you will never be taking advantage of me again.”

Keeping his head forwards, he responds just as quietly, “I love a challenge.”

But there’s no time for a response, because the Boss has already unholstered a pistol from his waistband. He raises it to Leroy’s temple, letting a fraction of a second pass before he pulls the trigger, assassinating him on the spot.

Feminine shrieks pierce the room, and a scream catches in my throat as Leroy’s body slumps against the marble floor. Blood pools around his head, spreading quickly.

“May this be a message to my recruits – I do not take negligence lightly.” Referencing a nearby guard, Richard groans. “Have someone clean this up.”

The man in question gathers equipment ready to dispose of the body, and it’s only at this moment I realise my limbs are working. My legs turn to jelly, shaking like a new-born calf, and I fight hard to stiffen them.

Clutching onto the back of Harry’s suit for stability, I hiss, “You want one of us to die?”

“Baby,” he replies, his voice low and all for me, “if I can’t have you in this life, you can bet your fucking ass I’m claiming you in death.”

FORTY

Gigi

The interior of my apartment is light and airy. The kitchen units are a fraction lighter than cream, and the tiled floors are a speckled beige, uplifting the space with enticing brightness.

Yet when a hard knock pounds on my door, everything feels dark.

I pull the duvet cover over my head, hoping to conceal the noise, but the sound only resumes. With a grunt, I exit the bed and trudge towards the door.

As I unlock the deadbolt my intruder storms past me. I sigh heavily at Harry's presence.

"What are you doing here?"

He's dressed in formalwear like he hasn't changed his clothes since last night. But this is a fresh suit – I can tell. It's perfectly pressed, and there's not a line or a crease on his white shirt despite his biceps struggling to accommodate the material.

Harry's eyes travel over my body, making me feel as if I've been dipped in fire. His green-eyed stare is intense. It's as if he can see through my silk pyjama co-ord, and my nipples pebble underneath the fabric at the thought. I cross my arms over my chest, hoping to deter his gaze.

"We have a long day ahead of us," he says.

His intense stare causes me to squeeze my thighs together. He notices the slight change in my posture, and a groan vibrates off his chest as his eyes darken, finally finding mine. At the reminder of what happened with Leroy, I turn away.

Whether or not I trust Harry not to snoop through my belongings, there's not much I can do to prevent it since I need to change. Thankfully, it doesn't take me long to shower, and make myself look presentable. The warm weather has me choosing a light, airy dress.

When I walk the hallway from my bedroom to my new living space, my gun isn't where I left it on the coffee table. Senses heightened, I turn quickly, only to find Harry turning the weapon over in his hands.

"Present from Daddy?" he asks.

"What are you – twelve?" I snatch it back from him, keeping the trigger aimed low despite how much I want to knock him over the head with it. "And besides, I'm very grateful."

His ringtone pierces the silence. He slips his phone from his pocket, propping it between his head and shoulder. "Hello?"

I double-check the Glock's safety is on before slipping it into the holster. Then I pick up my earrings from the tray table and turn to Harry as I fasten them into my ears.

"Put it on speaker," I mouth.

He obliges, setting the phone on the table.

"... and Bobby from last night?" the Boss asks.

Harry says, "Nope. Doesn't ring a bell."

"The twins, Harry. You haven't seen the twins?"

He purses his lips as if deep in thought then shakes his head. "Definitely not. I don't know any twins. Sorry I couldn't be any more help."

A mumbled curse crackles through the phone speaker before Richard asks, "Are you with, Gigi?"

"I'm here," I tell him.

"All missions a go today? Apologies that I couldn't have given you a bit more notice – I was a little preoccupied last night."

I shiver internally. "Absolutely fine. We're just about to leave now since it's a long road ahead."

He rehashes some final details about the intentions of today's task, but they slip my mind as something more potent rises to the surface. Something that churns my insides to ash.

When the silence indicates the call has ended, I ask slowly, "Harry ...?"

Fixing his cuffs, he mumbles, “Mm-hmm?”

“Where are the twins?” I ask, fastening the strap of my flashy, diamond-encrusted *Cartier*.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His voice is faultless, refusing to give anything away, but there’s the faintest tic in his jaw that tells me everything I need to know.

“Harry ...”

“Yes, baby?”

“Please don’t tell me you murdered these men in cold blood just because they were being disrespectful ...”

“All right, I won’t.”

Heat courses up my skin, sending an emotion so strong through my body that I almost topple over. I glance around and *really* look at him.

He’s so handsome I can barely stand it.

His features are so perfect, so symmetrical, that if they were any more delicate he’d be too beautiful for a man.

His black hair, gleaming in the light, one lock falling forwards on his forehead.

The lining of his jaw.

His large hands – the very cause of people’s death.

Harry has avenged me.

He has killed for me.

Again.

“Oh my God!” I press my face into my palms, concealing my flushed skin. “You can’t keep killing the people who wrong me, Harry!”

He shrugs. “Why not?”

“You’re going to get yourself killed if you keep doing stuff like this!”

“At least I’ll die doing what love.”

I scoff. “And what’s that?”

“Protecting you.”

I blink.

If we weren’t part of London’s most notorious crime group, I don’t doubt Harry would treat any woman like an angel, respecting the ground she walks on. But our life is far from simple, and even responding to the feelings swarming my stomach could result in a death sentence for either of us.

“I miss the man who used to keep me at arm’s length and couldn’t stand being around me,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

A sad smile crosses his features. Harry’s eyes are fixed somewhere in the past as he stares straight through me and says, “As soon as I branded you with a hot poker, I became indebted to you for the rest of my life.”

Indebted to you for the rest of my life ...

Is that how my scar torments him?

I can hardly lift my voice above a whisper. “A lifetime is a very long time.”

He blinks, bringing himself back to the present. “Then we might as well make it worthwhile ...” He takes a step towards the door, turns the handle, and bows dramatically like a doorman. “Your carriage awaits, princess.”

We fill a rental car with our belongings, preparing for our upcoming mission. I’m excited to be working directly in the field after all my extensive training with Oliver, having practised relentlessly for this moment. Yet when Harry pulls up to a small airport and onto the runway, I feel perplexed as he stops the car, winks, and then exits the driver’s side.

I step out slowly, my eyelashes fluttering in awe. “By the carriage, I thought you meant we were taking the Bentley.”

“Private jets don’t do it for you?” His voice is laced with humour as we scale the steps up to the plane. “An Italian mansion wouldn’t be very authentic in London, now, would it?”

The interior of the jet is muted and sophisticated, a mixture of dark greys and blacks. Plush leather seats sit across from one another, and a small bar stocked with drinks sits adjacent to the front entrance. Spots and speckled stars decorate the ceiling.

Shock renders me speechless as Harry and I take two vacant seats in the middle of the cabin.

“We’re going to Italy?”

He smirks.

Taking a glass of champagne, he passes me one before taking one for himself.

When my brain kicks into motion I ask hopefully, “Do we get to see the Sistine Chapel?”

He smiles, swallows his sip, and then catches a stray droplet from the corner of his mouth with his tongue. “No time for sightseeing on the job, princess. We’ll have left there and be back home by this evening.”

“Home,” he says, as if it’s truly that simple.

Flying via private jet is nothing like the commercial flights I’m used to. Even though business class is a slight added luxury, there’s still the delay of waiting for others to board, and no matter how luxe the seats may be, you’re still sharing stale air with

three hundred other passengers. But all of that's completely forgotten here. Since it's just me and Harry flying, we're charging the runway within a matter of minutes.

The flight is short – just shy of two hours to Milan – but it seems to take an eternity as my eyes are like magnets to Harry's legs, which fill the space easily. Leisurely he stretches his long limbs, appearing far too relaxed for a man in a business suit. When his hand absentmindedly rests over the front of his trousers as he scrolls through his phone, I decide it's a distraction I can't afford. I'm soon polishing the gun in my lap to occupy my mind.

"You've made sure the safety is off, right?" Harry asks tonelessly.

I lift my head, noticing his eyes are still glued to his phone.

"I'm not an amateur," I say, still not gaining his attention. "What do you have against the gun anyway?"

He shrugs. "Knives are better."

"Do you have to disagree with everything I say?"

"No," he responds with a not-so-subtle smirk.

As I stroke the cloth over the gun's magazine, I frown at the feel of something jagged in the metal. I brush my fingers over the source, discovering an imprint in the frame. Something engraved ...

"Harry!" I shout in accusation.

Eyed glued to his phone screen, the corners of his lips twitch into a grin.

"When did you do this?" I ask.

The irresistible bastard has engraved a heart alongside "G + H" on my Glock!

"Just to remind you who you belong to," he says. "Do you like it?"

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I exhale heavily, revisiting all the reasons this could lead to a death sentence. My gun, the very weapon that never leaves my side, is now a constant reminder of Harry ...

At least he thought of the fact I'm right-handed, so the engraving should be concealed by my palm.

Rather than dwelling on the sentiment, I ask, "Who says it's you?"

His expression stills and he grows serious, finally turning his attention to me. "What do you mean?"

"Who says it's you?" I press.

He draws his brows together in question.

"Doesn't Hudson Anderson start with—"

And I'm suddenly thrown back into my seat as Harry jumps forwards, gripping the armrests on either side as his body crowds mine. His hands flex, his grip tightening and cracking the leather. The wash of stubble on his jaw and cheeks makes him look more rugged and severe, matching his curt, cold voice as he warns, "Finish that sentence. I dare you."

"What will you do if I finish it?"

He laughs, the sound sinister and hollow. "Go on. Try it."

"Not until you answer my question."

His Adam's apple bobs, and then he says, "I'd ask for something from you."

"Ask for something from me?" I reiterate. "What could I possibly give you that you want?"

Crowding me to the point I'm forced to lift my chin, he says, "A kiss."

I feel my cheeks blaze at the heaviness of the moment. "Well, it's a good thing I didn't finish that sentence then, isn't it?"

"Very good indeed, princess."



Summer in Italy is how I idealise retirement: warmth flushing my skin and sunburn pinkening my nose. I feel it within my grasp as we step out of the taxi, the Italian heat hitting me with intensity. I'm thankful for the *Fendi* maxi dress I chose this morning.

Harry's heavy gaze is a constant reminder of my choice as his eyes run down the length of the garment. It's white, the V-neck exposing a hint of cleavage. The length is modest, reaching my ankles, apart from my trademark slit. Yet with the intensity of his gaze, it's as if I'm wearing the finest gown.

"Never wear white again," he says, his voice strained.

"Why?" I ask as we approach the Italian palace, positioned on the cliffside above crystal-clear waters.

The property is utterly beautiful and looks far more exquisite than any holiday resort, with lush greenery complimenting the outside of the striking home. Waves crash against the steps several meters below us, and I picture the flash of cool spray on my skin, still distracted by it when Harry says, "It's bad luck to be seen wearing white before you reach the altar."

"No, it's not," I return, forgetting to deny the idea of marriage. "Since when has that ever been a tradition?"

Harry smirks, pressing his hand to my lower back as he responds with, "Since I made it one."

The man we're supposed to infiltrate is hosting a garden party for a group of elite businessmen and their partners across Europe. It's a casual affair, yet Harry still opted for a full suit, needing to conceal our weapons. It wasn't a smart idea for me to enter with my gun in plain sight, so Harry hid it inside his breast pocket, the length of his jacket concealing the knives sheathed in the waistband of his trousers. I was forced to trade my holster for a garter, but it'll do the job.

The concept is simple: interrogate the man who helped plan the break-in at the Boss's office and then catch our flight home. His boss, Paolo Ricci, is our real target, but we're not nearly prepared for that operation yet.

It all seems easy enough, yet when we reach the security guards positioned at the front of the property – the alleged rookies – my stomach spirals with nerves. Their gazes are stern as they watch people enter, hardly seeming the negligent type. Out of instinct I step closer to Harry, and when he presses a kiss to my bare shoulder I'm filled with another sensation entirely.

"I love this," he mumbles into my skin as we walk past the guards effortlessly. "I can have my lips all over you, and there's nothing you can do about it."

I'm programmed to deny the effects of Harry's touch, yet tingles erupt in the pit of my stomach at the prospect of having his mouth on me. His lips continue to linger on my skin, kissing a trail from my shoulder to the side of my neck, which is exposed to the torture since I've pulled my hair into a large claw clip to survive the blistering heat. I don't know whether to be grateful as goose bumps cover my skin. Harry's soft mouth seems to catch every one of them, and my eyelashes flutter, a moan catching in my throat at the gentle caress.

"Stop," I warn as my core intensifies with pleasure.

He chuckles, the sound low and torturous. "If we didn't have a job to do, I'd fuck you in one of the rooms of this mansion. Would you like that, baby?"

"Harry," I whine, my thighs slick with heat.

Pressing one final touch on my skin in the form of nipping teeth, he playfully swats my ass before leading us further inside.

My heels clatter against the tiled floor, keeping up with Harry's long strides, as we peer into rooms for any sign of our victim. I'm blindsided by the array of plated food, the Italian delicacies causing my mouth to water. Large bifold doors give way to potted plants and the ripest of flowers. People gather on the terrace, and young children race by our feet with high-pitched giggles.

"Right there," Harry says, turning my focus. His thumb and forefinger lightly grab my chin, tugging my face in the direction of a man with greying hair and thick, dark eyebrows. He's dressed in casual board shorts and a crisp white linen T-shirt, clutching a beverage close to his chest and wooing his guests with his tales.

My fingers twitch, imagining how he'll feel as my first kill using my new Glock. But before I can linger on the idea, Harry tugs at my arm, leading us in the opposite direction. Using the cover of the busy party, he approaches a door at the end of a hallway and scopes out his surroundings before picking the lock, allowing us to slip inside.

The room is dark, clear of all windows and watchful eyes. A desk sits in the centre of the room, lit by a lone bulb in the ceiling. Another door sits adjacent in the far corner, hidden in dark shadows, but Harry seems unfazed as he starts to pull open wooden drawers, searching for information.

Referencing the single filing cabinet positioned by the door, he bucks his chin and says, "Start looking through that and see what you can find."

I frantically search through the files.

Endless nothing.

Forced to close another when there's nothing more than a mixture of tax returns inside, I huff in frustration. Minutes tick by, and I close the second to last one, nearing defeat, but I halt at the next as I catch movement to my right.

The door opens, the action silent and heavy, and I clash gazes with a dark, intense stare. Failing to act on his discovery, the male intruder's harsh features insinuate it's unlikely I'll leave this room alive.

"H-Harry ..." I stutter.

"You found something?"

I brave a look over my shoulder at him, but his head is tilted down, the muscles of his back stretching as he tears through paperwork. When I turn back to the man in front of me, his head is cocked in a menacing tilt, causing a lump to form in my throat.

"You know that ex-marine we were just talking about?"

Painstaking silence fills the air, and Harry asks hesitantly, "Yes?"

"I think I just found him."

The man steps further over the threshold of the room, forcing me to retreat a few steps with my hands raised in surrender. I backtrack slowly until something hard hits my back.

Harry.

Our backs hit, and his familiar scent provides a comforting blanket over me. I spare a look back at him, noticing another guard approaching from Harry's side, having entered through the spare doorway. I whip my head forwards as the marine approaches further.

“And what are you doing in here, miss? You’re missing out on the party,” the guard taunts in a mocking voice, no doubt aware of my true intentions. “My word, the highest bidder will pay a pretty penny for you.”

I pull my head back, utterly appalled, and clash against Harry’s skull.

Is he talking about human trafficking?

What. The. Fuck?

My hand hovers near my gun, twitching against the vacant holster until I realise it’s empty. Sensing the movement, Harry’s hand finds mine behind my back. He takes my wrist between his fingers, warning me not to move. Slipping a dagger down the arm of his suit jacket, he places it in my hands, the coolness of metal filling my palm.

“I don’t come cheap,” I tell the guard, clasping my hand around the hilt.

He smirks, but it lacks emotion. Speaking with a thick Italian accent, he says, “I do not doubt that, miss.”

I feel about ready to act on my first ever death, but my breath catches when Harry’s thumb lingers on my skin, brushing gently across my knuckles. I don’t doubt we’ll get out of this alive, but it’s a peace offering in case we don’t.

I whisper, “If we’re about to die, I promise I’ll haunt you forever.”

“Princess, even though the opportunity to spend eternity with you is extremely tempting, we’re not dying today.”

Before I have time to deadpan a response, he releases a heavy exhale before demanding quietly, “*Now.*”

The guard is on me in nothing short of a second, and I tighten my grip. As his hands reach my sides, I draw my arm forwards and slice the fucker across his throat, severing his carotid artery. I lose the dagger in the mound of severed flesh, a warm gush of blood splattering across my face, forcing me to blink my vision clear.

In the split second I have to collect my thoughts I hear a grunt from Harry behind me mid-fight, alerting me that he’s alive. *Thank God.*

Another man of a much larger build bursts through the open door, gunning straight for me. In a panic I reach my hand back, unsheathing a dagger from the back of Harry’s trousers, and toss it forwards. The knife sails through the air, plunging into my victim right between the eyes. He drops to his knees, then onto his stomach, reaching his hand out in a silent cry for help as he gargles on blood.

Despite feeling pretty accomplished, I run my hand over my chest to make sure my heart hasn’t leapt free of my ribcage, smearing blood in my wake. The red liquid spoils my white dress, and at the sight of it smothered on me, the realisation of what happened pounds into me like a round of bullets, causing my hands to shake.

Hands grip my face and I’m tugged in the other direction, forced to meet a set of emerald eyes. They hold mine hostage and refuse to leave.

I watch them dreamily. The person’s lips are moving, the intensity of their eyes insinuating they have something important to say, but I’m lost in their beauty. They don’t have a speck of blood on them, not a fault on their white shirt, nor a hair out of place – except for that distracting lone strand.

“Gigi!” Harry demands, capturing my focus. He exhales a heavy, weighted sigh. His thumbs find my cheeks, fingers spraying across the sides of my neck. “I’m just making sure you’re still here with me ... I thought I lost you there.”

Don’t lose your sanity in the madness.

Breathless, I ask, “Why couldn’t I have used my gun?”

He smiles, but concern is evident in his eyes as they dart across my face. “No one talks about harming my woman and gets away with something as simple as a bullet wound.”

My woman ...

My woman.

My. Woman.

As I truly look at him, the words settling in, I see him in an utterly different light. I’ve never wanted Harry to possess me, own me, or make me forget the very essence of who I am ... until this very moment.

My eyes flicker to his lips, taunting me to taste them.

But there’s still that inner turmoil in my mind screaming this is a bad decision.

But he saved you, the newly acquired voice in my head argues, overriding my brain. *He saved your life.*

My throat feels incredibly dry as I say, “M-my gun.”

“Right,” he says, voice catching. He pulls it from his inside pocket and passes it over to me.

Our fingers brush, and I ignore the spark of electricity as I holster the gun back on the garter around my thigh. As I turn back to him, his body stiffens, the blood draining from his face rapidly.

“Gun,” he orders.

“What?”

“Gigi, your fucking gun!”

He reaches out and clasps onto my arm, spinning me around to face him in one lightning-fast motion. My back hits his broad chest. The air is knocked out of me, leaving me with a split second to come to my senses.

A man charges at us from the entryway, and I cry out as he reaches his filthy hands out towards us. But Harry has already

disarmed my gun from the holster, his arms crowding mine as we grab the pistol, aiming it at the person running right for us.

While his thumb switches off the safety, Harry's forefinger presses over mine, and we pull the trigger together. The pressure of the gun vibrates up my arm, causing me to stir against his chest. The man drops to the floor, guttural noises spilling from his throat before his body becomes limp and silence swarms the air.

After a long, stretched-out pause Harry finally lowers our arms, bringing down the gun until the muzzle is aimed at the floor. I slip my hands from his, turning to him slowly. Flecks of blood are splattered across his skin, and his lips part with laboured breathing. There's not a single ounce of remorse in his dark soul. I try to mirror his frame, but inside, my heart is pounding with ferocity at the tension between us.

The air fills with the forbiddenness of temptation and skin.

Harry is staring at me like he never has before, a murderous intent in his gaze as he says, "Fuck it."

His heavy palm cups the back of my neck desperately, pulling my head forwards to crash his mouth against mine.

Our lips move together frantically, and my eyes roll from being away from him for so long. He bows his head to reach my mouth, palming my skin, and I melt into him, savouring the taste of the mint gum on his tongue. My hands find his chest, fisting the material to keep him close as his tongue crosses the threshold of my mouth, igniting warmth through me.

"I want to fucking devour you," Harry mutters into the kiss.

He tastes of toxicity and bad decisions. I welcome the feeling all too well, rising onto my tiptoes, and pressing further into him.

"Then do it," I whimper.

He chuckles, sinking his teeth into my bottom lip as his free hand fists my hip. "I can't." He pulls back from the kiss. "Not here."

The loss of him drags a moan from my lips, but the moment quickly catches up with me, making me feel like I've been injected with pure adrenaline as Harry says, "I think that was the guy we were supposed to bring in for questioning."

Tearing my gaze away from his plump lips, I turn to the man on the floor, who is indeed the man we were hoping to interrogate.

Grey hair.

Thick eyebrows.

Board shorts.

The linen shirt now stained with blood.

"Oh ..."

"It's too late now. Let's get out of here."

FORTY-ONE

Sigi

The aftermath of mine and Harry's kiss lingers in the air. I feel intoxicated, drunk on the raw intensity of the taste of his tongue on mine. That's why I lock myself in the bathroom of the jet for an eternity after take-off, attempting to compose myself since we barely escaped the Italian mansion alive.

The party turned to chaos with the news they'd been infiltrated, but we managed to sneak out right under their noises. But fuck ... it was close.

Revisiting the events of today, desire assaults my core. I catch the wall as the edges of my vision darken, my abdomen tightening with lust. Every part of me screams to stay clear from Harry. Yet something inside me – something raw, savage, and sadistic – forces me to stay.

Cautiously I open the door of the bathroom to find him leaning against the cabin wall opposite. His head is tilted back, watching me through dark eyelashes.

"What do you want?" he asks, his deep voice wrapping around me.

I wet my lips, acting on pure instinct. "You."

His nostrils flare, and the muscle in his neck pulses. "Where?"

His steps are slow and torturous as he crowds me against the wall beside the bathroom door, his hands pressed either side of my head. In response to his question I grind my hips forwards, feeling his growing erection pressing against my thigh. He catches my hip in one hand, balancing his weight on one strained arm. His fingers bite into my side as if he's physically restraining himself.

"You have to be quiet, though, princess." His voice lowers to a hushed whisper. "This jet is tapped with a voice recorder. I don't want anyone hearing those pretty whimpers, so you're going to have to be *really* quiet. Do you think you can do that?"

I nod, anticipation burning my thighs raw.

Harry kneels before me slowly, and a rush of adrenaline surges through my veins at the power of having him bowing at my feet. It sets my skin alight with fire until it burns like a furnace.

"The gun stays," I tell him.

He draws my underwear down my legs slowly, and when I step out of them he pockets them in the back of his trousers. As he brings his hand up my skin, from my ankle to my calf to my knee to my thigh, I feel the strength in his palm. He carefully rests my leg over his shoulder, letting my heel press into his upper back.

There's a murderous, carnal look in his eyes as he pushes my thighs apart and tilts his head up, pressing his lips against me. I gasp and push his hair from his forehead, pulling at the base as his tongue slides inside of me, licking, swirling, devouring me. My breasts ache to be touched, and I roll my nipples between my fingers.

He shifts underneath me, releasing a low, feral groan as he mumbles, "Christ, you're so fucking beautiful."

My eyes fly open. He watches me intently as my back arches from the wall and he pushes a finger into my entrance, replacing his tongue. Remnants of blood have dried on his cheeks, making him appear animalistic. He spreads my folds with his fingers, lapping at my clit with maddening intensity, maintaining eye contact the whole time.

My thighs threaten to squeeze around Harry's head, but his hands are steel traps, keeping my legs apart. I part my lips, choking on air as liquid heat, raw euphoria, overwhelms me. All it takes is for him to slip another finger inside of me, curling them both into my G-spot, and I'm chasing the crest of my orgasm.

My teeth catch my lower lip, piercing the skin as I struggle to remain quiet. And when Harry nibbles on my clit I'm a goner. Fuelled by lust and animalistic desire, I'm ready to unleash the pleasure coursing through me, but he forces two fingers into my mouth to silence me.

His tongue continues lapping at my clit, pushing me through as my stomach crowds with fireworks and my vision turns black. My body burns with pleasure, blistering with heat and sensation, as I suck on his fingers, desperate to keep my moans silent. I

taste myself on his digits, which are crowding my mouth, and my whimper comes mumbled against the intrusion.

When my body becomes spent with exhaustion Harry scatters kisses across my thigh, pausing on the spot where my bullet scar lingers. His breath hovers over the skin as he pays particular attention to it before rising to his full height and pressing two fingers underneath my chin, forcing me to look up at him. His lips are wet and swollen, and he runs his tongue across them slowly, savouring the taste.

Despite how beautiful the sight is, I force my throat clear. “This is the last time anything’s happening between us.”

“Keep telling yourself that, princess.” He smirks, finding the statement utterly hilarious. “Now get on your knees and tell me you love me.”

“I don’t love you, Harry.”

I really don’t.

But I do get on my knees.

His cock is hard and already tented against his trousers as I pull down the zipper and reach my hand into the fabric. He hisses as I take him into my palm, pulling him free of the restraints. I swirl my tongue around his slit. Harry tenses at the touch, slamming his palm into the wall behind my head. As I look up I find his eyes glued on me, and I wrap my lips around his tip.

His lips part, eyes darkening and pupils blowing until the black has eliminated the green. He pulls the clip from my hair, disposing of it on the floor, to wrap my locks around his wrist. When I take him in my mouth Harry throws his head back, groaning, and I thrive off the hurt as he tugs his hand.

I take him as far down my throat as I can, and he thrusts harder into my mouth, guiding my head back and forth in unison. I soak up the tightness of his jaw, the beauty in his features, as he comes undone at my touch.

Fuck, he’s breath-taking.

I rake my hands up his thighs, gripping him by the base as I pump the remainder of him, which my tongue can’t quite reach, into my mouth.

He opens his eyes to find me watching him, at which he pants, “You’re perfect.”

As his muscles start to strain and the vein in his neck throbs harder I know he’s about to come. It’s only a moment before he spills into my mouth, his limbs shuddering with his release.

“D-don’t swallow,” Harry stutters, shaking with aftershocks.

He slips his cock free and reaches his hand down, pulling down my chin to encourage me to open my mouth. Hooking two fingers against my bottom row of teeth, he turns my head slightly back and forth, smirking at the sight of the liquid filling my mouth.

“I think it’s time for a new tattoo.” He dips his thumb into the mess, swiping it over my bottom lip. “That’s my good girl,” he whispers.

And just like that, I feel myself becoming transfixed to the man I’m meant to despise.



I’m a woman on a mission, storming into the gym with adrenaline charging my steps. There’s one thing I’ve been aching to do since I secured my position within the Circle, and it’s the perfect opportunity to unleash my pent-up rage.

Harry is becoming a problem. I can’t afford to have him around. Whether he’s fuelling anger inside of me or bringing me to mind-blowing orgasms, I can’t lose sight of why I’m really here. And if a sensible man knows anything, it’s that you don’t interrupt a woman when she has her eye on the ball.

Sweat and body odour burn my nose, causing it to turn up at the tangy stench as I throw open the double doors to the sparring gym. People turn towards me, muttering amongst themselves, as I make a beeline for my target.

And there she is.

Poppy is conveniently standing on the ringside. She’s shouting at one of the training candidates to tighten up their form as they circle their opponent in the ring. I make a silent apology to the young man in training and turn the corner into her line of sight.

“Poppy!” I bark. “I think it’s about time we settle this once and for all.”

“I’m not in the mood for games, Thomas.”

We’ve been keeping out of each other’s way for weeks, but I’m not prepared to walk out of this gym without fighting it out with her. Besides, I never quite got over her determination to have me killed at the Weathers bank robbery.

I duck under one of the ropes and step into the ring. “Since you had me *shot*, I think this is a fair retaliation. Don’t you?”

Poppy shakes her head, feigning disinterest.

“Codex says any member can call upon another member to settle lingering disputes. Denial to such a request results in instant

loss.” I lean back against the ropes, crossing my arms over my chest. “What do you say, Green? Are you calling quits?”

She turns her attention the other way, acting disinterested. I know she won’t decline the opportunity with the intrigue with which people are watching us. She’d rather go down a fighter. That much we have in common.

When I hear her huffed defeat I grin to myself, offering her my hand. She slaps it away, ducking under the rope, and barks her orders once she steps into the ring.

“No breaks. No ref. No gloves. Loser claims mercy.”

“That’s against the rules!” someone shouts.

“Gigi!” another person hisses from behind me, trying to get me to come to my senses.

What they don’t know is that this is exactly what I want. It was only a matter of time before pride overtook her common sense. If she knew Jack at all, she knows it’s pathetic to call on a Thomas for hand-to-hand combat.

A dark smile spreads across my lips. “Gladly.”

Her own ominous expression covers her face, and we slowly start to circle one another.

“Fight!” someone shouts.

Dancing around on the tips of her feet, Poppy’s whole stance comes off jittery and way too overconfident. It works perfectly in my favour, all the training with Oliver swarming me as I rehash all my techniques. Poppy throws a sloppy overhead hook – probably interested in ending the game early – and I dart to the side, missing the throw with seconds to spare. Her posture weakens as she stumbles from missing the heavy shot.

The crowd roars, shouting for me to get a hit in.

But I’m not looking to end the game just yet.

“You’re sloppy,” I taunt. “Such a disappointment.”

She whips her head around to face me. “Don’t forget who won first, Thomas.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten.”

We start to circle each other again, and I watch the anger burn in her eyes as people start shouting from the ringside. I dart a foot forwards, taking a step into her territory as I rear my fist back, landing the jab directly on her nose and causing her head to recoil. In the same movement I sweep her feet from directly under her.

People scream from around the room for me to pounce on her. Instead I demand, “Tell me why you did it – you knew that man was in the storage room.”

She barks a growl and charges for my middle from her low angle. Her arms wrap around my waist, catching me off-guard. We tumble back a few metres, and I’m thrown to the ground. The air rushes out of me, and in my moment of vulnerability she lands a heavy right hook to my cheek that sends my head lolling to the side. Then she lands another. And another. Hisses echo around the gym, but if Poppy can play dirty, so can I.

“Ready to call mercy, Thomas?”

Spitting blood, I say, “Not quite yet.”

After letting her get another shot in I rear back my legs and send a blow into her stomach. It’s not enough to send her to the floor, but she stumbles backwards as she tries to regain her breath. I climb to my feet and swing my legs around so her body falls backwards, landing on the floor with a heavy thud again. This time, however, I pounce on her, straddling Poppy’s chest and pinning her arms down with my knees.

“You knew he had a gun,” I say, wincing with the shot.

My fist connects with her face, landing blow after blow after blow. My hand starts to go numb, and my eyes drop to the trail of blood trickling from her nose as it blends in with the colour of her hair.

Vision darkening, I cry, “Why did you do it!”

Poppy yelps below me.

From the state of her nose, it’s no doubt broken, but I know she’d rather die than surrender. Rather die than tell me the truth. One of her eyes is swollen shut, her lip is busted, and blood trickles from her nostrils. And when I see the look in her good eye confirming my suspicions, I draw my hand back on a heavy breath and decide to stop.

I came here to prove a point, not dismantle her face.

If she is so eager to protect her secrets, so be it. Besides, punching her in the face was surprisingly fun entertainment.

As I shake my hand to the side, the splatter of blood from my cheek sprays across the floor of the ring. I’m already stepping out from under the ropes before Poppy has time to get to her feet.

“I didn’t call mercy!” she shouts.

“Then I guess you win.” I turn, retreating back towards the door. Raising my hands in the air in defeat, I say, “I just hope it was worth it.”

FORTY-TWO

Sigi

I have a pep in my step as I walk through the halls of the former boarding school, the Circle headquarters, my nineteenth-century home. Besides the tinge of soreness on my cheeks from the brawl with Poppy, I feel faultless. No. Fucking *elated*.

Alive.

Thriving.

I'm. A. Fucking. Criminal.

I'm on a high this morning, having thoroughly impressed the Boss and continued to share intel about upcoming heists. I never thought I needed a man's approval – and I don't, really – but I'm revelling in the pride the Boss radiates with each of my suggestions. And Richard's not the only person to have noticed – I've witnessed plenty of other watchful eyes on me.

I've even heard someone say Jack had nothing on me. And every shit conversation I've ever had with my parents practically disintegrates at that very thought.

At the memory I skip a little faster, a bounce in my step as I head towards the lunch hall. On my way past the living space, my feet grind to a halt as I hear someone calling my name.

"Thomas," a guard barks. "Richard's asking for you."

"What? Now?"

"Yes. Now."

"Can't I get some lunch first?"

"He said it's important."

I nod and retrace my steps, heading towards his office at the other end of the property. While I'd normally be elated at him asking for me personally, I have a sneaking suspicion it's about the occurrence at the Italian mansion. It's about time we spoke it through.

Or perhaps he's looking to praise me for more of my work, possibly to discuss an upcoming heist.

I knock on his door, and his voice echoes through the wood.

"Come in."

I step inside to find the Boss lounging casually in his desk chair. His posture is relaxed, calm. And I'm suddenly wondering if I got this meeting completely wrong as he lights a cigar, beckoning me to sit.

"Someone said you wanted to see me," I say.

He puffs smoke from his lips. "Indeed. I've been wanting to speak with you ..."

A pause stretches between us.

"Okay ..."

"I want you to be one of the performers at Pixies."

Whoa.

That was *not* what I was expecting him to say.

When I signed up for this life, putting my life on the line by hanging on a tightrope to grab some plastic tiara, I definitely didn't expect to be selling the image of my body. I thought I'd be thrifting jewellery stores, stealing artwork.

"As you've seen, the women are our main source of attraction at the club, but we're looking to elevate our performance ... a finale to entice people to return." He takes another puff of his cigar, dragging the conversation out even further. My body is about itching when he finally adds, "My team and I believe a couples' performance would suffice as the extra entertainment."

"Don't you have other candidates? People are throwing themselves at the front doors every night."

"Are you saying you're not fit for the job? I can always find someone else."

Pride keeps me from arguing. I sigh, exasperated, and bow my head. "No, Boss. I can do it."

"I thought so ... And I've chosen the perfect person to accompany you."

As if on cue there's a knock on the door, and the Boss's grin extends before he calls them in. I gnaw on my bottom lip and briefly close my eyes, refusing to entertain the idea I'll be getting intimate with someone on public display. In front of a paying audience.

The door creaks open, and I wait until I feel a presence beside me, someone taking up the space in the empty chair. When I creep my eyes open, Harry's adjusting the front of his shirt, and as he turns to me he looks equally confused. His face is still, emotionless, until something akin to panic flashes across his eyes.

If I'm being honest, I've been avoiding him since the incident between us on the plane. While I know the idea of us fraternising is wrong, my body can't seem to control itself around him. And this new concept of us working together may be the ultimate temptation.

The Boss knows relationships are forbidden – it's his own rule – yet he's taunting us. Daring us to take the bait. Call it “the *Strictly* curse”, but working so close together will be a travesty. Our relationship will be analysed; under scrutiny.

Richard is the vulture, and Harry and I are the deadly meal.

“No need for introductions, you two,” the Boss says. “Say hello to your new dance partner.”

Harry is still staring at me, his eyes transfixed as if my presence has stilled him to stone. Finally, he shakes his head. “I don't dance.”

Deep down we both know the Boss is asking for far worse. If the girls' “dances” are anything to go by, the interaction between us will be an intimate affair of stolen touches, and a public display for crude wandering eyes.

“I can always find someone else to fill your spot and dance with Gigi if there's a problem between the two of you.”

I blurt out, trying to save us. “What about the heists? And the planning—?”

“Are you saying you don't have the efficiency to fit this into your schedule? Gigi, if you're not capable ...”

“I'm capable!”

“I thought so.” The Boss smiles, turning to Harry. “Any objections?”

We both shake our heads.

“Very well.” Richard stands, checking his *Omega*. “I'll have your instructor relay the routine to you both. You're both expected to attend training for the next few weeks. Your stage debut will be when they declare you're ready.” He approaches the door to leave.

Before he does, I ask, “Sorry, Boss ... but who's our instructor?”

His grin turns devilish. “Poppy.”

Richard closes the door before I have a chance to object, sucking the air out of me. I slump back in my chair, trying to comprehend having to resist Harry's touch while being surrounded by his intoxicating presence every day – in the company of someone as scheming as Poppy, no less.

“I didn't take you as the dancing type,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

“I'm not,” Harry says, his voice cold and unforgiving. Yet it softens as he turns to me and admits, “I'd die before I let another man put his hands on you ... Richard knows the rules, but he's not fucking stupid, Gigi. He knows I wouldn't let anyone else take the job.”

Normally, Harry would be thriving in this kind of situation, having me at his mercy so he can touch me without the fear we may be executed for the crime. Yet he seems angry, cold, off-kilter at the prospect.

I say, “It might not be that bad.”



“Thomas, straighten your back. Posture like the Hunchback of Notre Dame won't sell tickets.”

I'm going to kill this woman.

Thank God I'm involved in a society where murder is acceptable, because Penelope fucking Green is top of my hit list. My fists clench hard at my sides at the mere thought of wringing my hands around her neck. And there's nothing graceful about it. I'm meant to be pressed into Harry's body, leaving no fraction of space between us, but I'm lacking effort.

I know more than anyone how good my body fits against his – we're like two magnets aching to become one. But if I let my body melt into his touch, it'll be difficult to ever resist him again. Harry knows it too. I can tell by the way his fingers flex against my hip, refusing to hold as tightly as he should.

This is different from our stolen touches behind closed doors. This is having the forbidden fruit in your hand but being unable to taste it.

What happened to us?

The bruises on Poppy's face have dulled to a light yellow, and she's practically back to normal, save for a slightly bloodshot

eye. Yet she seemingly wants to be punched again, as she says, “You have to be more like this ...” She pushes me out of the way and replaces my spot in front of Harry. Bowing her body into him, her chest flush against his, their hips touch. My teeth clench at the interaction. Despite thinking my anger is subtle, Harry shoots me a weighted stare, warning me to cut it out.

“See?” Poppy cranes her head over her shoulder, smirking.

Her cleavage is directly underneath Harry’s chin, but he refuses to entertain the idea. His expression is stern as he stares at her face with boredom, barely blinking. She’s taunting me, and I refuse to take the bait ... until she starts to run her hand down the front of his chest, heading directly towards—

“FINE!” I shout.

She steps backwards, a menacing grin touching her lips when I take the spot where her body was. Poppy walks over to the stereo, barking for Harry to grip my waist. A flicker of a smirk ghosts his lips as I step closer. He grips my hipbone, pulling me flush against him, and his amusement blossoms into a feline smile. Yet when Poppy calls action, his walls crumble and something shifts, projecting his inner torment.

I feel the weight of Harry’s struggle as his hand slips to the base of my spine, carefully encouraging me to arch my back. I do so cautiously, clutching onto his hand. He pulls me back against his chest, and as if by magic I feel myself getting lost in the feel of him, utterly mesmerised. I naturally step closer, finding his gaze through the thick tension.

His touch on my skin is proving difficult for him, so I can’t begin to imagine his issue with having to strip me in front of a crowd. Poppy has choreographed our entire performance, which she’s certain will be a showstopper ... but it involves me stripping down to my underwear, and Harry losing his shirt. Something we’ve put off discussing.

The pain is obvious through the merciless lines on his face, his expression pinched as he brings the back of his hand to my cheek, stroking my skin. Now’s the moment he should spin me around and run his hands over my chest, but he pauses for so long I’m afraid he’s disconnected. His gaze is strained, and he squeezes his eyes shut before cursing.

“This is going to be a lot harder than I thought,” Poppy says in a huff. “You guys have, like, no chemistry.”

At the reminder she’s here I snap out of my trance. Harry and I break apart like we’ve been sparked with a hot poker.

“How long do we have to train for?” I ask.

“Until you two can get a bit of connection at least. Besides ...” She turns off the speaker. “Everyone seems pretty occupied with the Gold House heist coming up. While there are people on the planning team, we might be called to help. That means we need every spare moment to practice.”

The trade of documents could happen any day. Whether this week or next month, it’ll be soon. And we need to be prepared for it.

“What’s the latest?” Harry asks.

“We’re waiting on updates, but it’s looking like we’ll hit before opening. And when the cleaning crew have gained entry,” Poppy says.

From the conversations I’ve overheard, Gold House is under lock and key, making it practically impossible to gain entry. Kind of like *Harrods*. Unless you’ve sold your identity to their security team, no one is getting in or out of there. The team is planning to strike when the first set of staff enters for the day, but this would leave them extremely limited for time.

“What about the tunnels?” I suggest.

Harry and Poppy’s turn to each other, exchanging glances before they whip their heads towards me as if I’ve just spoken a foreign language.

Harry frowns and asks, “What are you talking about?”

“I used to work in a department store.” I shrug. “They have underground tunnels for when celebrities or royalty come to visit. Unless you’re an employee or Beyoncé, you wouldn’t know about them.”

Harry shakes his head. “We’ve checked the blueprints. They don’t have such a thing.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” I drawl. “How can you call yourselves criminals if you don’t know the first thing about breaking into high-security places?”

Struck speechless, Harry clears his throat, pointing to Poppy. “Go tell Richard. Get some of the guys to look into it.”

Poppy stills, her body in shock.

“GO!”

Finally, she huffs, rolling her eyes as she storms out of the room.

“Why did you never say anything?” Harry asks when the door closes.

“I hadn’t thought about it until now. Besides, I try not to remember much of my life before this.”

There are still aspects that creep to the forefront of my brain, of course – Mia being the most important. I can’t think about her too deeply without becoming upset. She used to contact me every day, then the messages became limited to once a week, and recently ... nothing. From what I know, she and Andy are still an item. But I don’t ever ask him, the guilt too much to bear.

Harry scoffs, and the cheeky, flirtatious man who was threatening me not to wear white before my wedding disappears, replaced by the short, abrupt version who hates my new lifestyle.

“What’s your problem?”

“My problem?” he throws back. “Who said there was a problem?”

“From the pissed-off look on your pretty face, I’d say you’ve got a problem.”

“You think I’m pretty?” With a new contentment on his face he steps closer, the flirtatious side breaking through his shields.

“Now that changes things.”

I allow myself a moment to memorise the feeling of him so close before pulling away and shaking my head. “I never said that.”

He chuckles. “I’m pretty sure you did, princess.”

“You need to stop with all the flirting. It’s going to make things incredibly difficult if we’re meant to work together intimately and then go back to this reality where fraternisation could kill us.”

The ominous look returns to his face.

“What is it that’s bothering you?” I ask, my voice softer. “Please tell me.”

He turns his head away, and I catch his chin, turning him back to me. Harry grabs my hand, squeezing, his voice distant.

“You’re fucking torturing me.”

“Why?”

Suffocated, he says, “I burnt you. I fucking branded you—”

“That was not your fault.”

“Was it not?” He squeezes my hand tighter, emphasising his pain. “Your blood is on my hands—”

“Harry—”

“You wanted the truth, right? Here’s the truth ...” His hand moves to my wrist, bringing my palm closer to his face and encouraging me to spread my fingers over his cheek. I do, allowing us this moment as he says, “I can’t fucking stand the idea of people seeing you on that stage. I want to adore you, not worship you in private, yet the only time you’ll let me is when you’re forced against your will, on public display.” He steps even closer. “You told me to be truthful, yet you also told me not to kill the people who wrong you. Tell me, Gigi, which do you want? Because I’m tired of choosing for you.”

I gulp, my throat tight with emotion. “The truth.”

He brings his face closer to mine. “I feel fucking murderous at the idea. Any man who watches you on that stage is disrespecting you, and you’re *mine*. *My* woman. *My* responsibility. Becoming a serial killer was never on my agenda, but I’m well on my way to making Pixies a slaughterhouse if you set foot on that stage.”

The words hit me like a stab to the chest. As I stare down at my hand, I realise it’s cupping Harry’s throat and applying pressure as if demonstrating how lost I am for words. How tormented he makes me. The idea of him murdering people should be obscene, but it makes my heart triple in speed.

“What will make you feel better?” I ask, my voice betraying me.

He tilts his head. “Will you let me slaughter the men who lay their eyes on you?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not fucking happy.”

I scoff and retract my hand from his throat, but he catches my wrist. He puts it on his chest, right over his heart, which is thumping as ferociously as mine.

“Then what do you want?” I ask. “What will give you peace?”

He pauses for a beat.

“You, baby. I want all of you.”

FORTY-THREE

Harry

Having Gigi would give me eternal peace, but if I can't have that, spilling blood will come as a close second. Whenever I'm struggling with rage, there's no other outlet for my pent-up anger than to unleash it by giving my trusty dagger a whirl. In a sick, twisted way, torture is my only option to calm the beating pulse under my skin.

Nothing has ever sparked my anger so intensely as discovering Gigi will be stripping in front of a room full of men, all eyes on her.

Thankfully, two people can help unleash the demons.

Two men who need information extracting from them.

Twins.

My little princess thinks I killed Billy and Bobby for looking at her wrong. God no. Who does she think I am? Killing them for the hunger in their eyes? No way ... They deserve a death much, much worse.

I've always said I like to keep my work life and home life separate, and that's why I'll never live in the apartments at the Circle headquarters. But desperate times call for desperate measures. Sometimes the two have to mix.

The surveillance room in my house is currently wrapped with plastic sheets from floor to ceiling as Billy and Bobby sit restrained to wooden chairs in the centre of the room. Cloth gags fill their sick fucking mouths, and their pupils are blown in fear as they watch me approach. They've been here for days. Christ, I went abroad to fucking Italy and left the two of them in the comfort of my home – how generous am I? Sure, I've been feeding them just enough food and water to make sure death doesn't meet them soon. But they're weak, their fat, slimy bodies now frail and lacking life.

At the sight of them, desperation overwhelms me. I'm eager to feel flesh and muscle submitting to my blade as it pierces through skin, brittle and bone, but something holds me back.

Something that fucking Italian guard said to Gigi.

"My word, the highest bidder will pay a pretty penny for you."

Fucking hell, I wanted to castrate the man on the spot and force-feed him his intestines, but that was Gigi's kill.

And something tells me Billy and Bobby here have a lot to answer for.

I pace by their sides slowly, scratching the stubble underneath my chin with the tip of my blade as I say, "How much business do you do with the Mafia?"

One of them mumbles against his gag.

"Where are my manners?" I sigh, ripping them both free of the cloth.

Sucking in a heavy breath, one says, "Richard dealt with the Italians."

I frown, spin the dagger between my fingers, and then catch it in my palm, pointing it at his chest. "Billy, is it?"

"Bobby," he says on a heavy exhale.

"Ah, sorry." I step closer, keeping the edge of the dagger pointed at him, and he pulls his head back the closer I approach. "But you work with Richard closely, no?"

He hesitates but nods.

My face turns cold, and I feel my humanity lessen as I say, "Then tell me about the human trafficking."

Stuttering, he starts, "I-I ... I don't know what—"

"You don't know what I'm talking about," I deadpan, finishing the sentence for him. "Don't be so fucking cliché, Bobby. Maybe a bit of motivation will help change your mind ..."

I stretch out my limbs above my head, sighing at the satisfying crack as I walk around to Billy, smiling at him in apology.

There's simply no other choice.

I press the tip of the knife into his thigh. He grits his teeth, anger flaming in his eyes despite trying to keep his composure. As I push further in, piercing flesh, he cries out, flailing at the torture.

“Quickly, Bobby. If you don’t spill your fucking mouth, then I’ll have no other option than to sever his femoral artery,” I shout over the cries.

Bobby starts fighting against the restraints as his brother’s screams vibrate off the walls. I shudder in delight, yet I become really tired as I hear, “I told you, I don’t fucking know!”

“Don’t fucking lie to me!” I shout through gritted teeth.

As I stare down at the mess of the dagger, my hands stained with crimson, my vision blurs. The further I push the dagger in, the more I become lost between the past and the present, imagining there’s a bullet wound in his thigh.

A bullet wound in her.

I dig the dagger in deeper.

“TELL HIM!” Billy screams.

“ALL RIGHT!”

I smile and blink away the dark haze before yanking my knife free.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard.”

As I walk around to Bobby, his nostrils flare, and he spits, “You’re sick. Fucking sick.”

I grin, chuckling as I press the tip of my blade to his throat, still soaked in his brother’s blood. “My girl says the same thing, but I prefer hearing it from her pretty lips than your ugly gob.” Crouching down to his height, I retrieve a piece of paper from my back pocket and offer it to him. “You’re going to write down the address of the trafficking ring, and it’d better match up with what your brother says. If not, I’ll kill him.”

His bottom lip trembles. “But I haven’t got anything to write with.”

I grin, flipping the handle of my dagger and pressing the hilt into his mouth.

“Bite down,” I tell him.

He does so hesitantly, grimacing against the metal. The tip of the blade is drenched with blood and will act as his pen, telling me what I need to know.

“Now think real carefully, Bobby. Someone’s life is on the line here.”

He nods frantically, scribbling down a sloppy version of a postcode situated in East London. Once he’s finished he drops the dagger from his teeth, his body shaking with tremors.

“Th-there! I swear that’s the truth.”

I smile. Even more so as I stab the dagger right into his fucking heart. He cries out as I twist the handle, watching me, his heavy eyes draining of hope, skin fading in colour. When I pull the knife from his flesh his body goes limp against the chair.

As I walk slowly around to his brother, he becomes frantic against his restraints.

Pretty impressive for a man bleeding to death.

“Fuck you, man!” he shouts, his throat hoarse. “I ain’t telling you shit!”

I flip the dagger in my hand then lean down to his neck, pressing my blade against his pulsing vein. “There’s no need,” I say, watching the fight leave his soul. “I believe him.”

And I slit his fucking throat.



If I thought resisting Gigi was hard, right now it’s fucking impossible. She’s in my embrace, her forehead against mine, yet she’s untouchable in every respect. My cock is painful against my trousers, and she can clearly feel it as she rubs her hips against me.

“I wouldn’t do that again, princess. Unless you want to deal with the consequences.”

“Did you say something?” Poppy asks beside us.

Gigi stutters, “N-nothing. He said nothing.”

She glares at me.

I wink.

We’ve been training for this show like clockwork. Every day is incredibly difficult, feeling her touch on my body yet fighting the arousal. The thought of Billy and Bobby quickly sobers my mood. Despite having lost a significant amount of weight, they were heavy, and it was fucking difficult to haul them out of my house and into the G-Wagon. No way was I tainting the Bentley with their slime.

It’s only a matter of time before their bodies are recovered from the River Thames.

I checked out that postcode, and while there was evidence something dark occurred, the place was deserted. There’s nothing I can do right now. When I’ve finally got some free time, I’ll traipse through the security footage of the area.

“Harry?” Gigi asks, pulling me back to the present.

“Yes, baby?” I respond naturally.

I turn to find her eyes are wild, darting a worrying look at Poppy. I chance a look too, but she’s staring down at her phone, typing away with disinterest.

Lowering her voice to a whisper, Gigi hisses, “You can’t say stuff like that in public.”

“Why?” I respond just as quietly. “Have you agreed to be mine?”

I stare at her lips – the ones I remember being wrapped around my cock, but more importantly, the ones I imagine moving with the words she’ll take me. She’ll let me worship her for the remainder of our lives.

“I’m still thinking,” she says.

I spin her into my embrace, bringing her in close so her back is pressed to my front. In time with the music, my hand slowly moves up from her lower stomach and over her chest. Her breathing shallows as I softly cup her jaw and turn her face to mine. It’s part of the routine, but my heart spikes as if I’ve fallen from a skyscraper when her eyes naturally drop to my mouth.

“It’s a good thing we have forever,” I tell her.

FORTY-FOUR

Sigi

Panic swarms me quickly, overwhelming my limbs as I pace in the changing room of Pixies. Poppy clearly thought our chemistry was finally sufficient, because it's mine and Harry's opening night.

The costume designer, Liv, some personal shopper at *Selfridges*, spent hours preparing my outfit. I hardly recognise myself in the reflection of the mirror, its edges decorated with LED bulbs. The black *Chanel* maxi dress is relatively plain with spaghetti straps, yet it's elegant and easy to slip off to expose black lace. Meanwhile a short blonde wig conceals my long brown locks. Thankfully, the lights are dimmed to such an extent that only our silhouettes and the slight reflection of our skin will be visible. But it doesn't calm my nerves.

I'm nothing without my pistol, and I feel utterly naked without it.

I want crime.

I want to use my Glock.

Not this.

All the thoughts at the front of my brain disperse as I catch Harry in the reflection. Turning to him slowly, I drink up the sight of him. He's wearing dark trousers and a crisp black shirt, the top few buttons already undone. His hair is styled to the side, and I fight a frown, missing the lone strand.

"Are you nervous?" he asks.

I shake my head, saying truthfully, "Not if you're there with me."

He steps towards me, and I dig my heels into the ground, fighting my instincts to step back from his touch. Yet I look to the closed door to double-check it's shut as he nears closer.

He fingers a piece of blonde hair. "Have you made a decision?"

He's asking if I'll be his.

His eyes find mine, threatening to pull me under. The closeness of his body aches to capture me and never let me leave. Despite the threat of Harry wanting to commit mass murder, I'm riddled with thoughts. If this were a normal life, I'd have him instantly. But the risk of potentially sentencing him to death is potent in my mind no matter how tethered to him I feel.

My words are heavy as I say, "I'm still thinking."

He nods slowly, disappointment evident in his eyes.

I'm teetering on the border of insisting he kiss me breathless and pushing him to arm's length in the hope he'll stay there for eternity. I've always insisted Harry should never get in my way, but my restraint falters more with each second I'm around him. With our affection on public display tonight I fear what our audience will see. I don't doubt my thoughts will come to fruition in the most intense of moments.

Withdrawing his hand, Harry offers it out to me to hold instead. "Come on, princess. Your castle awaits."

We walk down the backstage halls in silence, so much more than the upcoming performance lingering between us. As we stand on the sidelines waiting for our cue, my nerves threaten to skyrocket and abort mission. Harry grasps my hand, running his thumb over my knuckles, giving me a sense of protection. I accept the welcome distraction.

The crowd hushes, a gentle song passing through the speakers.

As the lights dim, a dusky spotlight is unveiled in the centre of the stand.

Here we go.

Hands clasped, Harry and I step into the centre of the stage, taking our positions.

Our eyes meet, saying all the things words can't.

Harry's hand grips my hipbone, pulling me forwards into his embrace. His chest closes the gap, his heart against mine, both organs beating in unison. His hand slowly slips to my lower back, and my hand finds his, intertwining our fingers as I arch my back in the comfort of his strong grip. When I bring my back up straight, our faces are just inches apart. He drops his hand to

my cheek, stroking his thumb, and his dark eyes make the entire room fade away.

Darkness swarms our bodies, locking us into a secure cocoon that only exists in the form of me and him. Silence overtakes the music. No one is here – it's just us.

He spins my body, bringing my back to his chest as he runs his fingers over my front, turning my face to his. As if I'm fuelled with pure instinct, I turn, my hands undoing the buttons of his shirt, exposing his chest. I slip around to his back, pulling the fabric off his arms. My hand runs over his shoulder, down his chest, and over his pecs, soaking up the feel of him under my palm unforgivingly. When the fabric is pulled from his body, I discard it on the floor and step around to his front.

Lifting one hand, Harry slips it under the shoulder strap of my dress. He pauses, sadness shining through the darkness.

"It's okay," I mouth. "It's just us."

I take his hand, helping him slip the dainty material over my shoulders until it slides off every crevice of my body. The dress falls to the floor at my feet.

His breath hits for a second before his full, warm lips kiss the column of my throat. He fists the hair at the nape of my neck distractingly, exposing my neck further. My thighs squeeze and I gasp on air as I reach my arms around him, running my nails over his scalp.

The thumping of a heavy bass picks up momentum, and Harry runs his strong hand over my bare thigh, holding it up against his waist and pressing himself into me. He arches me backwards, and I feel weightless as he presses his face right above my chest.

When he pulls me back up into the comfort of his embrace, the action brings our faces just a hairsbreadth from each other. His lips are a sweet, forbidden torture as they brush against mine, aching to be kissed.

The lights dim.

And then the audience erupts in applause, piercing our ears.



Our performance receives an impeccable reception. A standing ovation and applause fit for royalty as we rush off the stage, keen to escape the fortress and vacate to our own hidden kingdom.

Heart lurching, I sit in the changing room in silence, clear of the costume wig and music vibrating in my ears. I lounge into the back of the settee with a glass of wine in hand. It's tasteless on my tongue, as if my occupied thoughts have turned the liquid to poison.

Something stronger overrides its place.

Lust so intense it's sinister.

The bathroom door attached to the dressing room is ajar, allowing me a view of Harry as he steps out of the shower, his naked body on full display. Breath catching, my eyes fixate on beads of water rolling down his body, lower and lower.

He wipes the condensation free from the mirror, and our eyes clash in the reflection as he wraps a white towel low on his hips. The silence between us is piercing, but my ears ring with demand as he watches me with his dark, intimidating stare.

The hunger is unmistakable.

And bad.

Very, very bad.

Rather than acting on the forces stringing our bodies together, he takes his time slowly, torturously, and carefully using a fresh towel to dry his hair. He shakes the strands dry, and as if he can sense my desperation his feet lead him forwards, out of the bathroom and straight to me, like he's being pulled by an invisible force to my side.

I slump further into the sofa underneath his gaze, and he takes the glass from my hands, placing it down on the dressing table. He places two hands on either side of my head, his forearms straining as he watches me in silence, the tension thick between us.

"What do you want?" he asks, his voice incredibly quiet and full of meaning.

Memories overwhelm me. Memories I need to forget to live a successful life within the Circle. But it's impossible around Harry. When I look at him I'm drowning. I will never be able to shake myself free of him. Tonight proved that. The part of me I've been refusing to admit exists shone through like a beacon of light.

"What do you want?" he asks again, bringing me back down to earth.

"You," I say, my voice shaky.

His teeth clench, and he asks, "Where?"

"Everywhere."

"You know that if you submit yourself to me now, you're mine. There's no going back from here, princess. You will only

ever be mine – do you understand?”

I nod slowly, afraid of what the future could entail.

But the worry of tomorrow slips my mind as Harry lowers his head and delivers a line of delicate kisses across the side of my throat. I gasp at the sweet gesture, arching my back from the sofa as he continues with the gentle caress. I barely recognise this side of him, the touches that are as light as a feather. My thighs squeeze shut and my core intensifies with need.

“Touch yourself,” he demands against my skin.

I slip my hand underneath the waistband of my underwear and tilt my head against the back of the sofa as Harry assaults my neck with his mouth. My fingers circle my clit before I brush over my entrance, nudging in a finger. My thighs squeeze around my hand as his teeth graze across the skin of my throat.

“H-Harry,” I plead.

I reach my other hand out, freeing him of the towel around his waist. His cock springs free, sitting flat and hard against his stomach, the tip red and aching for release. As I reach my hand out to take hold of him, he laces our fingers and puts the hand beside my head.

“This is about you.”

“But if I’m yours, then that makes you mine,” I say, blinking up at him.

A low groan vibrates off his chest. “Fuck, you’re everything.”

He brings his hand down, slipping the underwear down my legs and discarding them to the floor like trash. Pushing my thighs apart with his heavy palm, he struggles to blink as he watches me thrust my finger into my entrance. Lowering himself to his knees, he releases my hand and wraps his strong arms around my thighs, wrenching them apart so his tongue can lap at my clit.

I cry out with pleasure, running my nails through his hair and gasping, stuttering his name like a broken record as he brings me close to release with his mouth. His lips purse around my clit, and he sucks softly, causing my limbs to tremble. He pushes a finger into my entrance, next to mine, and I see galaxies as he thrusts it in with unison.

He pulls back, his lips wet with my arousal. “I’m going to devour you.”

My back arches at his depraved promise. “Then do it.”

He laps at my clit, running his tongue from our joint fingers and back up again in a vicious cycle that leaves my body bowing and shaking. As my walls start to clench around our digits, he pulls our hands free and lines his cock up against my entrance. He pushes inside me with one long thrust, reaching the hilt.

My eyes screw shut, crying out at the intrusion, at the fullness and the slight pain of taking something so big. I barely have time to adjust to him before he hooks his forearm under my knees and thrusts into me, slamming my G-spot. I feel him everywhere. Inside of me. In my body. In my soul. And I never want him to leave. My fingers rake over his shoulders, his skin, and all his tattoos as he watches me with such raw intensity I almost crumble. His eyes find mine through the chaos, and I clutch onto them like a totem, the intensity of his gaze carnal as he takes me at my mercy.

I grip the back of his head, fisting his hair between my fingers and bringing him down desperately against my lips. Our mouths clash, lips parting as we swallow up each other’s moans.

And in this moment I know.

I know he’ll be the death of me.

His love will kill me.

Harry thrusts into me, and my nails claw into his shoulders as he picks up momentum. My core tightens with his increased pace, and I fall apart completely, stars bursting across my vision and euphoria overwhelming me as he says, “Let’s paint this fucking town red, baby.”

He finishes inside me, his body shuddering with the release. I reach my hand up to his face and push his hair off his forehead.

Breathless, against his lips I say, “I have something better ... let’s paint it silver and gold.”

FORTY-FIVE

Sigi

“I fucking hate how all those men have eyes on you when I touch you.” Harry speeds up his thrusts with killer determination. “You’re.” *Thrust.* “Fucking.” *Thrust.* “Mine.” *Thrust.*

“Harry!” I cry out.

His fingers dig into my hips as he fucks me against the vanity table, causing the perfumes and makeup brushes to scatter to the floor. He fists my wig, forcing me to buck my chin. Our eyes clash in a heated gaze through the mirror. His hips slap against my ass, and my whole body trembles as I feel him nearing release.

We’ve officially found a new way for Harry to unleash his pent-up emotions, which is a success if it means he isn’t murdering people. This is our new normal now. Pixies’ attendance has reached an all-time high, and we end the show each night with a standing ovation, aching legs, and bodies burning with lust. The few nights a week that we perform, Harry rewards me with animalistic sex.

When the crowd’s cheers start to die, we’ve already exited into the backstage dressing room and he’s pinned me to the sofa, where he brings me to mind-numbing release.

Tonight, however, we couldn’t quite reach the settee, so he has my front bowed over the table.

Harry swats my ass with his palm, ringing the area with heat. I throw my head back as he thrusts into me unforgivingly, and my thighs tremble, chasing orgasm. Feeling my body tense, Harry covers my mouth with his large hand. “Scream as loud as you want, baby. No one can hear how good I fuck your pretty cunt.”

I fucking break apart.

My body constricts. My limbs cease. And my orgasm swarms my body to the point I see nothing but black. Black vision, with a kaleidoscope of colours bursting in front of my crossed eyes. I cry out into Harry’s hand, my nails piercing skin. He groans the most delicious sound in my ear and chases up his own orgasm. There are barely a few seconds before his hips shudder and he’s spilling his release inside of me.

My body is slick with heat, and I’m thankful I’m still wearing this itchy blonde wig, saving my long hair from sticking to my chest and shoulders, which are drowned with sweat. My breath hitches as Harry pulls out of me, and I feel his release running down the insides of my thighs. He catches it on his finger and shoves the few droplets back into my entrance.

Normally I’d complain about his breeding kink, but as he places soft kisses on my spine I’m practically putty in his hands.

He mumbles gently against my lower back, “I will never get enough of you.”

I hum in satisfaction as he kisses further down, pressing his lips to the sore flesh of my ass.

Struck for breath, I say, “I have places to be.”

The Boss asked me to meet with him after today’s show to discuss upcoming business, and with the sneaking around Harry and I have been doing, I’ve been trying to appease Richard wherever possible. But with each kiss I can feel myself screwing all morals, consequences be damned.

I’m forgetting all the reasons I never wanted this ... until the image of Leroy’s limp body on the ground assaults my mind, bringing me back to my senses.

“Stop, or I’ll never leave.” I shimmy out of Harry’s grasp, pulling down my dress to conceal my naked skin.

As I reach the door and prepare to leave, he catches the back of my neck and turns me back to him, placing a heavy kiss on my mouth. “You’re fucking beautiful.”

I hum in response, instinctively chasing the sight of his mouth.

He smirks. “I thought you were leaving.”

“Right.” I nod, kissing him a final time. “I’ll see you later.”

I push the door open a fraction, dashing out to run down the hallway when the coast is clear. I quicken my steps to get there sooner, running my hands down the front of my dress and repositioning my wig to ensure I look composed. But as I pass a few

smiling faces, nerves creep up my spine. It's as if they're whispering to me.

I know what you did.

She's going to get herself killed.

They're fucking behind closed doors.

She's a traitor.

I force the voices away – the ones reminding me what I'm doing is wrong. Stepping through the secret passageway that opens beside the concealed booth in the corner of Pixies, I plaster on my fakest smile.

As I sneak past the thick curtain a deep voice calls my name.

“Gigi!”

I turn, locking eyes with Hudson Anderson.

His arm is lounging against the top of the sofa, one hand free and the other clasping a glass filled with amber liquid. He smiles, his eyes dropping over my outfit, yet they lack the suggestiveness a man's gaze would normally have.

“Hudson.” I smile, turning around in search of the Boss. “I'd love to catch up, but I'm meeting with someone.”

“I'm sure Richard won't mind you sitting with me.” He draws my attention back to him. He moves further up the seat, leaving room for me. “Come sit.”

Hudson is innocent and far from the other creepy businessmen in this establishment. It'd be no problem to sit with him.

I smile hesitantly, scanning the area one final time before taking the seat beside him. His arm is resting above my shoulder, just inches from touching me.

“I barely recognised you,” he says, gesturing to the short blonde locks.

“It feels like my alter ego,” I say, and then I ask, “Have you been enjoying the show?”

He purses his lips after swallowing his bitter drink. “I don't watch the girls' performances.”

“Of course,” I apologise. “I almost forgot.”

I've heard the rumours he isn't here to watch the women onstage but to undertake business. As I'm mentally reciting the other useful information I've heard about Hudson, movement from across the floor catches my attention, drawing me to the source like a magnet. The door opens, and Harry walks out, appearing the picture of composure with his freshly styled hair and his belt back in place. Andy greets him, hitting his chest in triumph, but as if we're drawn to one another, his eyes find mine.

Eyes that I know are green and beautiful.

“Gigi?”

I turn to Hudson, lost in thought. “Hmm?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

I shake my head.

“It seems you know a lot about me and I don't know very much about you. Entertain me. Tell me your life story.” He gestures to the men at his side engaged in a heated discussion. “Save me from the sorrows of business.”

“You want to know more about me?” I reiterate, and he nods. “Why?”

He smiles. “Because you're different. You don't fit in somewhere like this.”

My back snaps straight at his words. I swallow hard and square my shoulders on instinct as if I have something to prove.

This is my home. The Circle is my *life*.

“Then you clearly don't know anything about me, Mr Anderson,” I say, my voice stern.

“Well, then let me get to know you.”

“I—”

“Gigi, there you are!” the Boss says, adjusting his shirt and making sure his jacket is free of lint. “I've been looking everywhere for you.”

“Sorry, Rich, that would be my fault,” Hudson says. “It seems Gigi's time is valuable, and I was hoping to steal a few precious seconds.”

“By all means.” There's a long, stretched-out pause before the Boss suggests, “In fact, why don't I book dinner for the three of us tomorrow night?”

I whip my head towards him. “No.”

He frowns, and my stomach tightens with nerves at the sudden rejection.

What am I supposed to tell him?

That I'm seeing someone?

The very someone that could lead to a bullet in the brain?

Struggling with a reasonable explanation, I force a swallow and say, “What I meant was ... I'm too tied up with the upcoming heist. I don't have time to entertain plans outside of work at the moment, but thank you for the offer.”

The Boss's suspicious gaze is quickly overtaken by pride. “You've got to appreciate a woman who's married to her work, Anderson.”

When I turn to Hudson, his eyes are focused on my face, and his head tilts as if he's trying to read me. I force my guard up,

praying he can't see the mess that lies underneath.

The Boss's voice pulls me back. "I actually have a job for you and Harry coming up in a few days."

I fight the smile threatening to break at the prospect of the two of us spending time together. "Anything you need," I tell him. "We also need to discuss further details for Gold House."

He grins – the dominant kind that exudes pride.

When I'm not in my Harry-filled haze, I've been offering my expertise to help flush a heist to its full potential, but mixing the two will always be a struggle ... so when I notice Richard beckoning Harry over from the far corner of the club, my stomach drops. He seems hesitant at first, but he obliges and makes his way past the tables before finally reaching our side.

"Boss," Harry says, nodding at him. "Hudson." He reaches over me, shaking his hand, but I can tell from the tic in his jaw that the interaction is painful. "Gigi," he says, taking my palm in his. He brings my knuckles to his lips, kissing the skin and acting like a true gentleman despite having fucked me to orgasm just an hour ago. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Harry drops my hand, pushing it into his trouser pocket.

"There's a heist I need you and Gigi to attend in the next few days," the Boss says. "I thought we could discuss the details over dinner tomorrow night."

"That's a great idea. I'll book a table in Mayfair for three, shall I?"

Hudson's hand flexes right above my shoulder, and Harry catches the movement.

The Boss says, "Four, if you wouldn't mind, Harry. I asked Hudson first."

Harry nods slowly, appearing completely unfazed, but I can tell by the strum of the pulse in his neck that he's livid at the idea.

"Of course." He smiles, but the emotion is disingenuous. "Four it is."

This dinner may be the hardest interaction of my entire life.



Never would I have thought mine and Harry's secret affair would be put under scrutiny as quickly as this. As I step out of the car and head towards the front entrance of Lolitas, just a few doors down from the exquisite *Annabel's*, my palms start to sweat. I blame it on the summer heat. Thankfully, my Glock is hidden underneath my *Miu Miu* slip-dress since it'd probably terrify diners at the social club. It's a breath of fresh air, but still not as easily accessible as I'd like.

Hudson offers me his arm, and I link it with mine as we enter the establishment.

I was initially perplexed when he offered to escort me here this evening, since I'm certain he hasn't been seen with a woman in years. Despite my reasons for saying no, it would've been incredibly suspicious if I'd denied the offer.

Hudson is nice.

Innocent.

Yet I doubt Harry will see it that way.

Entering, Hudson takes off my jacket and hands it to the waitress, while another leads us to our table. A pianist sits in the corner of the room, strumming the most beautiful tune with his keys. An artificial blossom tree grows from the centre of the room, complementing the pink-and-gold decor. Circular tables are dotted around the area with matching seats, and I fight a blush at the elite members and celebrities taking up the space.

On approach to our table, Richard and Harry stop mid-conversation and rise to their feet. The Boss greets me by kissing my cheek, and I return the gesture before turning to Harry. His gaze is incredibly captivating, and I fight the urge to kiss his irresistible mouth.

"Christ, you look fucking incredible," he whispers in my ear.

I swear, the tension of being so close yet so far from him almost kills me.

We embrace, and I hug him a little tighter, inhaling the familiar scent of his aftershave before I'm forced to pull away. Despite the interaction only being brief, I clutch onto it like a lifeline.

Hudson pulls back my seat, and from the way Harry's muscles tense, he's triggered before the dinner has even started. As I sit, the white linen tablecloth covering my lap, my phone vibrates. Awareness flickers at my spine as I retrieve my phone and read the text.

HARRY: Don't leave here with Hudson.

I turn to the culprit, but his head is down, subtly staring at his phone screen. I conceal my phone with the cloth, typing a response.

ME: I don't have a choice.

HARRY: I'm giving you one.

HARRY: If you leave with him, I'll kill him.

ME: Stop being a child.

HARRY: You don't believe me?

HARRY: I'll show you how serious I am, princess.

ME: You are NOT killing Hudson Anderson.

But he doesn't respond.

My eyes lift from my phone, meeting Harry's. Unspoken words pass between us. This man will not live to see tomorrow unless I co-operate.

I reach out and take a sip of my wine to calm my nerves. The Boss is thanking a waitress as she fills his glass, and Hudson follows suit. Meanwhile I feel Harry spreading his long legs underneath the table, his knee brushing mine.

"So, Hudson, how's business?" Harry asks, turning his body towards him. "Whenever I see you, you always seem engaged with work. I appreciate a man who knows what he wants."

The interaction seems fairly innocent ... until Harry reaches out and places his hand on the inside of my thigh. My entire body stiffens, and I choke on a mouthful of wine.

"Gigi, are you all right?" the Boss asks.

Harry's palm grips me tighter.

"I'm fine." I laugh and grab the napkin, dabbing at my chin. "Just went down the wrong hole is all."

Hudson pauses, eyes scanning over me, and I silently plead for him to look away. When he does, he lounges back and says, "Same old, same old. You know how it is ... Rich says you and Gigi are quite the entertainment at Pixies. How have you been finding it?"

Harry's hands claw up my leg slowly until he pauses at the feel of my Glock. The very weapon he engraved his initials into. I see the flicker of a smirk before he continues his trail. Despite me gripping his wrist, he refuses to stop.

"It was definitely a surprise, but we work well together ..." Harry turns to me right at the moment his touch reaches the crease of my thigh. His fingers press into my pussy, melding the fabric to my skin. "Don't we, Gigi?"

"Mm-hmm," I say, disguising the shakiness of my breath by taking another sip of wine. And another. And another. My cheeks are hot with blush, but I blame it on my empty glass, saying, "Wine just goes straight through me."

"I'll order you another glass," Hudson says, turning and calling over another waiter.

Harry dips his fingers in further, and my thighs squeeze unforgivingly around his hand.

He's staking his claim.

My fingers claw at the top of his palm. *I won't leave with him*, I'm mentally shouting.

He pauses his sick torture, and I quickly regain my composure.

"Thank you," I tell the waitress as she refills my glass.

The Boss leans forwards, resting his forearms on the table as he says, "I have a mission for you both tomorrow. Some loose ends I need tying up in Chelsea."

That's code for "assassination".

"Consider it done," I tell him. "How many ends?"

He smirks. "Only two."

Easy work.

I smile.

Hudson picks up on the gesture. Resting his arm over the back of my chair, he asks, "And to think I was under the impression you didn't fit in. You really like the dark side of the business?"

"Very much."

My stomach plummets as I feel something cool and hard in texture pressing between my thighs, replacing Harry's hand. I surge forwards and chug down several mouthfuls of wine as I notice the familiarity of his dagger rubbing against me.

The longer Hudson's arm lingers, the rougher the touch becomes. A cough whips through me, the wine burning my throat. Hudson rubs my back, concerned, and I almost lash out on the spot at what that could entail.

"I'm fine. Really."

He pushes my hair over my shoulder, palming my neck. "It's fine. Let me—"

"NO!"

The table turns silent.

I exhale a shaky breath. "I have an ick about being touched. Thank you though."

Despite his hesitation, Hudson leans away, and as he does, Harry loses the pressure on his dagger. My chest finally loosens with a heavy exhale as he slips the weapon back up his sleeve. I turn to him in my seat, and he wets his lips, refusing to meet my gaze.

We spend the next few hours discussing work with code words, talking business about Gold House, and relaying the final details for tomorrow. More threats have come to light with the Boss's business, and we need to execute the threat before it

becomes an issue. It truly feels like the only time I get to spend with Harry is during work, but I'll take the opportunity wherever possible.

Once Hudson has paid the bill, he shrugs on his jacket, turns to me, and says, "I'll drive you home."

Harry is chatting with the Boss, but I can tell from the way his ears twitch that he's waiting to hear my response.

I smile politely. "Thank you, but I'm not feeling too great. It was probably all the wine. I'm going to pop to the pharmacy and then head home."

"Oh," Hudson says, surprised. "I can wait with you until you've got what you need."

I shake my head. "I don't want to risk throwing up in your car. Another time though. I appreciate it."

He takes the rejection like a gent and says nothing else.

Harry is the first to leave, saying goodbye to us all individually. He kisses my cheek, leaning down to whisper in my ear, "Leave in five minutes. I'll be waiting."

A smile threatens to surface at the idea of finally being alone with him.

I stare at the clock on the wall, eagerly counting down the minutes. Then, as soon as time's up, I bid my farewells and rush to the entrance to retrieve my jacket.

Before I have a chance to fully step outside into the summer evening breeze, I'm pulled around the corner. I barely have time to respond as I'm ushered against the wall beside the building.

Harry.

I whack him in the chest.

He chuckles. "What was that for?"

"You know what!"

He smirks, humming as he starts to kiss down my jaw. "Christ, I hoped he'd have his hands on you longer just so I could fuck you with that dagger."

My throat catches, and I run my fingers through the back of his hair. The feeling of his lips is pure bliss, but the risk teeters on the borderline of outweighing any momentary reward.

"Someone could see," I say, my breath shaky.

"I'd slit the throat of anyone who does."

The words hit me straight in the abdomen, erupting against the area with tingles and heat.

"I'll never get enough of you," I moan as he starts to wrap his lips around the sweet spot on my throat.

"Good, because I'm here to stay, baby."

FORTY-SIX

Harry

There are no suits or designer dresses for today's assassination. Gigi and I are in black leathers, and she's never looked more sensational. She's like some sexy vigilante, with clothes that cling to her like a second skin, emphasising the dip of her waist and the shape of her thighs.

This is the first time we've been on a heist in weeks. Between the shows at Pixies and planning Gold House, we're short on free time. I'm thankful to get out of the house, but the fact that all I want to do is rip those trousers clean off her skin has me restraining myself to the extent a vein might burst.

Richard doesn't want our victims interrogated, so the job is relatively straightforward. What should be a downside is that we have to dispose of the bodies ourselves instead of using a clean-up crew ... but when I see Gigi in the plastic apron, I'm close to combusting.

We sever the limbs of Antonio and Davide Gallo with the equipment we find in their basement. While I'm extracting the teeth of Antonio, ready to crush them into powder, Gigi pushes the right arm of Davide through the meat grinder. A gush of crimson sprays against her apron, assaulting her protective eye goggles, and fuck my life, the sight makes me as hard as nails.

Sick.

Crazy.

Obsessed.

It's all the same when I think of her.

I know she was enticed by the glitz and the glamour, but I'd be lying if I said a part of me didn't falter at the potential of her being corrupted. At the thought of what she could've been if I hadn't introduced her to this life.

Having a mind of their own, my feet bring themselves over to her, and I wrap my arms around her waist underneath her apron, pressing delicate kisses to her neck. She hums in response, tilting her head back against my chest.

I slip my hands down to the insides of her thighs and up her legs until I'm pressing against her cunt.

"Harry," Gigi whines, pressing her ass against me, feeling my growing erection.

I flip her around and sit her on the edge of the metal table beside Davide's remaining limbs. I rip the apron clean from her body, along with her goggles and her T-shirt, freeing her of all restraints. Her breasts bounce free, and I catch her nipple in my mouth as I grind myself between her legs. Her whimpers are a symphony to my ears as I knead her other breast with my palm and pull away from her nipple with an audible pop.

"I need you," she says, desperation evident in her voice.

"Then have me you shall, baby."

Catching her mouth with mine, my eyes roll at the taste of her strawberry lip gloss, and our hands are suddenly frantic, freeing us of our remaining clothing. Before I know it, I've hooked my forearms around her creamy thighs and I'm thrusting into her. I drag her until her ass is perched on the edge of the counter, then I slam my hips into her again, reaching the hilt.

My balls start to tighten almost immediately, and I fight the need to release inside of her. I drop my hand to her clit and rub frantically with precision, bringing her up to speed. Her lips part, and she throws her head back.

"Oh God—"

I grab her by the throat, and her eyes light up as I tighten my fingers. "What did I say about saying another man's name during sex?"

My eyes drop to her neck, which I've accidentally tainted with blood. A normal man would be revolted by the idea. But I'd fucking kill him before he had the opportunity to have her like this.

I slide my hand higher up Gigi's skin, until I'm gripping her chin. "Eyes on me."

Our gazes clash, and I drop my head to hers as I hook her thigh up higher on my hip. My cock slams into her, and she grips my skin unforgivingly, her nails leaving tread marks on my chest.

We release together. I swallow her moans, never wanting anyone else to hear the sounds outside of her mouth except for me.

Spent, she sucks in lungfuls of air and leans back on her hands. “You never told me about your tattoos,” she says with bated breath.

I smile, pushing a strand of hair off my forehead, which is coated in sweat. I look down at myself and over the scattering of black ink that stretches from my lower torso to my chest.

“Anything specific you want to know?”

“I want it all when it comes to you.”

Fuck, this girl is everything.

Just looking at her, it’s a struggle not to smother her with affection.

Grinding my feet into the floor, I say, “We’ve got forever to talk about it, but since Davide’s limbs still need grinding, I’d say our time is relatively limited.”

She nods, having forgotten that detail, and then asks, “Why do they stop at your elbows? Why not cover your forearms too?”

I smile, expecting the question. “I’ll always be judged for the blood that stains my hands, but I guess a part of me hoped being a criminal wasn’t always in the cards for me. Whether we like it or not, tattoos have a stigma. If I ever want to cure my sanity by working an office job but I fail the interview, I’ll know nothing is predetermined. And I’m destined to be a killer. But don’t fool yourself, princess. Even if I’m ever behind a desk, I’ll always kill anyone who wrongs you. That’ll never change.”

Her sadness is quickly replaced by bashfulness as she rolls her eyes and shoves at my chest. I catch her wrist, twisting it and turning her palm over so I can place a kiss on her pulse.

Our lifeline.

If it wasn’t for her, I would’ve surely lost my sanity.

Before Gigi entered my life I was killing for sport. With each kill I felt the darkness clawing through me, ready to overwhelm, but she brings me back to the surface.

Christ, I don’t know what I’d do without her.

Searching day and night for a crumb that could lead me to the trafficking ring is driving me to the brink of insanity. Yet Gigi pulls me through every time. After I spent thirty hours straight traipsing through the footage in my home office, near numb when it amounted to nothing, hearing her voice was the grounding I needed to pull myself back together.

I’ve spent countless sleepless nights searching for the slightest indication the postcode the twins ratted out in East London is rotted with evil, but alas, nothing. The thought of innocent women being sold against their will makes me fucking murderous. And it isn’t something I’m going to allow to plague Gigi’s life.

Refusing to allow vanity to get to the head of the woman I’ve devoted my life to, I refuse to mention the symbol I got in honour of her. She’ll have flickered her eyes over the tribute without so much as knowing what it is, the light bulb shining through in a cascade of black.

My light in the darkness.

“We should get this all cleaned up,” she says, bringing me back down to earth.

Gigi finishes grinding Davide’s remaining limbs, and then, while she works on Antonio, I turn the pieces into meat-sized cubes and package them up accordingly. We throw the remainder of our clothes into the furnace and pack the meat into the boot of my Bentley. Once we’ve changed into fresh clothes, we drive to the house of a paedophile living in Kensington. I don’t tell Gigi he’s on my suspect list, giving her little information as she leaves the party gift on his doorstep, wearing a baseball cap to conceal her from any security cameras. We finish the night spreading the powder of Davide and Antonio’s teeth in the River Thames like ashes.

My eyes flicker over to Gigi from the driver’s seat, and I take a rare moment to appreciate her in the chaos while she sleeps. Through the craziness that is our life, I barely get the opportunity just to appreciate her at her most vulnerable.

Seeing her like this, lips parted and seemingly innocent, is my favourite. I do love to see her thrive, and believe me, she is. Everyone can see it. She’s climbing the ranks and would be giving Jack a run for his money if he were still around. Richard is beside himself with joy, and it makes me sick. I don’t fucking trust the fella, whether he’s my boss or not. And that’s excluding the fact we’ll be murdered for fraternising.

As the Bentley’s wheels move over the gravel of my driveway, Gigi’s eyes flicker open and she stretches out her limbs above her head.

“I thought you were dropping me back home.”

“This is your home.” I smile at her rolling her eyes. “I couldn’t cope with saying goodbye to you yet. Besides ... I have a present for you.”

“For me?” Her eyes light up. “What is it?”

“It wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you, now, would it?” I exit the car. Walking around to the passenger side, I open her door and offer her my hand. “It’s right here, if you want to see it.”

She grips my palm, a smile spreading across her cheeks as I lead her to the corner of the garage and pull off the cloth concealing her gift.

“You said you missed the Harley.”

Her pupils blow and her lips part as her gaze lands on the bike that’s near identical to mine. A Vivid Black Heritage Classic. It cost me just shy of thirty grand, but it was nothing in comparison to my adoration for her. A bouquet of twenty-four red roses sits alongside. A dedication to every hour of the day I spend admiring her.

“Harry, I meant yours!”

“Do you not like it?”

“Of course I like it!” she says, turning to me as tears fill her waterline. “But it’s too much.”

“It’s not enough.” I press my palms to her cheeks. My thumb catches a stray tear and I put it to my lips, relishing the taste as I say, “There’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do for you. I would burn the world for you if you asked.”

Her breathing turns shallow. “If you strike the match, we’ll watch it burn. Together.”

“Together.”

I take a selfish moment just to admire her beauty in the passing quiet. The sweeping of her eyelashes. The curve of her nose. The swell of her lips. Nodding towards the bouquet of flowers, I say, “You smell like roses. Do you know that?”

Her cheeks flush pink and she takes my hand, pressing her soft lips against my fingertips.

“I l—” She cuts herself off mid-sentence, her eyes slightly flared before she speaks softly. “Thank you.”

I slip my hands from her face and pick up the keys, as well as both helmets. “Do you want to take her for a spin?”

She nods excitedly, taking one of the helmets from my hand and slipping it on over her head. She takes the front seat and I sit behind her, showing her the brake, the gas, and the necessities to drive. She follows with the impression she has free rein. My palms cover the backs of her hands as we pull off, torn between the opportunity to touch her and making sure she’s comfortable.

The wind whips at her hair as the bike races down the streets. Her sweet scent of roses fills my senses, and I fight the urge to kiss her skin. As one of my hands stays sturdy on the brake, my other runs up the inside of her thigh. Her protest is hidden by the onslaught of the wind, and I smirk at her attempts.

When we reach a red light she pulls up her visor. “Do you want us to crash?”

“Maybe,” I say, pulling up mine to meet her eye. “Eternity with you does sound appealing.”

Her eyes have barely finished rolling before I’ve revved the gas and we’re off again. I rest one hand on the accelerator, pulling down our visors with my spare hand to help keep stability on the road.

We spend an hour roaming the streets lit with streetlamps, the roads fairly quiet, save for the odd car and red-top bus. She becomes more relaxed throughout the drive, leaning back into my embrace and relishing the rare time we have together.

When the clock strikes twelve and my princess needs to go home, we pull into my garage and Gigi stalls the engine as we draw to a stop. I help her tug off her helmet, and the burnt rubber scent now ingrained in her hair makes my abdomen tighten with desire. The wind has whipped colour onto her cheeks and blown her brown hair into disarray.

“I have a question,” she says.

I pull off my helmet and cock a brow.

“When I first met you, why did you always come to Greg’s house for the most ridiculous reasons?”

I pause for a beat and then smile, telling her the truth. “I just wanted to see you. There was no reason.”

She laughs, and the sound is fucking beautiful. Her eyes crease, her expression part shock yet far from surprise. “So you didn’t really need rice and eggs?”

“No, baby. I just needed you.”

FORTY-SEVEN

Gigi

It's always bittersweet whenever I get to spend time with Harry away from the Circle. Every precious second in his company feels like a ticking time bomb counting down until the truth is unveiled. Yet I cherish it all the same.

Reaching the driveway of the Circle headquarters, I pull up alongside those climbing into the back of the armoured truck on my new Harley. A low whistle sounds as I pull off my helmet and shake my windswept hair free.

Andy wanders over in his uniform and says, "Jesus, Gigi. If fraternisation wasn't a death sentence, you'd be just my type." I roll my eyes at his flirtation. Andy has always been harmless, and I'm pretty certain he's still seeing Mia. I struggle to ask about her these days, selfishly not wanting to expand on the pain in my chest for leaving her in the dark. Despite my intentions to protect her, the betrayal is still sore.

"You want to repeat that, Davidson?" Richard shouts from across the lawn. Stepping forwards, Andy grimaces at the interaction, concealing a grin. He drops his voice to a whisper. "Besides, I think Harry would murder me before I even considered the possibility."

My stomach plummets as I teeter on both feet. "I don't know what you're talking about." "No?" He eats up my reaction with a heavy smirk. "Why don't we ask the other guilty party?" As we both turn, Harry climbs out of his Bentley. Eyes landing on the two of us, he strolls over. I drink in the sight of him. The jeans, the long sleeve T-shirt clinging to his muscles. All I can think is that he looks delicious in all-black. I want to shout it from the rooftops that I woke up in his bed this morning and stake my claim.

I'm dating this man. He's mine! My hands dig into the crevices of my helmet as he nears closer. I'd climb him like a tree if we didn't have company, kissing from the *Rolex* on his wrist all the way to— "I didn't know you were joining the heist," Oliver says, walking over.

I fight the blush on my cheeks, turning my attention to him as Harry reaches us. "I'm not," I say. "What's on the agenda for today?" "A couple of start-up banks in Marylebone. There's only a short team today. The Boss thought he ought to give you both the day off after the assassination yesterday."

I nod, placing my hand on Oliver's arm. "Be careful." "Remember who you're talking to, kiddo." He pats my hand, muttering to Andy that the truck's almost ready before he rallies up the remaining recruits.

When I turn to look back at Harry, my stomach flips at his intense stare. His eyes linger for longer than necessary, causing Andy to say, "You're both definitely fucking."

"We are not," I clarify. Harry's eyes rake over me, and he cocks his head. "Are we not?" "No," I say, my voice stern. Yet when I turn back to Andy, he's grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. He knows. Of course he knows. Besides, he's Harry's best friend – he was bound to discover the truth sooner or later.

"Is it that obvious?" I ask. "Only to me," Andy says, throwing his arm around Harry's shoulder. "We've been best pals for a decade. I know this man better than he knows himself."

The sight of the two friends hugging tugs at my heartstrings. To think Jack would've increased this bromance to a trio causes my chest to tighten.

I smile and say, "I'd give you a run for your money." "She would as well," Harry says, patting Andy's back proudly. Andy clasps his chest as if he's been wounded and then resumes his grin. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me."

A chilling voice demands, “What secret?”

I whip my head to the side as the Boss wanders over, his face stern, those harsh lines refusing to falter. The shock of his presence brings me to utter silence, stilling my limbs.

Harry steps out from underneath Andy’s arm, his calm façade intervening with impressive speed. “I found some inappropriate content on Antonio’s computer that I thought you’d like to see. It seems Davide didn’t even know the *secrets* he was holding.”

How does he do that?

Richard nods. “Have it sent to my desk, and I’ll look it over within the hour.”

That was close.

Way too close.

Oh God.

My eyes squeeze shut, the image of our potential repercussions too excruciating to comprehend. I fight the urge to claw at my chest as my heart stutters, struggling for a breath. My ears ring and the impact hits me like I’m being assaulted with a knife straight to the gut.

Do you see what they’re doing?

She’s going to get him killed.

They’re definitely fucking.

Someone tell the Boss!

I shake my head no.

In my mind the Boss unholsters a pistol from the waistband of his trousers, raising it at Leroy’s temple. A fraction of a second passes before he pulls the trigger, assassinating him on the spot.

“May this be a message to my recruits, I do not take negligence lightly.”

As I peer over at the lifeless body, I see a mop of tousled black hair.

No. No. No.

My lungs ache. My heart screams.

Harry—

“Gigi!”

My eyes fly open at the sound of guttural panic. Harry is gripping both my shoulders tight, forcing me to meet his eye.

“Are you okay?”

His eyes capture mine as if he’s attempting to soak up the fear possessing my body like a parasite. Heat claws up my neck at the realisation everyone in the courtyard is staring, having witnessed my episode.

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure what came over me.” I step out of his arms like the weight is physically bringing me down.

The silence that swarms the group is heavy. I lift my chin in case my moment of vulnerability highlighted any incompetence for the job.

“Are we still meeting in the boardroom?”

“Yes,” the Boss says, rubbing at his temples. “But if you’re not—”

“I’m fine,” I assure him, pushing down the fear that assaults me with his heavy gaze. “I’ll meet you and the team in five minutes. I wish you all the best on today’s heist,” I tell Andy, dismissing him.

As I turn to leave, Harry steps in front of me, blocking my path. Expecting I’ll falter under his growing concern, I keep my head down.

“Thank you for your concern, Harry, but I’m fine. I’ll see you in the boardroom.”



“Keep your eyes on the documents like a fucking hawk,” I tell Whizz Tech Dan. “We don’t want the opportunity for a crossover between companies to slip through our fingers. Hit them when they’re most vulnerable.”

“What’s the overlap?” he asks, barely raising his head as his fingers clatter against the laptop keys.

The Boss paces behind me, briefly stealing my attention as he walks the length of the room.

I pick up the documents in front of me, scanning them briefly to add, “According to their last sales report, we have less than twenty-four hours from the news breaking to contracts being finalised. Every. Second. Counts.”

“Unlikely,” Poppy mutters, and my head whips towards her. “That’s a lot of fucking paperwork within twenty-four hours. You’re looking at a couple of days at least.”

“You think the biggest department store in the whole of Europe isn’t going to act accordingly?” I ask. “That they’re not going

to cover all ends when they're at their most vulnerable? Christ, Green, you have a lot to learn."

Her upper lip curls into a snarl.

"And if we're not prepared to hit them without that timescale?" someone asks.

I turn to the source of the sound, but Harry captures my attention before I'm able to turn fully. The heavy look in his eyes obliterates my earlier panic to ashes. A rare look passes his features. With a tilt of his head, he hitches his brow as if he doesn't recognise me.

"Boss?" the same voice presses.

Silence fills the air. I turn my head, waiting for Richard's response, but when I look at the people surrounding the table, there's something different about them.

Their eyes are on me.

Individually I make eye contact with each of them. Everyone is looking at me, including Richard himself. The comment threatens to overwhelm me, but I take it in my stride.

One of the new recruits – the one who asked the question – nods at me to continue.

I lift my chin, a grin slowly swarming my mouth. "Then we hit them with everything we have."

A sudden commotion in the hallway diverts our attention. There are shouts, cries, and a high-pitched female scream that chills me to the bone, bringing the whole boardroom to silence. Instinctively reaching for the Glock holstered on my thigh, I halt at the familiar voices.

"What do you mean!" a woman's voice echoes, near hysterical. "What do you fucking mean he's gone?"

Andy storms into the room, causing the doors to smack against the walls with a heavy *whack*. Harsh lines mark his face, and he's near toppling over. Mine and Harry's eyes clash from across the room, staring at one another before we turn our attention back to Andy.

He bows his head, shaking it.

A guttural sob assaults the silence.

Tears burn my eyes with white-hot fury.

It's a feeling I recognise all too well.

A sound, a raw cry, that no one should ever have to hear within their lifetime.

Death is unforgiving. That much I know.

FORTY-EIGHT

Bigi

The rain is harsh against my skin. It pounds my cheeks with fury, to the extent that my skin is numb as the rainfall and my own tears blend into a watery cascade.

People tend to ache for the sun to beat down on their cheeks, letting them know the recently departed are looking down at them in the darkness. But I don't feel like that.

I want the rain.

I want the thunder.

I want the rest of the world to grieve in misery as I am.

While I didn't know Oliver for as long as the others, I owed him my life.

He only wanted to leave a legacy for his son – the money was never important to him primarily. He was fulfilling one final job before leaving the Circle for good.

Members can't quit so easily, but people respected Oliver in a way no one else understood. He, his wife, and his son were planning to go to Disneyland, but now the date will be full of grief and misery instead. He died on the front line during a heist, when a bank employee slipped his gun out from the emergency stash and shot him straight in the head, killing him on impact.

When I first heard the story I felt utterly numb. It was so eerily similar to what happened on my first heist.

My heart feels like it's splitting right through the centre. I watch his wife and child while Oliver's coffin is lowered into the ground. Despite the day resembling nothing of summer, his wife is wearing a large, wide-brimmed sunhat and dark sunglasses to conceal the burn in her eyes, her blonde hair sticking to the back of her black trench coat in the pouring rain. She stands directly behind her son, rubbing the tops of his shoulders as he bows his head. The young boy, no older than five, wears a black suit that practically drowns him. The heaviness settles in my chest, and I bite my bottom lip, holding back a sob.

No child, especially that young, should have to deal with the grief of losing a parent.

The last time I stood in the face of death was when my own brother's coffin was being lowered into the ground. It's like I've been physically backhanded.

"Tenderly, lovingly, and unforgivingly, we commit the spirit and body of Oliver Lark to a more peaceful place," the priest says. "We now say farewell, and may you rest in peace. Thank you for being you."

The man is old – much older than Oliver – perhaps in his early seventies, and his hair is grey. For a moment I wish it were him in the ground. He's probably lived a long, happy life thus far, and his children are most likely grown-up with kids of their own. But Oliver will never see that. He'll never see his young boy come of age, finish school, find a partner, and settle down.

My throat swells, and I feel sick, emotion welling in my eyes. I blink them away, feeling guilt for crying when there are people here keeping their composure together.

To me, Oliver was a man I knew in corridors, a colleague, a breath of fresh air, the reason for my success – but more importantly, he was someone I admired. No matter what a criminal record might say, to me his slate was clean.

"You okay?" Andy asks, his voice quietly echoing beneath the umbrella above his head, which is being beaten with rainfall.

I nod, focusing on the ground beneath my feet. The rain is so heavy that mud is starting to seep into the grass.

Harry has taken it hard. He's watching the ceremony. Somewhere. There are hundreds of people here paying their respects, and I think he snuck off to take a quiet moment. I so desperately want to console him, but I understand his reasoning for being alone.

The service wraps up, and the group of us associated with the Circle leave the family to say their final goodbyes. Oliver's family asked for a private wake for immediate family only, since that was his biggest love, so the rest of us are having a drink in his honour back at the headquarters.

Within the hour we're sitting in one of the lounge rooms, the large coffee table in the centre littered with wineglasses and beer bottles. Oliver's gun has pride of place in the middle, alongside a photo of him. My eyes bore into the picture, trying to

etch his features into my brain.

I only saw him a few weeks ago.

I saw him *the* morning before he died.

Oh God, I told him to be careful.

I told him to be careful, and he wasn't.

Now ... Now he's—

I shake my head, refusing to accept the truth. Poppy is seated at my side, her leg bouncing frantically against the floor and stealing my attention. It's the first time I'm thankful to have her in such close proximity. She takes a shaky sip from her glass, her eyes staring at nothing.

"Do you remember when he first joined," Whizz Tech Dan asks, picking at the sticker on his beer bottle, "and he brought in packed lunches because he hated the idea of wasting money?"

"And his wife cut the sandwiches into triangles," a girl says, her voice breaking.

A breath of silence fills the room.

Andy speaks up. "He didn't deserve any of this. That could have been any of us." He locks eyes with each person in the room individually, but I feel the effects personally. "His blood family may be together right now, but his second family is here."

Poppy lifts her glass, rubbing her cheek against her shoulder to catch a stray tear.

"To Oliver."

"To Oliver," the room echoes.

I take a sip from my wineglass, my eyes falling on Harry. He's sitting on one of the sofas opposite me, repeating the words in a silent whisper, far too quiet for anyone to hear. He runs his fingers around the rim of his beer bottle, clearly lost in thought. Then, exhaling a breath, he places it on the table in front of him before standing from the sofa and exiting the room.

Andy catches my line of sight and nods subtly, insinuating I should follow.

When people start up conversation about their favourite heists with Oliver and everything he contributed to the team, I excuse myself to use the bathroom, following Harry out the door.

"Harry?" I whisper, looking around.

I check my immediate vicinity, poking my head into the cafeteria and walking past the billiard room, to no avail. The home seems eerily quiet and lacking in life, missing the soul within. As I step into the hall a cold gust of air hits me from the ajar porch doors leading onto the patio.

Approaching the door slowly, I feel Harry's presence before I see him. Rain clatters against the roof above his head and echoes around the small space. There's no doubt there's a sombre mood across camp, but this seems different. Harry looks completely cut off, almost as if there's something else on his mind. And I know better than to leave people riddled with their own guilt, especially grief.

His eyes flicker up to meet mine as my steps echo on the cold patio tiles. He maintains eye contact momentarily, taking a drag of his cigarette. There's a far-off look in his eyes as he returns his attention to the gardens in front of us. What used to be vibrant, bright flowers and luscious greenery is now soaked in the downpour, drab and dismal.

"Are you okay?"

"Not particularly."

"Something's bothering you," I say carefully. "I can tell."

The cigarette in his mouth twitches with a slight movement of his lips. "I'm at a funeral. What wouldn't be bothering me?" He takes another drag before deciding he's finished. He pokes out the stub on the glass ashtray to his left.

I take a step forwards, my hand falling to his bicep, where I rub up and down his suit jacket. He doesn't push me away, but I feel his body stiffen.

"You can talk to me," I whisper.

He pushes the cigarette so far into the ashtray it disintegrates between his fingers, but he continues to play with the grains even when they're far past crumbs.

"Talk to me," I plead gently. "I'm right here, Harry."

Saying his name seems to gather his thoughts together, and he retracts his hand carefully, brushing away the residue on his trouser leg.

"Are you?" He meets my eye. "Are you right here?"

"Of course I am." I frown. "Tell me what's bothering you. I can try to fix it."

"You couldn't."

"Try me."

"What if that was you? It could have so easily been you we were burying today, and you know it."

Ah, there it is.

He's right. Of course he's right. It was one of the first things I thought when Andy broke down in the boardroom. But I knew the risks when I signed up to the criminal lifestyle. I know I'm putting my life on the line every single day, with the fear I might

not be coming home.

Life is different now. The Circle is a life worth dying for – a motto we all breathe daily to remind us that loss is a potential no matter how tragic it may be.

“It could easily be you too,” I say.

Harry tears his gaze away, but I catch his chin, bringing his face back to mine. “But it’s not ... I’m right here. We’re together in this moment. Right now.”

He pulls my hand from his cheek, clutching onto my fingers. “You’re here until someone walks through those patio doors and sees us together.”

Letting out a slow breath, I say, “You know the risks, Harry.”

“I’d rather have a sliver of you than none at all, but there’s only so much I can take.”

He’s right. And I hate it – with every fibre of my being.

The toll on his mental health is clearly more impactful every day.

And I know if he gets much closer, this could break him.

I can’t risk Harry living in the fear I might not come back from a job, thus tearing himself up with guilt if anything were to happen, though the alternative of not having him around seems unbearable.

... But I’ve been fighting for this my whole life.

FORTY-NINE

Harry

Gigi is on edge – more so than ever – and I’m a fool for thinking it’s for anything other than the fact we’re sneaking around. Our views on whatever this is between us are completely different. “It’s not a risk I’m willing to take,” she told me previously. Whereas my view is as plain as fucking paper.

She’s not something I’m willing to lose.

A part of her is better than none of her at all.

We’re fighting, clashing heads, and my anxiety is increasing tenfold with each passing day, the burden of finding the trafficking ring weighing heavily on my shoulders. I’m about as close to finding it as I would be to finding a needle in a haystack. Something fucking dodgy is going on, and I don’t trust anyone. I can’t risk speaking to someone else purely on the basis they might be involved.

One of Richard’s colleagues is currently strung up in my surveillance room, but what good is that when there are girls being targeted? My stomach plummets at the thought of them being held against their will, and I exhale a slow, steady breath.

There’s nothing I can do about it right now.

I will discover the truth in time.

But today ... the Gold House heist is finally here. The business exchanged contracts this afternoon, so we were pulled into immediate action. We’re all sitting in a briefing room, our asses in desk chairs at the ten-metre-long table that takes up the majority of the space, all of us equipped with combat gear, except for the balaclavas.

Gigi walks into the room, scanning for a spare seat, and she ever so slightly stiffens when she realises the only available one is next to me. I cross one foot over my knee, throwing my arm casually over the back of her chair. She walks to the empty space and sits down, edging forwards to escape my touch.

“Good afternoon, princess,” I say, keeping my voice low. “Sleep well last night?”

I know she did. She slept in my bed, and I reckon if I lean close enough I can still smell the aftermath of our shower sex this morning. The scent of my body wash on her skin. Christ, it makes me want to throw her on this table and fuck away every problem that’s bothering her.

Nothing sobers my thoughts more than Richard entering the room. His salt-and-pepper hair is as styled as ever, and his suit is in pristine condition despite the chaos after the news broke. He presses his palm to the table as he leans forwards, addressing us all.

“Thank you all for getting here so quickly. I appreciate morale has been down since the loss of Oliver, but that’s why we go out and fight for his legacy. The show must go on. We’ve trained for this moment, and I have no doubt you’ll all do me proud today.”

Silence.

“Any questions?”

Everyone shakes their head.

“Knock ’em dead. Not literally. There are no deaths on the agenda for today.”

And then we’re swept up in the chaos. I lose sight of Gigi in the crowd, her height giving her a disadvantage against the swarm of people who race out the door to help load the truck.

We’re on the road in less than ten minutes.

Whizz Tech Dan types away at his laptop, setting up the live feed, as well as preparing to hack the security system. It’s wired with a laser system that’ll project light beams generated by LEDs to create a trip zone. In most cases they’re invisible, but Dan has hacked the system to unveil the death trap. There’s no way to turn them off completely without the security being tripped, but we’ll cope with what we have.

With their security system in shatters, we only have a matter of minutes to sneak inside undetected. If all goes to plan, we’ll

be able to get in and out without them realising the issue until morning.

Gigi drew the short straw to get us through the doors, meaning we'll wait for her signal before we start charging the tunnels. It only makes sense, since she worked at a department store similar to this one.

She sits opposite me in the truck, and my hands itch to clutch onto her. The sight of her in the gear is mouthwatering, but there's still that inkling of doubt she shouldn't be here. It's not that she's incapable – there's just a growing worry that the insanity will consume her, or that she'll face a fate like Oliver's.

I'd do anything for her to quit, no matter how good she might look in her full uniform.

This heist is far different from our other operations. We'd typically go early-morning, but with the contract exchange we're sneaking in after close. We have the cover of darkness on our side.

We reach our destination, the truck grinding to a stop and silencing the entire crew. Sneaking open the door, Gigi climbs out, quietly shutting it behind her. I rest my forearms on my knees, picking at a loose thread and tensing in my own anticipation.

The burden of her fate has me unveiling tics I never thought I had. My leg starts to bounce, I pull on that fucking thread, and I gnaw at my lower lip until minutes have passed and her angelic voice is finally coming through the speaker on Dan's laptop.

"I'm in. Let's go."

We climb out the truck, handhelds equipped in our holsters. If everything goes to plan, there'll be no need for people to unholster their weapons today.

Sneaking through the hidden entrance, the team charge down the tunnels while Gigi holds open the heavy iron door. Instinctively I step in to help, but she shakes her head, refusing to meet my eye.

"I've got it."

Adrenaline races through my body, as it usually does with a heist, masking the sting of her harsh words. I begrudgingly obey but keep a watchful eye on her as the team gather in the storage room the tunnels lead to. While Gigi secures the door shut, I crack open the other, peering into the dark department store.

Poppy calls over my shoulder, "Where are the lasers?"

"Dan?" I ask into the earpiece.

He responds quickly. "All lasers should be visible. If there's none there, then you're in luck, my friends."

A few people erupt into cheers.

"Let's not question it."

Since we're not limited for time, everyone rushes to their stations. Poppy and a few others make a beeline for the safe on a lower floor. Gigi races to one of the neighbouring rooms housing the jewels. Andy, the remaining team, and I head to the artwork section.

Despite Dan keeping a watchful eye on the surveillance cameras, my senses are on high alert. Andy and a male recruit reach up to start disarming an ancient painting from the wall – until a bellowing noise halts their movements.

The roaring sound of a kickstarting engine echoes throughout the quiet space. We all make eye contact, rooted in place. I throw up an arm, instructing that nobody fucking move.

And suddenly, in awe-striking bright light, lasers flicker to life, starting at one end of the room and quickly gaining momentum as they chase up the length of the store.

"To the floor!" I roar.

Everybody drops to the ground like dominoes, bodies prone as they flatten themselves against the marble. The lights are upon us in seconds, a hairsbreadth away from our heads, and it feels like fire touching my skin. While I know it won't hurt, the fear of tripping the system is enough to raise caution.

"We expected this. The alarm system was just regenerated. We know what to do," Andy calls out. "The plan doesn't change."

Army-crawling my way across the ground, I silently thank the janitors of this place as my face presses so close to the floor I can practically see my full reflection. People follow in pursuit, and when I reach the doorframe, I rise to my feet and plaster myself against it.

"We have a problem!" a voice shouts from the parallel room.

Great.

"What kind of problem?" I throw back.

"I'm fine!" Gigi hisses.

I recognise her voice instantly, and I grit my teeth, concealing the aggravated grunt brewing in my chest. Sticking to the wall like glue, I hold my breath as if it'll help to keep my actions precise.

Turning the corner, my pulse quickens when I see Gigi standing in the centre of the room. Her body appears frozen in time, hands out at the sides as she keeps her balance, surrounded by alternating lasers. She's just a few steps away from the glass cases housing some of the rarest gems in British history, which are due to go to auction for no less than one million pounds.

"I said to get down!"

"It's not as bad as it looks."

I shake my head.

As I take a cautious step closer, intending to help her, she throws her hand out and shouts, “You’re not meant to be near me right now.”

“I don’t give a fuck about that!”

I’m not sure whether she’s referring to our relationship or me trying to protect her. Either way, I don’t stop to ask.

“Get back here right now! It’s not worth it.”

She gnaws at her bottom lip, her eyes frantically scanning the trip lasers that could detonate this whole mission, and then the glass cabinet.

“Please don’t tell me you’re actually considering this.”

“Leave me alone.”

Her eyes close and she withdraws her foot.

Ready to pounce, her eyes ping back open, and she races into a sprint. She narrowly misses the fluorescent lines in the air, her small frame an incredible advantage. She weaves through the obstacles effortlessly, only inches from her target. On pursuit towards the glass case her footing falters. Acting on pure fucking instinct, as if my body can tell her life is threatened, I throw myself forwards.

Narrowly missing the lines that could trip the system, I clasp onto the back of her T-shirt, sucking the air straight from her lungs. My hand fists the material, catching her body just as she threatens to fall. Her arms flail, her face hovering just an inch away from failure.

My arms shake with the exertion of holding her. Her breathing is rapid, the consequences of her decision shining through. As if handling a new-born baby, I pull her back up slowly, steadying her footing.

When she’s flat on her feet I turn her quickly and bark, “What the fuck were you thinking?”

She rears back. “Excuse me?”

My nostrils flare. “That was fucking foolish, and you know it!”

“That stuff in there is worth one million pounds, Harry!”

“And it’s worthless if it’ll cost you your life,” I shout, my composure shattering. “I’m not prepared to lose you.”

But I fear I already have.

FIFTY

Sigi

Things have been off between me and Harry since my stunt at Gold House skyrocketed his protective instinct. He claims he's afraid of losing me, but if I'm honest, I'm sure he thinks I'm incapable of doing the job.

Adding to the tension in our relationship, we've been forced apart the past few weeks. Harry's been pulled onto several more jobs than normal, and then, when he's home, he's too knackered to entertain the idea of sneaking around. Whenever we do find time, the Boss is pulling me into meetings about upcoming heists. My role within the Circle has never been as demanding as it is right now.

I'm thriving, power threatening to consume me. The recruits and the Boss's businessmen watch me like I'm someone who should be feared. The feeling is surreal – and what I've ached for my whole life.

The days of us sneaking around after Pixies seem like a lifetime ago, so when I first saw we had a performance scheduled for tomorrow, it felt like a saving grace. Though, with the way Harry's been acting lately, my doubts he'll even turn up are increasing.

I bite the bullet, deciding to text him.

ME: You're still available for Pixies tomorrow?

HARRY: On a job. Chat later.

I frown, double-checking the text message, certain there are no heists scheduled for today. I lean over the table in the boardroom and pick up the paperwork listing today's quota.

"Hey, Dan."

The clacking of laptop keys pauses.

"Were there any heists scheduled for today?"

"Nah, don't think so." He slurps on the straw of his cup. "Why's that?"

"No reason." I look back at my phone, betrayal making my stomach drop. Deciding to investigate, I storm towards the door, calling over my shoulder, "Just going to get some lunch. You want anything?"

Dan mutters under his breath something that sounds a lot like "too busy".

I walk out of the room, quickening my steps as if someone is chasing my heel. I turn left and walk down the hallway, past the sunspots reflected on the floor from the glass windows, and past those gathering for lunch. As if my mind is naturally drawn to it, my eyes flicker to a glass cabinet where I know a picture of Jack sits framed beside his colleagues. My priorities lately have forced my past life to slip through the cracks. The burden of Jack's death continues to plague my empty silences, but I turn my face away, afraid I'll despise what I'll find if I chase his ghost back to the vulnerable girl who grew to thrive in his shadow.

I walk faster and push open the doors to the cafeteria, spotting Andy sitting alone at a table. Walking up to him, I lean my palms against the surface and ask, "Where's Harry?"

He bites into his apple. "Why? You missing your fix of sanity?"

"What does that even mean?"

He shrugs, looking down distastefully at the fruit. "And they say things are greener on the other side."

I frown, confused at his nonsense. "Are you high or something?"

He chews on his mouthful, deep in thought. "Or something."

He turns his head to face me, red-rimmed eyes speaking a thousand words.

My God, what's happened to him?

"You know, Mia asks about you every day," Andy states, stealing my concern.

Pain squeezes my heart at thought of her, making it a struggle to face him.

"She's worried about you. And you know what I tell her? Nothing. I tell her nothing."

"There's nothing to say—"

“Bullshit. Don’t make excuses because the guilt is too heavy on your shoulders. You’ve been an awful friend, but *she’s* the one who thinks she’s done something wrong. That *she’s* the reason you’re acting the way you are.”

A wave of shock slaps me.

Despite the sacrifice I made to save her life sitting on the tip of my tongue, pure molten anger rises to the surface.

How dare Andy talk to me like that!

The fury I feel is more substantial than any remorse for my best friend.

“Acting the way I am?” I spit out the words. “Where has this attitude come from, Davidson? I’d be careful who you’re speaking to.”

He laughs, the sound cold. “I was done talking anyway.”

He rises from his seat, leaving his food tray on the table.

The longer I stand there watching him depart, the further my anger threatens to explode. Something under my skin threatens to break free. Keeping my hands busy, I storm over to the tray and tip the contents into the bin before slamming it down on the counter.

I charge in the direction Andy exited.

In case I lash out unintentionally, I hope he’s far out of sight. Yet a part of me craves to find him still lingering in the hall so I can give him a piece of my mind.

But when I step out into the corridor, my world tears into two.

Tension leaves my body the very moment I breathe.

“Harry.”

He slips off his bike helmet and shakes out his hair. When he raises his head and runs his hand through the tousled mess, he looks dishevelled. There are dark marks under his eyes, and he looks like he hasn’t slept in weeks.

Has it really been that long since I last saw him?

Holding his helmet underneath his arm, he takes a step closer towards me, and I meet him in the middle until we’re only a few feet apart. On his approach I can see the tiredness incredibly clearly.

“Hi,” I say, my voice catching.

“Hey.”

“Can ... can we talk?”

He nods his head, a war raging inside of it.

Leading us towards one of the vacant offices at the end of the hall, I close the door behind us, pulling down the privacy screen. The room is compact, only leaving space for a few tables and chairs. One window sits in the far corner, the blinds drawn, allowing no natural light to enter.

Harry places his helmet down and leans back against the edge of the table. He exhales a heavy breath, pressing his palms against his face. Cautiously, I walk closer and pull myself up to sit on the table beside him. He slowly moves his hands, turning his head towards me.

Capturing my cheek in his palm, he tilts my face towards him. His lips find mine, and the bliss makes my stomach twirl. The gesture is short, but it still leaves me breathless as he pulls away. His hand lingers on my cheek, and I instinctively lean into him.

“What was that for?”

“I’ve had a really shitty day,” he says with a sad smile.

The rage I was suffering only moments ago quickly ices over, replaced by something much more desirous. Precious minutes like this feel extremely rare these days.

“I’ve been looking for you. Where were you today?”

He fights a grimace, slowly retracting his hand. I grab it instantly, pulling it back to my cheek.

“You don’t have to tell me ... But are you being careful?”

His thumb strokes my cheek tenderly, his eyes focused on the movement. “Aren’t I supposed to say that kind of stuff to you?”

Slowly, I lean my head into his chest, feeling content with the steady rhythm of his heart. It accelerates as I press myself into him. I sigh decadently as Harry strokes down the side of my hair, whispering sweet nothings into my ear.

It’s bittersweet, having him so close yet so far away. While cherished moments like these are beautiful, they scar my chest raw. The feelings I have for him, the love I harbour underneath the surface. Emotions I’ve been refusing to admit in lieu of the truth I can never confess.

The temporary bliss is addicting, but stolen moments are gaining on us, threatening to seal our fate. It’s only a matter of time before our secrets catch up to us.

Blinking away tears, I ask, “You’ll still be at Pixies tomorrow, right?”

“I won’t let you down,” he mumbles into my hair, placing a kiss on my head. “I’ll be there.”

And I trust him with my whole heart.

I trust all of him.

But a nagging voice reminds me Romeo and Juliet only ever ended in tragedy.

FIFTY-ONE

Sigi

The communal changing room at Pixies is embedded in the darkest parts of my brain, likely to assault my nightmares, now I've paced the area for the hundredth time. Bile creeps up my throat at a rapid rate, threatening to spill from my mouth, when my seventh call to Harry goes straight through to voicemail.

The Boss's voice booms, "Where is she!"

It echoes through the small space that reeks of perfume, bad decisions, and fear, scaring the performers into silence. Struck with panic, I catch the glances of other petrified women who watch me with a mixture of remorse and fear. Poppy looks about ready to throw me to the lions, yet one young girl rushes forwards. She ushers me out of the room, pushing me through the secret passageway.

Dashing down the steps, I stumble into the crowd of tables. I rush to the bar to retrieve a shot and chuck it down my throat, trying to ease the nerves.

Harry hasn't shown up.

Despite promising he wouldn't let me down he's failed to show, aware of the repercussions we'll both face if the performance doesn't go ahead.

The blonde wig is uncomfortable on my head, my dress feels itchy, and my skin crawls with the effect of a thousand spiders as Richard's intimidating footsteps approach. A strong hand grips onto the back of my arm, forcing me around.

"Why aren't you up on that stage?" he growls.

"I was just getting a drink to ease my nerves."

I'm stalling, and I know it.

The door to the club opens, and I quickly avert my gaze, silently pleading it'll be Harry who walks through. My disappointment is clear as a regular walks in, and the Boss catches the movement within a matter of seconds.

"Where. Is. He?"

I press my lips into a thin line, remaining silent.

"Fuck!" He drops my arm.

His sudden outburst draws attention from surrounding tables, and he raises his hand apologetically. Pacing in front of me, he runs a hand through his greying hair.

"What about Andy? Where is he?"

"He's out on the heist."

Tables start to whisper in speculation, the lack of presence on the stage raising suspicion with the customers. A few start to rise from their tables, gathering their belongings as the lack of entertainment onstage brings a sombre mood to the club.

"Don't leave just yet!" Richard calls. "We're just having a few technical difficulties. Please sit!"

They cautiously return to their seats.

My boss turns, whipping his head towards me with such speed I'm unprepared for his harsh grip. He grabs onto my upper arm with a force that makes me hiss.

"You'd better fix this right now." His gaze darkens and the pressure of his grip intensifies. "I will not have a *Thomas* making me look bad."

"Y-you're hurting me," I say, stumbling into his grip, attempting to ease the tension.

"What's going on here?" someone asks.

The Boss's chest rumbles with a groan. Despite the audacity of whoever's interrupting his business, he turns, plastering on a smile.

Arms crossed, Hudson watches us with suspicion.

What's he doing away from the booth?

He doesn't ever get involved in the girls' drama.

"Hudson," the Boss sighs. "Everything's fine. Please take a seat. The show will be resuming shortly."

The line of concentration deepens along Hudson's brow as he narrows his gaze on my bicep, captured in the Boss's grip. Initiating his power, the grip tightens, and I gasp with the pain.

"Let go of her."

An order.

Not expecting the demand, my eyes widen in surprise. Hesitantly turning my head towards Richard, I note the tightness of his jaw and the way his neck pulses with restraint. He releases me from his grip. I clutch onto the sore area on instinct, rubbing at the patch to try to ease the redness.

"Now ... is someone going to tell me what's going on?"

The Boss straightens his suit jacket. "A performer has failed to show up. We're without a dance partner."

Hudson drops his head, his eyes running over me. "Gigi needs a dance partner?"

Richard nods.

Silence stretches between all three of us.

"I'll do it."

Taken aback, the Boss sputters, "You don't know the—"

"I know the number."

My eyes hover between the pair, watching their heated exchange, until the Boss grinds the word out between his teeth.

"Fine."

It's on the tip of my tongue to refuse, but I know if I deny this offer, it'll result in a fate worse than death. Instead I smile hesitantly. "I'll see you up there."

Either way, this is going to be a disaster.

Hudson can't possibly know the number. He doesn't watch any of the performances. I've seen it with my own eyes.



Soft music filters through the speakers, and as if he's done this a hundred times before, Hudson's hand drops to my hip, pulling me forwards. Slowly, his hand slips down my spine, allowing me to arch my back.

I pull myself back up to his chest. Rather than dropping his hand to my cheek in a gentle caress as Harry would have done, Hudson's touch hovers over my arm, focusing on the fingerprint bruises. He blinks uncertainly, fighting his true expression.

My gaze narrows, but Hudson quickly spins my body, pressing my back to his front before I can think twice about his reaction. His hand travels up from my lower stomach and over the valley of my breasts before he softly cups my jaw and turns me to face him.

How does he know every move?

The momentum picks up, the song knocking me from my dazed state as I turn to Hudson slowly. When my fingers hesitate on the buttons of his shirt, he presses his hand over mine, helping with the movement. I slowly move around to the back of his body, bringing my palm over his shoulder and down his muscular chest.

I slip the shirt from his broad shoulders, discarding it on the floor. In time with the lyrics I approach his front. As I stand before him, his gaze drops to the thin straps on my shoulder.

Hudson's fingers dance over the straps before he slips them slowly down my arms. The room feels utterly silent as the dress pools at my feet, exposing my lace underwear, when he drops his head to caress my neck with gentle lips. I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting the betrayal as my lungs are assaulted with breathlessness.

My hands run up Hudson's neck as I would've done with Harry, my fingers threading through the soft strands. Holding onto my bare upper thigh, Hudson presses it against his hip, encouraging me to arch backwards.

My back bends. The music picks up tempo. When I return my posture, the action brings our faces just inches apart.

His lips are just a hairsbreadth from mine, a hand still remaining on my thigh.

The lights dim and applause rings in our ears.

Even through the darkness his heavy gaze confirms my suspicions instantly.

I was wrong ...

Hudson doesn't watch the girls' performances.

He watches mine.



“You were amazing!”

“It’s pretty easy when you have a great dance partner.”

I roll my eyes, responding with, “Now I know you’re lying.”

As the last performance of the night, we were potentially left with unsatisfactory customers, but we prevailed. The crowd ate up our performance, and it’s safe to say Hudson smashed it. Thanks to the low lighting, they were completely oblivious to his identity.

With it being so late in the evening, he offers to walk me to my car. Normally, I’d decline such a gesture, but after his favour tonight I can’t refuse. I’m desperate to change clothes. A short-sleeved cream dressing gown conceals my underwear, the thin material igniting a chill to my skin.

After attempting the handle of my dressing room, I search through my pockets to retrieve my key. I swear I left it unlocked before I took the stage. A gentle touch on the back of my arm diverts my attention. I turn to Hudson to find his face tight and grim.

“Is everything okay?”

He says nothing.

Cautiously I drop my eyes, watching as he delicately runs his fingers over the bruise on my upper arm. Instinct tells me to flinch at the touch, but the caress is gentle ... safe.

He traces each dark imprint. “Does he do this often?”

“Why do you care?”

“A man should never lay a hand on a lady,” he whispers. “Just say the word, and I won’t ever let him touch you again.”

My breathing falters as he slowly raises his hand, cupping my cheek. Hudson’s eyes drop to my lips, his thumb caressing my cheekbone.

“Just say the word ...”

“Hudson, I—”

I’m cut short as the door to my dressing room swings open. Hudson darts his arm out, catching me around the waist by the crook of his elbow. My hand drops to his bicep to save myself from stumbling to the floor.

I glance over my shoulder to meet a dark stare.

Harry.

His eyes are troubled, falling immediately to where my hand rests on Hudson.

Finally, he meets my eye, and my body threatens to crumble beneath the weight of his stare. Harry doesn’t pay Hudson a single glance, intensifying the fear in my stomach. Regaining my balance, I retreat backwards, separating myself from the businessmen.

Silence stretches between all three of us.

I stare at Harry, trying to read him. Trying to contemplate why he left me this evening despite *promising* he wouldn’t.

“I’ll be waiting outside,” Hudson says, breaking the quiet. “I’ll give you both a chance to speak.”

Schooling my features, I say, “Thank you, Hudson. But Harry will lead me to the car.”

Hudson remains absolutely motionless for a moment until he finally nods. His lips part, and for a brief moment it appears as if he’ll say something else. But he closes them, and I exhale silently, relieved.

“Have a good evening,” he says, leaving us alone.

Turning back to Harry, I push past his body, feeling the stiffness of his side. Rather than face him, I start packing my bag. I can’t stand to even look at him. He left me stranded tonight. He could have been God knows where, and I was none the wiser. Who knows what execution the Boss would’ve chosen for me if Hudson hadn’t stepped in. Harry knew the consequences.

He left you, that nagging voice in my head says. *He broke your trust.*

There’s no orderly fashion to my packing. I grab vital belongings and anything within reach, shoving everything in.

“You danced with him?”

“Yeah,” I say, keeping my head down. “What other choice did I have? I was waiting around for you.”

“You didn’t look like you were.”

I whip around to face him. “I was worried!”

“You had a pretty good distraction. I hardly doubt it.”

“Don’t play the jealous boyfriend. It doesn’t suit you.”

Harry takes aggressive steps forwards, his long strides eating up the distance in a matter of seconds. He crowds me to the

point I'm forced to crane my neck and meet his fiery gaze.

"You clearly know nothing about me then, princess. If you knew me at all, you'd know that if a man even looked at you wrong, I'd be serving a life sentence."

"What was I meant to say?" I ask in disbelief.

"You say no! You decline a dance like that when you're with someone else."

"It's not as if I can say I'm with you!" I yell, my temper flaring. "We don't have the pleasure of flaunting our relationship to everyone. That's not my fault!"

"And whose choice was that?" He tears his stubborn, arrogant face away. "I told you never to join."

"Are you being serious right now? Are you not going to tell me where you've been? The Boss was about to lose his shit when you didn't turn up—"

"What!" he roars, blowing his cool.

"I called you a dozen times, Harry."

He takes more steps, forcing me to retreat until my back hits the vanity table. "Richard put me on Andy's job last-minute. He said he was going to tell you tonight and call off the final show."

What. The. Fuck?

The Boss knew.

I shake my head no, the betrayal too much.

He embarrassed me in front of so many people. Hurt me. Humiliated me, even though he knew exactly where Harry was. Why would he even do that?

Tears sting my eyes, and I grip the sore part of my arm on instinct, rubbing at the bruise as if it'll help to ease the mental and physical pain. Harry charges forwards, grabbing the tip of my elbow. His grip is strong, but he avoids the delicate flesh as he drags my upper arm closer to his eyes.

"He did this to you?"

I rip my arm free and bow my head. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does!"

The voices in the hallway suddenly dull to a quiet hush. I trudge over to the door, smile my apology to the people lingering in the hall, and close it shut.

Turning back to Harry, I plead, "Can you stop acting like a child? You're causing a scene."

"A scene?" he counters. "He hurt you! And you're letting him get away with it."

"Keep your voice down!"

"Why? Another secret you want to keep? Why are you protecting him?"

Taken aback, I gasp.

"What has gotten into you? Are you crazy?" I ask, expecting him to throw his usual words back.

"No, princess ... I'm in love." He meets my eye, but his are cold and lacking in empathy. "There's your fucking difference."

The confession impales me right in the stomach like shards of broken glass, rendering me speechless. They sink deeper as the impactful word hits, threatening to knock me off my feet.

Our imagining of Romeo and Juliet lingers in the silence.

But I shake my head no.

No.

No.

No.

Harry can't love me.

We were never the love story. It will only ever end in tragedy.

"You don't want to love me," I say. "You *can't* love me."

"Can't you see what's happening? He's getting between us. He's getting into your head—" His voice breaks off mid-sentence. "I'll fucking kill him."

Harry's tone is deadly, and I have no doubt he'll attempt to follow through on the threat. I jump in front of his body as he charges towards the door. I press my hands to his chest, feeling his heart pounding hard beneath my palms.

"You need to sit down." I force him onto my chair.

Reluctantly, he obeys.

I crouch down in front of him, reaching up to his cheek. "What's gotten into you? Tell me."

He forces his chin to the side, running a hand down the front of his face like he's exhausted. "If I ask something of you, will you promise to listen even if I can't give you context?" He retracts his hands, his eyes meeting my heavy frown. "I would never ask you to prioritise your feelings for me over your happiness. But if there is one ounce of you that cares for me – one ounce of you that feels love for me like I do for you ... you'll quit."

"What?" I sputter, rising to my feet. The impact of his words hits me more profoundly than whatever love I may have for him.

“You can’t expect that of me. Not after everything we’ve been through. We’re a team!”

Grimacing at his own words, he says, “If you care for me, then you’ll leave.”

How can he possibly ask that of me? We’ve been through hell and back to get here. I’m not turning back now. I forbid it.

“He’s always had a soft spot for you. I reckon we’d be able to get you out. I spoke with Andy and—”

A smile starts spreading over my features, silencing his words. Pride, like I’ve never known it before, overwhelms me. The Boss *does* have a soft spot for me. I knew it.

“I can’t.” I struggle to hold back my grin. “I really like the person I’ve become. This is what I’ve ached for my entire life. And while I don’t want to admit it, I’m good at what I do—”

Harry jerks to his feet as if propelled by an explosive. “At what? Begging for attention?” he scoffs and motions to my outfit.

“Christ, if your brother could see you, he’d be fucking embarrassed.”

I flinch, and for the first time since he entered the room his eyes soften. I can pinpoint the exact moment he regrets his toxic words, but the damage is already done. The hole in my heart is too significant.

Cursing instantly, he reaches towards my body. “Baby, I—”

“Get out.”

He looks at me as if I’ve hit him. Yet the harrowing pain doesn’t hurt nearly as much as my heart as it screams betrayal.

As fury threatens to choke me, Harry tries to reach for me again.

“GET OUT!”

“You love me,” he says. “I know you do.”

“We are *nothing*,” I say, my voice cracking with the lie.

The urge to fight swarms his eyes, his green-eyed stare threatening to pull me under. But as if he can feel the bands tethering, feel how impactful our words are, he slowly withdraws his steps and leaves the room.

When the door closes a scream rips free from my throat, and I swipe all the contents off my dresser. Makeup, hair tools, jewellery, a glass trinket, and a vase – they all smash against the floor with a loud crash. The broken pieces shatter, breaking and scattering at my feet.

The sight on the floor looks so pretty, yet it’s so devastating at the same time.

Gripping the sides of the dresser in my fists, I bow my head. Hot tears tremble on my eyelids, spilling to my cheeks. They burn, as does my chest, and I exhale a slow breath, vowing I’ll never feel this kind of weakness again.

I will never allow someone to alter my life for me.

This is *my* life.

And I’ll decide how I want to fucking spend it.

Without Harry.

Without *anyone* deciding for me.

When I finally lift my head and make eye contact with the girl in the mirror – the girl that was once me – I don’t recognise her. I see someone desperate to please everyone but herself. A girl who became a shell of herself once her brother died, constantly living in other people’s shadow.

In the mirror’s reflection, my eyes flicker to something shiny, and I crane my neck over my shoulder to spot it fully. I reach down, picking up the dainty little tiara, and stare at the flimsy item in my hands.

It doesn’t matter what it’s made from or how much it weighs – the message is impactful and exactly what I desire.

Straightening my shoulders, I lift the tiara and place it on the crown of my head.

When I catch my reflection, an enticing shiver washes over me. I see a woman.

A force to be reckoned with.

A weapon of mass destruction.

If given the opportunity, Jack said, I could become the greatest weapon the Circle has ever seen. So that’s exactly what I’ll do.

I’ll show him.

I’ll show everybody.

“This is only the beginning.”

FIFTY-TWO

Harry

She lost her sanity in the madness.

PART 3

"Thus with a kiss I die."
– *William Shakespeare*

FIFTY-THREE

Bigi

Five months later

Five men.
All part of some major drug empire.
One assassination attempt.
No specific details, just get the job done.
One of the new recruits – Ben ... Byron ... Brandon, I don't know. I just call him B. Well, B with the feather-blond hair and blue eyes, looking like a Ken doll, is shaking like a leaf.
“What are you waiting for, B?” I ask, breathing down his neck. Looking through the window at the large, burly man preparing food in the kitchen, I urge, “Just do it.”
“Richard said we don't use bullets unless we have to.” He shakes his head. “The more blood splatter, the harder the clean-up ... I need to sneak up on him somehow. Put shit in his sandwich or something.”
I roll my eyes at his stupidity. That'll take forever, and we're limited for time.
“He's your boss when you're in training. We're on the field right now, which means I'm your boss. You answer to me. I'm telling you to shoot him.”
B gulps, turning back to our victim and shaking his head. “No. There'll be another way.”
“Fine,” I huff, standing to my full height. “I'll do it.”
Swiping my Glock from the holster, I switch off the safety and pull the trigger, popping the guy in the centre of the forehead. The glass smashes with the passing bullet, and his body falls against the wooden cabinet, eyes bulging before he slowly topples to the side, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.
Due to the silencer the bullet doesn't elicit so much as the bat of an eyelid from those next door.
Pity.
Content with the aim, I put the pistol away, dusting my hands together as if I've just baked something delicious for tea. Avoiding the smashed fragments of glass, I grimace as I step over the pool of crimson on the floor, managing to get a splash of red on my ankle.
“I loved these,” I sigh, my eyes falling to my *Gucci* trainers.
Reaching the limp body, I lean down, feeling the inside of the man's pocket for anything useful. My eyes light up when I find his wallet and a stack of cash. I pop it into my bra, thanking the dead man for his service by patting him atop his bald head.
Harry's been disposing of the trail of bodies B and I have left in our path, but since I'm ahead of schedule with my present kill, he's running late.
“Hurry up, St. James.” I tut. “I don't have all day.”
Feet pound in the hallway, and I turn as someone skids to a stop. Silence stretches across the space as I watch one of the newer recruits stumble backwards.
“What happened?”
“He's the last one,” I say, peering down at my *TAG Heuer*. “And we're ahead of schedule.”
My eyes are forced towards the entrance as Harry storms into the room looking as handsome as ever. His gaze lands on the crime scene, the dead man lying lifeless against the wood, his body twisted at an unnatural angle.
“What the fuck!” Harry shouts, his expression frantic.
It really hurts my feelings.
Several footsteps filter in behind him as people stop at the entrance, taking in the space. Andy catches himself against the doorframe, the wood cracking beneath his palms. Meanwhile Poppy watches on with her mouth agape, utterly speechless.
“You don't like it?” I ask.

Harry's nostrils flare, and if we weren't struck for time I'd appreciate his flushed expression and deadly appearance. He storms towards me until we're toe-to-toe, and I crane my neck up to look at him, unfazed by his petty anger.

"You know full well we don't use bullets unless absolutely necessary."

I shrug. "It seemed pretty necessary."

"You're fucking reckless," he spits. "You need to pull your shit together."

"What you gonna do? You gonna kiss me, Harry?" I taunt.

But I know he never will.

He may be a teeny bit pissed, but he'll come around.

If I'm certain of one thing ... it's that this man may kill me.

But that's only if I don't kill him first.

FIFTY-FOUR

Harry

Richard storms into the briefing room and bellows, “What the hell happened in there!”

Someone got trigger-happy, that’s what fucking happened. I scan the room, double-checking to make sure I didn’t say that out loud. I tend to lose my common sense when Gigi is in the room.

All the other faces are as still as stone, but I catch Richard’s protégé in the corner, with the brown eyes and dark hair. She’s snickering away, having officially become his puppet.

“No one’s going to fess up, huh?” he asks. “It took five of my men to clear up that crime scene even though you were all under strict instructions not to use bullets unless absolutely necessary!”

Gigi’s mumble is quiet. “It was pretty necessary.”

A roar tears up Poppy’s throat, and she throws herself to her feet, pointing her hands in the direction of our problem. “She’s going to get us all killed if she keeps pulling stunts like this.”

The little princess gasps, appearing wounded as she slaps a hand over her chest. “You don’t like my tactics?” she asks, playing coy.

Poppy laughs, the sound hollow. “I don’t like you.”

Gigi jumps to her feet, coming within an inch of Poppy’s body as she threatens, “Say it to my face, Green.”

Commotion breaks, and I drop my head, shaking it.

They’re both fucking idiots.

I chance a look up at the cat fight to find Brody, one of the recent recruits, has captured Gigi’s hands behind her back, and he’s tugging her away from the redhead. I don’t doubt for a second that if Gigi wanted to, she could outfight him, but she gives in to the restraint. It sparks a flicker of hope in my chest that the girl I once knew lies under the surface.

Richard sighs, pinching his nose as both women are ushered into their seats. “Just get out of my sight. All of you. I’ll see you all this evening. Don’t think I’m forgiving any of you for this stunt.”

Don’t think I’m forgiving any of you, he says.

Of course she’s got away with shit again, the situation somehow being blamed on all of us. That’s how life works nowadays.



There’s a party tonight on Richard’s yacht. It’s common courtesy to attend and bask in the glory after a heist, but I wish I’d stayed home and wallowed in self-pity now I’m standing beside the bar, chatting with Andy about fucking rubbish.

The boat is incredibly luxurious, displaying Richard’s disgusting wealth and making Andy’s look like a sinking battleship. The floating hotel is docked at St. Katharine’s in Central London, alongside those owned by some of the richest businessmen in the country.

Elites occupy the front of the boat. I don’t know what any of them are wearing apart from Gigi. If you were to ask, I’d tell you I have no clue, but in reality I know she’s wearing strappy diamond heels and a gold slip dress that enhances those eyes that are etched into my brain. Her naturally straight hair has been blow-dried into soft curls, and I ache to run my fingers through it.

The beer tastes stale on my tongue when I hear her laughter echoing from the other end of the deck. She’s talking to Hudson fucking Anderson. He’s wearing his signature *Tom Ford* suit, and I instantly despise him for being so close to her.

The little brunette turns her head as if she can feel my pining gaze, and our eyes linger. She turns back after a few seconds,

breaking eye contact, and resumes her conversation without stalling.

Fuck my life.

I drag my palm down my face, slapping my cheek to try to awaken my senses.

She is *not* someone I want to associate myself with anymore.

“Did you hear Poppy is engaged?” Andy asks, diverting my attention back to him.

Did he just say what I thought he said?

“You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.” He nods. “They were talking about it on the drive over.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline. “What the fuck?”

As if she heard our conversation, the little redheaded wench steps forwards. “Don’t remind me,” she groans. “Not something I wanted by choice, I might add.”

“Who to?” I ask.

It’s not that I can’t imagine her getting married to someone ...

Well ... forget I said anything.

She shrugs. “Some descendent of the Mafia. Richard set it up.”

“I didn’t know Richard was getting friendly with the Italians. That’s news to me.”

“Maybe this is his way of calling a truce. Besides, if I get a good payday out of it, who cares who the guy is?”

“Aren’t you meant to keep stuff like that a secret?” Andy asks, taking a sip of his drink.

I don’t know much about Poppy’s financial situation besides the fact she lives with her father in some village on the outskirts of London. She’s never been overly flashy with her paychecks – no fancy cars, no designer handbags.

“Knowing who you’re marrying is pretty fucking important,” I say.

She shrugs again as if it’s no big deal, passing her drink to her right hand and holding out her left as if she wants it to be kissed.

Spotting the gigantic rock on her ring finger, I sing a low whistle. That fucker would be impossible for anyone to miss.

“Maybe I should marry an Italian,” Andy says, pulling her hand closer to his face.

“Are you sure he’s not being blackmailed?” I tease, making Poppy’s eyes narrow to slits.

We all laugh, and I feel really fucking content. The world is normal momentarily. Everything is perfect ...

Until a five-foot-four brunette, who draws my attention like nothing else, steps up to our side, silencing all conversation.

“Something funny?” Gigi asks.

I try my best not to look at her. I really fucking do. But just as my body always opposes me whenever she’s around, I drink up the sight of her.

Through her ugly personality, she’s perfectly beautiful.

She cocks her brow, waiting for an answer.

Andy scans the group, waiting for someone to speak. It’s sure as hell not going to be me. I simply stare, scrutinising her with unmistakable attention.

Despite knowing she can feel my eyes boring into her, Gigi doesn’t entertain me. Not even for a second. Things are different now. She’s crossed a barrier, and the power is getting to her head like nothing else, burning every good decision in its path.

Several people really fucking hate her, and for good reason.

“No one going to say anything?”

Her voice is like a violin, but the spew that comes out of her mouth nowadays makes my body recoil. Sneaking around hallways and keeping our relationship quiet seems like some distant dream.

Andy breaks the silence. “Poppy’s getting married.”

Poppy whips around, glaring daggers into his temple.

“Oh,” Gigi says, cocking her head. “Who’s the unlucky fella?”

“Always a chore, never the pleasure, Thomas,” Poppy counters.

“That’s not even the right saying.”

“I always look forward to seeing you ... it means I get to say goodbye sooner.”

“Is that a threat, Green?” Gigi steps forwards, squaring her shoulders, her spare hand hovering around her upper thigh, right where her Glock is holstered at the slit in her dress.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Please,” Poppy scoffs. “I’m not into child’s play.”

“Do I have to remind you who knocked out who last time we were in the ring?”

“I remember you trying to claim victory before the fight was even finished. Never one for the rules, were you, Thomas?”

“You fucking—” Gigi starts.

I step in front of her, blocking her path. She walks straight into my chest, stumbling on impact. Poppy snickers from behind me. I look down at Gigi, who clenches her jaw, refusing to meet my stare.

“Out of my way, St. James,” she orders, her hand still positioned on her thigh.

Huh. So, we’re on a last-name basis now?

“You really want to shoot her? On a yacht full of people who would make you pay with your life?” I keep my voice down.

“Doesn’t seem worth it, does it?”

“Trust me, it does.”

Poppy smirks from behind the rim of her glass as if someone pretty capable of doing so didn’t just threaten her life. Andy, on the other hand, acts as if the situation is utterly hilarious, biting his fist to conceal his laughter.

I turn my attention back to the woman staring directly at my chest. “Why don’t we take a walk and calm down?”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

My nostrils flare. “That’s an order, Thomas.”

She finally meets my eye, jaw clenching.

If there’s anything Gigi struggles to deny, it’s authority within the Circle.

I walk away before she’s come to a decision.

Thankfully, she matches my stride. I lead us down the yacht stairs, taxis already lining the street. Opening the door of a black cab, I pause, allowing Gigi the impression I’m being a gentleman. But as she approaches, I slip in front of her and onto the seat, slamming the door behind me.

She scoffs, accusing me of being a child as she climbs in on the other side.

Silence stretches between us as the driver leads us towards the hotel Richard booked. He’s rented out every single room to allow his guests the ultimate privacy. When we arrive, Gigi pulls out some cash from her bra and hands it over to the driver. I frown, not even wanting to ask about it. She smirks, daring me to question her. I don’t.

Doormen open the large front doors of the hotel, and we traipse up to my room in silence, the potential consequences of my decision threatening to pull me back while I can still run with my emotions intact.

But that’s not us.

That’s not what we do.

This has become routine for us now. Sex. Oral. I don’t know what it is, but whatever – it’s fucking carnal. Perhaps it’s my desperation for her to feel an inkling of human emotion even though she’ll never admit to it.

I close the hotel-room door after we step inside. A large window sits adjacent to the entrance, accessorised by a sheer curtain. The double bed has been made with white linen sheets, and the room is dark, save for the light of the moon streaming in through the window.

As Gigi moves deeper into the space, dangerously close to the bed, I step in front of her, forcing her to tilt her chin upwards.

“You’re a bitch,” I say.

She smirks, unfazed, toying with the hem of my T-shirt. “I know.”

Shrugging off my jacket, I throw it over the nearby chair and slowly undo the buttons of my shirt. Her gaze drops at the movement, her eyes alight with desire. But when I let the fabric fall to the floor her attention slips to my torso. I don’t have to look to know what she’s staring at. We don’t usually have time on our side when we fuck away our angst, but tonight’s a night for sightseeing.

Memories assault me. Memories I’ve tried desperately to forget. Memories that tug at my ankles, pulling me down to the pits of hell at the reminder of my failure to her.

Failure to the girl I once loved with my whole heart.

Her eyes zero in on the litter of scars adorning my skin. Hot poker burns. Dozens of markings I self-inflicted.

The punishment only sufficed for a while, until I realised I’d forever be racked with guilt. The torture didn’t come close to curing my remorse at knowing I was the reason she lost herself.

Gigi finally blinks as if raw emotion has touched her. Twice. Three times.

I wonder what she’s thinking. If she regrets it.

Forcing a swallow, she says, “A waste of pretty skin. Such a shame.”

I fucking despise her. Yet the emotion is nowhere near as strong as my self-loathing for still wanting her. After all this time.

I toe off my shoes as she says, “I’m not taking off the pistol.”

“I never knew you were so into toys.”

Lowering herself slowly to her knees, she pulls open my belt and tugs down the zipper of my trousers, releasing my cock from the imprisonment of my briefs. She licks her lips, and I wrap her hair around my fist, tugging as she slips the tip into her mouth.

“Fuck,” I groan, wishing I wasn’t so tormented by her touch.

Gigi bobs her head back and forth, teasing the remainder of me that doesn’t quite fit with her hand. And just because I hate her, I push her head down even further for good measure. She splutters at the shock, slapping my thigh with a hash whack in protest, tears welling at her waterline as she takes me deeper down her throat. When she deliberately grazes her teeth over me, I hiss and pull tighter on her hair, forcing her eyes up to meet mine.

“Careful, princess. If you start crying I might think you have a heart.”

Mouth full and a tear rolling down her cheek, Gigi rolls her eyes. And just to prove a point, she manages to take the full length of me, her sharp nails running down my thigh. Wet slurps of spit echo around the room as she sucks my cock, and a groan slips from my throat as I watch her devour every drop.

“That’s it. Take my cock like a good fucking girl.”

With that my cock slips from her lips with an audible pop, and she pins my torso down onto the bed, pressing the heel of her stiletto directly over my chest. She’s trying to look feisty, but her lips are plump and drool puddles on her chin. The sight makes me smirk – and gets me really fucking horny. I lean up, kissing the ankle of her bare foot, paying particular attention to her calf.

“You call me shit like that again and I’ll murder you, St. James.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it, baby.”

I lean up, clutching her hips and flipping her body beneath me so her back is pressed tight to my chest. She may think she’s on top in the field, but in this fucking bedroom she’ll always be underneath me. I bunch up her dress around her waist, drinking in the sight of her without underwear. Spitting on my fingertips, I bring my hand down between our bodies and fucking relish the moan that slips past her lips as I push a finger into her aching cunt.

Our lips skim, brushing against one another’s but never kissing.

That’s a boundary we’re not crossing anytime soon.

“Pretty wet for a good girl.”

She growls, ready to pounce at the comment, but I shove in another finger, pushing the pair in knuckles-deep and curling them inside. Her hips bow off the bed, and I take the opportunity to push my stiff cock against the curve of her ass. Her body starts to tremble, and through the few steady pumps of my fingers I feel her walls tighten.

Our relationship may be at death’s door, but our bodies sure remember how good we felt together.

“It seems your body remembers exactly how good I used to treat her.”

“Just fuck me already,” she whines, shaking her ass against my cock.

I retract my fingers, using the same hand to push the side of her head against the pillow. She gasps, whispers of hair sticking to her lips from the quick movement.

Bringing my mouth closer to her ear, I nibble at the flesh. “I’m not rushing this. You do shit like that again and I’ll make you fucking beg for release.”

“I don’t beg.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Her eyes widen at the prospect, showcasing her excitement. I clutch her chin and crane her neck so I can drink up her reaction as I tease her entrance with the head of my cock.

“You on birth control?” I ask.

She nods.

I push myself inside of her in one full thrust, reaching the hilt.

My eyes threaten to close, and I curse, my head rolling.

So. Fucking. Tight.

Drunk on the feeling of her, I speed up my thrusts before falling into the same hole of succumbing to her again. I thrust into her harder, relishing the sounds of her little whimpers against the pillow.

“You sing for me like a fucking violin.”

“Harry,” she moans, fisting the bedsheets.

“You want this?”

She nods, eyes screwing shut.

“Tell me what you want,” I encourage.

She whines, struck for breath, struggling to form words.

I pull her body flush against mine, her back to my chest as I knead her breast in my hand, pounding into her.

“You want my tongue on that pretty cunt?”

Following the comment, she pushes her hips further against me, meeting me halfway. Our sexes meet in unison, and my hips smack against her ass with an audible whack.

“Use your words, baby,” I groan, sinking my teeth into her shoulder. “Tell me what you want.”

She brings her hand back, fisting my hair between her fingers and purring like a fucking kitten. Her body shakes, breasts bouncing each time I pump into her.

“I ... I just want you.”

Her lips part on a silent whimper, her walls clutching my cock like a vice as she nears release.

Mumbling into her hair, my heart constricts as I say, “I’d give you the world if you asked for it.”

FIFTY-FIVE

Harry

I should kill her.

No doubt she'd kill me first given the opportunity.

Gigi's Glock lays idle on the bedside cabinet, calling to me while she sleeps. She put it there, within arm's reach, as if she's safe, but I've always claimed she has no one to protect her from me.

My fingers twitch at my sides as I imagine picking up the weapon and pressing the barrel to her temple. Pulling the trigger would loosen the restraint tying me down.

To her.

My fucking weakness.

Despite the shadow that swarms her and the pinch in her brow, she's so innocent while she sleeps, igniting my fragile hope for a woman who will inevitably put me in exile.

Before I can get ahead of myself, I exhale a tortured, "Fuck."

Busying my hands, I charge out the hotel room and light up a cigarette. Dangling it between my lips, I call reception for my car and wait outside the hotel exit, dragging out the nicotine as I stand on the steps, welcoming the burn in my lungs as the sex-filled haze starts to dissipate.

The valet driver turns the corner in my G-Wagon, and I drop the remainder of my cig to the floor, stubbing it out with the sole of my shoe.

I thank the bloke, handing him some cash as I climb into the driver's seat.

Suit jacket abandoned, my shirt is unbuttoned to the centre of my chest, unveiling blank ink and scorched scars. With the reminder of what I'm potentially about to face, darkness threatens to crowd my vision, forcing me to blink quickly. My hands shake with the mental pressure of keeping it at bay.

Waiting for my partner in crime, I anxiously check my watch and tap my fingers against the steering wheel, my teeth grinding with a nervous tic.

Where the fuck are they?

As if on cue the passenger door opens. I keep my eyes forwards as they occupy the front seat. Releasing a heavy breath, they press the back of their head into the headrest.

"Took you long enough."

Poppy scoffs and turns to me, her blue eyes boring into the side of my head. "I'm here, aren't I?" she asks. Tearing her eyes over my outfit, she laughs bitterly. "Looks like you were pretty occupied anyway."

Starting the engine, I turn to her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your belt, St. James. Your fucking belt is undone."

Panicked, I chance a look down at my trousers, and she cackles, pulling down the vanity mirror to check her lipstick.

Poppy purses her lips then says, "I was teasing you. But you just gave yourself away with that little slip-up."

A growl vibrates in my chest as I pull off from the side of the road. "Why did you never tell me you were engaged?"

She turns to me, lost in thought. "Huh?"

"Why'd you never mention it? Seems like a pretty big deal."

"It isn't." She shrugs. "I don't plan to go through with it. I'm just here for the payday."

What are the fucking chances Poppy and I are working close together like allies?

The answer is: minuscule.

I had every intention of keeping the information from my search into the trafficking rings under wraps ... until one day, when I had to search for a new lead, someone snuck up behind me, catching me off-guard. And I almost slit Poppy's throat. Turns out she'd been following the leads as well, having also thought something sadistic was occurring in Richard's inner circle.

Through the months of Gigi losing herself, I ran myself into the ground, the burden of having to save her mentally, while I physically pulled these girls from the hands of disgusting, vile businessmen, almost drowning me. If my movements are caught by Richard or his minions I'm calling for a death sentence. Poppy knew the risks too, but she claimed she didn't have much to live for anymore. She'd rather die on the front line than refuse to help.

Her father's dying. Fucking cancer. He's bedridden, having gone through several rounds of chemo. The doctors have confirmed it'll eventually kill him. Knowing his days are numbered, he now spends his time looking out his window at the English countryside. Poppy feels indebted to him.

At least we have that feeling in common.

It almost made me feel remorse for her.

Almost.

I'm still extremely cautious about trusting her.

I drive down the motorway in silence, the radio playing late-night club music. We found leads to a ring outside the city, and my car's currently eating up the distance towards the place that's about to be a slaughterhouse.

"Who's the unlucky lady anyway?" Poppy asks, pulling me back to the present. "Please don't tell me it's who I think it is."

I stiffen in my seat, my hands flexing around the wheel. "Who do you—?"

"I'm not a fucking idiot. I know you and Thomas have been fucking since I became your trainer for Pixies."

"Christ." I grunt, running my hand down my face in exasperation. My palm lingers on the bottom of my face, and I grip my chin hard, trying to force my thoughts clear.

"But to think you're still hitting that ..."

I whip my head towards her, and she whistles low, shaking her head.

"That is not someone I want to get involved—"

"Let's get one thing straight," I tell her. "You and I are not friends. This is not fucking team-building. We're just getting the job done, and then we're parting ways. Got it?"

She lounges back in the seat, crossing her arms over her chest in defiance.

My composure starts to waver the closer we approach, and by the time I've turned off my headlights and the tyres are crunching on gravel, my nerves are in tatters. I always claimed spilling blood calms my rage, but when I'm oblivious to what I'm about to face, the idea makes me feel fucking lethal.

No one hurts a woman on my watch ... besides Poppy, that is.

We're still working on being civil.

I pull the G-Wagon to a halt, pulling up the handbrake as we sit adjacent to the dark cabin lit by a flickering porch light. As I unsheathe my daggers, Poppy ties her burnt orange hair above her head.

She leans into the back seat, grabs her baseball bat, and throws it between her palms. "Let's knock 'em dead, St. James."



My palms shake relentlessly as I attempt to flick the lighter against my cigarette. The flame disappears, and I attempt again with further determination, trying to draw in my composure for a fraction of a second. As I'm finally able to catch the flame I draw in a heavy exhale, craving the nicotine in my lungs.

Bringing two fingers to my lips to take a drag, I taste the bitter tang of blood. It coats my entire body, dripping from my palms, coating my face, and even spoiling my chest.

Throwing open my car door, I slump back in the leather seats and relish in the moment of calm, the little sanity I have left threatening to crack as flickers of the crime scene play out in the forefront of my mind.

My fists curl, my palms blistered from how tightly I held my blade and smashed it into the fucker's skull.

And his cheek.

And his jaw.

Even gouged his fucking eyes out.

The passenger door opens, and Poppy sits down in the seat. I exhale the smoke building in my lungs as I watch her in my peripheral, noticing her orange hair is now blended in with the blood of our victims.

"Where are you taking me?" a sweet, gentle voice asks from the back seat.

I've trained most of my life to withhold my composure, but it fucking snapped when I saw the teenage girl being held at her mercy.

Poppy and I became a weapon of mass destruction, beating those bastards to within an inch of their lives. And then I smashed their fucking skulls to a bloody pulp to make sure they got the message.

The seventeen-year-old girl changed into the fresh clothes we brought with us. The very clothes I keep at my home for situations like this. Her hair is pulled back into a plait, and her hands are jittery as she clutches the fabric.

“Home,” Poppy says breathlessly. Her eyes meet mine, yet she speaks to the girl in the back seat. “We’re taking you home.”

FIFTY-SIX

Gigi

Harry's an ever-changing mystery, and I have my suspicions he's up to something.

Our glory days at Pixies are far behind us. While I thought Richard enjoyed the torment, our hatred for each other was evident onstage. Besides, Harry seems to be roped into something far bigger than the Circle, and it's never within me to ask. My days are limited to meetings about upcoming heists and galas, schmoozing with businessmen, and blistering my feet with trashy heels.

It's been a few days since the assassination of the descendants of the drug empire, and I've finally been called into office. I walk inside, feeling Richard's pressing gaze.

"Gigi," he sighs, frustrated, rubbing at his temples as I sit opposite his desk. "What's all this about you getting trigger-happy?"

"They're being dramatic."

His jaw clenches.

The past few months have been testing for our professional relationship, and my fight for my position on the pedestal has heightened my fast descent into insanity. My blinding hunger for power is a driving force above all else, and undermining is not something I take easily.

I cock a brow, inviting Richard to comment. "Something the matter?"

While much has changed in my work, perhaps the most immediate change was bringing Richard down a peg. I still answer to him, of course. But when he's not around I take the authoritative role.

Richard's nostrils flare, and he restrains himself, but I can tell his real emotion from the way he white-knuckles the table.

"Where did you go after the yacht party?" he asks, catching me off-guard.

I push away the thought of this animalistic, toxic relationship that's blossomed between me and Harry. While many things are different recently, he's always managed to stay near.

There are still strides I need to make within the Circle, and I refuse to fall at the last hurdle. If I breathe the character, invoke this authority on others, it'll bring everything I've ever wanted into existence. And Harry's hatred towards me makes things easier since he's not a distraction I can afford ... When I feel his touch on my body, it ignites something in me so strong I'm powerless to resist; sends passion through me so deep I struggle to remind myself what life ever felt like before him.

The wall I've erected around myself holds strong despite most unwanted opinions, yet Harry always manages to make it crumble. When I saw his scars I was close to crumbling completely. I tried to be brave, but beneath the dubious character I ached to give up everything.

Harry will be my salvation – and also my undoing.

This is what you want, I'm always forced to remind myself. *This is what you've fought for.*

I can't let him be my weakness. Not again.

"Back to the hotel," I respond robotically, quickly diverting the conversation. "I'm sick of all these galas and fancy parties. When's the next heist?"

As if on cue the door knocks, and Richard groans tiredly.

"Come in."

I watch over my shoulder as Harry saunters into the room. From the way his jaw tightens, I know he's caught me occupying the chair, but he refuses to spare me a glance as he sits down beside me.

"You asked to see me."

Cutting to the chase, Richard explains, "I was going to send Davidson, but he has his eye off the ball as of late. I have no other option than to send two people for the job, which unfortunately means you two."

Loving being involved in the action, I smile and turn to face Harry. Dark marks underline his eyes, and I narrow mine, trying

to read him. Whether he's put up his barricades or I just don't know him well enough to read him anymore, he gives nothing away.

"Your job is to lure in Lorenzo Gallo." Harry's ears perk up. "We've had cyber threats against the business again. I need you to eradicate the threat before it becomes another issue."

"I don't suppose he's connected to Antonio and Davide Gallo?" he asks.

Ah, of course. The brothers Harry and I put through a meat grinder.

"We suspect Lorenzo has been upping his search since you dealt with his brothers. The Circle can't afford to have their men lingering around, so I need you to deal with them ... He also has connections to Paolo."

"Paolo Ricci?" I clarify.

"Whiz Tech Dan is traipsing through our cameras across London to try to find him, but for now we wait."

Now *that* gains my interest.

Paolo has become an increasing threat to the business, having hired the Circle a few years back for an assassination. Richard and his men fear he's intimidated, working diligently to break down our forces. Just last year Andy and Harry dealt with his buddy, Russo, who'd been sent to infiltrate our London offices to gather information. The very kill I snuck in to spy on.

The team is yet to find Paolo. His plan is to unearth crucial information, and from the way my boss's posture stiffens, I can tell the threat scares him.

"The heist will occur this Saturday. He's hosting a poker night at a nearby casino. Thought it'd be easy to lure him into a few games, gain his trust, and then deal with him." Richard stands, dusting off his jacket. "I've booked the two of you a room at a nearby motel."

Harry stills for a solid few seconds and then finally laughs, the sound hollow and lacking life. "Sorry. I thought you said 'a room'. As in one."

"I did. There was no availability elsewhere, and we don't want to draw attention to either of you if you're booked in anywhere fancier. This is the only motel in the area – it's low-key, and no one will ask questions. Is that an issue?"

I imagine Harry has plenty. He looks ready to spill his complaints, but he remains quiet and shakes his head.

Hours pass, both of us going over endless, endless plans of how we'll infiltrate Lorenzo Gallo until we're finally ready to take on our true target. Paolo Ricci.

I wait until the cover of nightfall before slipping on my riding leathers and motorcycle gloves to protect my skin. The Glock holstered on my thigh, engraved with Harry's initials, and the fact I'm being accompanied by the very vehicle he once gifted me, are cruel reminders of my past devotion to him.

Tugging on the helmet, I shake my head, dismissing the feeling that arises at the thought of green eyes and a dazzling smile.

I kick-start the engine.

Wind whips my cheeks as I drive, my hair blowing haphazardly behind me as I pass through the streets of London, weaving around the few cars lingering on the roads at this late hour.

As I pull up to an expansive driveway that gives way to elegant steps and marble pillars on either side of the heavy front door, a security guard stops my pursuit. His head pokes out of the security booth as I approach, and he exits the small box to bring his sweeping gaze over me, his eyes lingering on my chest.

"And why would you be here, miss?"

"I have business to attend to."

"At eleven at night?" he counters.

I shrug matter-of-factly.

"What's in it for me?" He steps closer, clear insinuation in his tone. "I'll have to make it worthwhile."

Oh boy.

My eyes drop to his ring finger momentarily, adorned with a thick gold band. "Why don't you come here and find out?"

"And I thought I'd have to force it out of you."

His smile is crude as he takes a careful step closer to my Harley. He reaches his arm out to cup my cheek, and I allow him the moment of distraction as his sordid eyes sweep down to my tongue, which wets my lips with hunger.

As he reaches closer, ready to take the moment further, I grasp onto his puny wrist. I twist it around, putting immense pressure on his shoulder and forcing him to cry out. Stepping up from the bike with fiery determination, I indulge in the fear in his eyes before shoving down and breaking his arm.

He roars, and I fist the back of his hair, slamming his head onto my knee. The guard passes out, but if only it were that easy. Climbing off the bike with a grunt, I smash my elbow into the protective glass of the booth's exterior and retrieve the firearm axe intended for emergencies.

Which this very much is.

This guard will forever continue to treat women and his wife with disrespect if I let him live. Even the impending doom of how this could develop into something far worse sparks a memory so deep I can barely think. Can barely do anything other than raise the weapon above my head with strained arms.

“That’s enough! Couldn’t you hear me? Jesus!”

I bring the axe down with a piercing *whoosh*.

“What is it with sluts like you thinking you can dress like that and not suffer the consequences?”

I swing again.

“You’re practically asking for it.”

The memory comes through as blinding black flashes through blood splatter.

I swing again. Twice.

“It’s finally settling in.”

Three times. Four.

I persevere harder, struggling to get through the stubborn bone.

“Shh, you’ll enjoy this—”

With an additional strain the guard’s head breaks free and rips from his shoulders.

I stumble back with a combination of exhaustion and shock. *Where did that even come from?*

Flustered from the surprise of the memory coming through so forcefully, I blink away the haze. It takes effort, but it finally dissipates, and I turn to the ground spoiled with red. Despite the internal shiver that courses through me I fist my fingers through the top of his hair, clutching his roots, and charge up the mansion steps towards the heavy entrance doors. They open with ease, and blood drips onto the pristine tiles as I walk into the centre of the foyer, declaring my arrival.

Pulling myself together, I demand, “We need to talk!”

Precious minutes pass, and I tap my foot, waiting for the banister to fill with a presence. The thick, bloody tendrils of my victim’s hair threaten to loosen my grip.

The man I wish to speak with descends the steps with worry and shock in his eyes, his large body concealed by a dressing gown.

“How did you get past security?”

“Never underestimate female rage.”

As he reaches the lower step, I roll the man’s head towards his feet.

“He was ready to take a bribe to let me in here. You need to teach your men more respect, so I taught him a lesson.”

The head stops just a fraction away from his bare feet. The dead guard’s eyes bulge, staring at nothing, his mouth open in a constant state of shock.

“Call it karma for treating a woman with disrespect.”

The man in front of me stills, his face morphing into nothing short of horror. Our eyes clash, and my face turns serious.

“We have a problem.”



Exhaustion weighs heavily on my mind. It’s nearly 2 a.m. by the time I’m trailing through the front door of my apartment and face-planting the messy white sheets. I try to fight it, knowing the pain will be particularly aggressive tonight, but my attempt is useless, having spent hours upon hours planning our retaliation to this new threat.

Eyes closed, I feel my limbs loosening off as sleep takes me. Yet my shoulders are stiff as I settle into the bitter new routine that’s been plaguing me since I lost my grip on humanity.

The energy around me changes, and I know I’m truly in my lucid state as I hear the mechanical, *“Night after night, you think of me again.”*

I say nothing, immune to this behaviour that hijacks my sleep. As I push my head to the side and away from the pillow, the silhouette of a body I once knew skitters with my imagination.

The very demon who torments my dreams with reminders of my failure, tempting me to descend into the black hole in my mind.

His eyes beeline to the blood that continues to stain my hands and the arguably poor decisions I continue to make ...

“Christ, you make me so fucking embarrassed, little sister.”

FIFTY-SEVEN

Sigi

Another day, another ridiculously expensive dress, this one courtesy of *Gucci*. The low-back, floor-length gown is described as wine-red, but I prefer blood-red – with my pistol, of course. It's perfect for today's heist. My makeup is near immaculate, having been forced to conceal my under-eyes, which highlight my night of tormented sleep.

I'm convinced Richard thinks we'll fail today's task, which makes me more inclined to prove him wrong. He emphasised we should have drinks with Lorenzo – whatever we can do to gain his trust before making our move.

Legion Casino in Leicester Square is pure euphoria for even the simplest of gamblers. The casino/bar gives way to four floors of utter chaos. Past the bouncers at the entrance, the curtain unveils a sight I can only describe as going back in time to the jazz age. Just like I've stepped into a reimagining of *The Great Gatsby*, my dress suddenly feels years outdated. Women are dressed in the finest pearls and feathers, while their men smoke cigars, cackle at their shortness of breath, and throw cash like it's utterly worthless.

At least my Glock makes it look like I'm wearing fancy dress.

It's a rarity to see Harry without his suit jacket, but I'm not complaining since it's sight to behold. As if he can sense my desperation to jump in on the action, he nods towards one of the porch doors that lead to the smoking area, insisting I follow. I do even though I'm no dog. But alas, he holds a power over me that I'm helpless to act on. That's why I can't let him get too close. Can't let us kiss when I'm this close to the finish line.

I fear if he presses his lips to mine, I'll be fuelled to the point I'll lose myself and all clarity of what I want.

As we pass by the abundance of casino tables, the sound of poker chips rattling and glasses clinking with joyous celebration, my attention is immediately pulled to the side, drawn to our target.

Lorenzo Gallo.

A large, overweight man. Grey hair and a receding hairline give way to dark, cruel eyes. Age lines cover his features, and a cigar dangles from his lips. His suit is black. Black on black on black. As if he can feel my stare he lifts his head, and his eyes drink up the length of me.

Something about Lorenzo makes me cold to the bone and breaks through my hard exterior momentarily. Something that makes me suspect he'd fight with all his might to have his way with me.

Perhaps we can use it to our advantage ...

With a jittery feeling, I drop my eye into a wink, scurrying out through the glass doors towards Harry.

He lights up a cigarette on my approach and asks, "Did you see him?"

Leaning against the brick wall, I watch the puff of smoke leave his lips. "Hard not to. Looked as if he wanted to eat me for dinner."

Panic swarms his features, but the expression drops as he inhales the nicotine. "Makes me fucking sick," he says on an inhale.

"Why? You jealous?"

"Not in the slightest, princess. If it wasn't obvious by now, you're not someone I care for anymore. And I do not trust you."

"Sticks and stones." I tut, no matter how much the words try to break through. "I think I have a way for us to gain his trust."

Shaking his head, Harry withdraws his cigarette and stubs it dry in the ashtray. "I've got my own tactics. Something I know will gain his attention more than anything else."

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm not telling you."

"Why not?"

He steps closer towards me. "As I said. I. Do. Not. Trust you."

His words burn deep inside of me, his undermining invoking an anger so strong I force my head away, fearful I'll say

something I regret. One thing's for certain: I'll make him pay for thinking he's better than me. I'm yet to figure out how, but I'll know it when I see it.

"Fine." I turn back to Harry where he stands just inches from me. "Because my idea was to flirt with him, perhaps run my hands all over his chest ..." My hand moves up the length of Harry's shirt, dangerously close to the buttons I'm tempted to undo. "And have him at my mercy—"

He grabs my wrists and slams them into the wall above my head.

I smirk. "I've rattled you."

He snarls.

I bow my back from the wall, drawn in by his captive gaze. But as if he knows it imposes a weakness in me that has me teetering on the edge, he brings his mouth dangerously close. Perhaps a kiss won't swarm my stomach with the feelings it used to, but that's not a risk I'm willing to take.

I rear my head back.

Harry releases me, and it feels like my mental pull towards him loosens.

"Let's go," he finally says.



I never would've imagined this heist would take *hours*.

My new tactics as of late are spurred on by an eagerness to get the job done quickly. Yet if we're looking to gain Lorenzo's trust, then trust takes time. Trust looks like the millionth game of poker as we waltz around the room joining people's games on tables and slowly decreasing the distance to where our target sits in the corner of the room.

Throughout Harry's games I sit at his side like a trophy wife, running my hands up and down his back, enjoying the feel of his muscular behind as I occasionally drop lower.

He hisses as the distraction causes him to roll an unlucky number.

"I'm bored," I tell him.

He squints as if it'll help him focus, breathing into his clenched fist, which holds a few dice. "There's no point rushing him. We might as well have fun while we can."

"Oh, I'm having fun," I say, squeezing.

Throughout the night I've felt that same uncomfortable gaze burning into the side of my face and the lower half of my body. Turning my head, I catch Lorenzo's eyes from the far end of the room again. He brings a glass to his mouth, smirking over the top of it. Despite the action making me shudder, I jump to my feet as Harry's head whips towards me.

"What are you doing?"

"What we should have done ages ago."

Straightening my posture, I tug down the front of my dress to show further cleavage and strut towards Lorenzo and his men. With an extra swagger in my step, his eyes are ravenous during my approach.

Here goes nothing.

I reach his table and press my hands against the cloth, purposely puffing out my chest. "Hello, boys," I tell them. "You don't mind a woman joining in on your game, do you?"

Though I'm not looking directly at Lorenzo, he speaks instantly. "Why, of course, my dear. Please sit beside me."

I flash Harry an "I told you so" look from across the room as I walk around the length of the table, sitting beside my soon-to-be victim. I sit in the spare seat beside him, flashing my winning smile.

"Do you play much?" I ask, my question full of meaning.

Lorenzo chuckles, taking a sip of his beverage. The hollow sound vibrates against the clinking ice cubes in his glass. "Where have you been hiding all my life?" he asks.

Just as I thought.

Harry approaches the table, taking an unoccupied seat. "Are we playing poker dice? Do you mind if I join?"

A waitress leans over me, passing me a glass of champagne, and I smile my thanks, turning my attention back to Harry.

"You look like you were on a winning streak back there," one of Lorenzo's men says, his dark, bushy brows pulling into a frown. "What's your trick?"

I mirror the expression since all I can remember is Harry groaning as I ran my hands over his buttocks.

Distracting me from the thought, a large hand runs over the back of my dress, cupping my waist. Breath fans my ear, and the stench of cigar washes over me.

"You look divine tonight, miss. I don't suppose your boyfriend would mind if I captured you for a night?"

I freeze, knowing we have a role to play. I turn my attention to Harry, lingering on him for merely a second. “I—”

I catch sight of the drink I left idle on the side. The champagne sparkles with an excessive fizziness, and if it wasn’t for the increase in bubbles, I’d assume the liquid was untouched.

But unfortunately, I’m a victim to these scenarios.

The fucker tried to spike me.

Sadistic rage swarms through me, and I laugh bitterly. Thank God we’ve already planned on murdering this man tonight.

Since Richard asked us to gain Lorenzo’s trust, that would involve me taking a sip regardless, acting innocent and allowing the effects to take over me while hoping Harry catches on.

But anger forces me to ask, “Did you really not think I’d notice? What’s the fun in taking a woman unwillingly?”

Lorenzo draws his head back, shock overtaking his features. He fists the material of my dress, and I lift my chin, refusing to surrender under his gaze.

“Why don’t we make this interesting?” Harry asks, gaining my attention. There are five men around this table, and he looks every one of them in the eye. Yet he piques Lorenzo’s interest the most by asking, “Put something more valuable on the line.”

Gripping my dress harder, Lorenzo sucks the air from my lungs. “I’m listening.”

With dice in hand, Harry toys it between his fingers as he says, “Just a simple game of odds and a man looking to make friends. If I roll a six, you’ll sit and have a drink with me. Talk business.”

“And what if you don’t roll a six?”

Harry smirks. “If I don’t roll a six then you get the girl.”

I blink.

Lorenzo cackles and shakes his head. “You must be awful at maths, ’cause that’s hardly a fair deal on your part.”

Harry shrugs as if the loss would be meaningless. “I don’t particularly like her, and you’d be doing me a favour by taking her off my hands.”

Green eyes finally turn to me, but they give nothing away. Not a glimmer of remorse for putting my life on the line. At a time like this it’s hard to remind myself that I encourage this kind of behaviour between us.

Harry’s simply playing the cards I dealt him.

So why does it sting?

As if Lorenzo has already won, he wraps both arms around my waist and brings me closer to his chest.

Harry doesn’t falter at the sight.

Not once.

Lips assault my neck, stale smoke spilling over my skin as Lorenzo howls, “Let’s fucking play, boys!”



Lorenzo shakes his head in utter disbelief. He laughs, continuing to toss his head back and forth as he says, “I really can’t believe you actually rolled a six. Luck must be on your side, kid.”

Pushing open a set of large swinging doors, Harry responds, “I’ve never been one to believe in luck.”

My steps falter as Lorenzo’s feet grind to a halt, his eyes tearing up the restaurant kitchen. It’s empty of people but stocked with appliances, including ovens, fridges, and so on. The walls and floor are pristine-white and about to be spoiled with blood as Harry orders, “Duck.”

I drop to a crouch instantly as he swings his arms around, biceps flexing as he connects with the top of our victim’s skull. The fireman axe plunges into Lorenzo’s brain.

The axe gets stuck in the sludgy mess, and Harry presses his black loafer to Lorenzo’s stomach, kicking him hard. Blood spurts at the impact as the cutting edge slices free with ease, allowing the Italian to drop to the floor like a piece of rotting meat.

Harry clutches his knees, axe still in hand to catch his breath.

“It’s cute that we opt for the same choice of weapon. Quite romantic, actually ... but I’d have done it better.”

He scoffs through a strained breath. The axe drops to the floor with a heavy clunk, and Harry flexes his palms to revive the feeling in them. He huffs at the hair dangling from his forehead.

“Do I even want to know why you’re axing people?” He shakes his head as if he’s made his mind up and then says, “Let’s get this cleaned up. Then we can figure out the sleeping arrangements.”

He turns his back to me, stretching out his arms and heading towards the equipment. As if my feet have a mind of their own, I stand over Lorenzo’s body and stare down at him. Blood pours from the wound in his head, and I struggle to stray my eyes from the spill.

Perhaps a shade darker, it's so eerily like that guard who had similarly bestial ideas. Who wanted to "force" me if I wasn't compliant ...

Did Harry even know what Lorenzo said to me? Did he even know what his true intentions were? Did he even care?

Of course he doesn't.

"Gigi," Harry says carefully, as if he heard how my thoughts strayed to him.

Watching him through heavy lashes, I look at him. *Really* look at him. I'm angry – so fucking angry – and bitter at the fact he was willing to sell me off so easily. But more disappointed in myself for being taken aback.

That voice screams through, reminding me I ask for this every day. This is what I want.

I know it is, but ... but—

Harry carefully reaches his hand out towards me. I swear his eyes soften as if he can hear my internal battle. As if he just witnessed it firsthand through my telling facial expressions.

I grit my teeth.

"I'm not weak," I say with authority.

He responds with unmistakably honesty. "I know you're not."

His hand is steady as he continues to reach for mine. Ignoring the gesture, I turn my back to him and steady myself.

Through the act of severing Lorenzo's limbs and grinding them down, I blink away the haunting memories that try to fight their way through, leaving Harry to cut the remains into freakishly precise cubes of meat.

My search for containers gives way to a selection of peculiar items that have no right to be in a restaurant kitchen. There's a weird, sinister feeling to each of them that I'm convinced is my subconscious playing tricks on me. Yet I take the handcuffs, sneaking them behind my back.

Harry puts the pieces of Lorenzo in the refrigerator next to the minced meat. And when anger fuels my outburst, I lock his wrist to the door handle with an audible click. I step back, and his face stills, dropping with emotion as he tugs at the restraint.

I retreat a few steps and head for the door.

"GIGI!" Harry roars, cutting his wrist raw as he tugs relentlessly against the cuffs.

"Call this payback for trying to sell me."

The closer I get towards the exit, the louder my heels click against the marble, and the sound of Harry's screams subsides.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Sigi

It's hours later and Harry still hasn't turned up. There's no playing the role of a bitter, inhuman recruit of the Circle, because after what Harry did at Legion Casino, the thought of him in need of aid makes me selfishly giddy. I don't doubt he'll be able to axe through the chain, but it will take him a little while to do so.

Knowing his arrival will be later than intended, I help myself to one of his T-shirts from the drawer. Lying down wearing the garment, I surf between TV channels and dig into the chocolate-covered strawberries that were kindly laid out for us.

The duvet is firm under my stomach but strangely comfortable. Whoever felt the need to knock cheap motels is missing out. I may not know where these strawberries originated from, but perhaps that's for the best. I pop the fruit into my mouth, humming as the pleasure of sweet citrus explodes on my tongue.

"Delish."

The lock turns, and I hide my grin at Harry's impending entrance. He waltzes through the door with his jacket slung over a shoulder, his hair in disarray. He tries to act composed, but I can tell from the stiffness of his body as he walks in front of the bed anger is coursing through every limb, threatening to explode.

He throws his jacket over my head as he passes. I pull it off, watching as he undoes his cufflinks. When I throw the jacket back towards him, his calm exterior cracks as he kicks it to the floor. Placing his accessories to the side, he shrugs off his shirt, and before I have time to appreciate the view, the fabric is chucked behind him and on my head.

Huffing in annoyance, I tear it off. "Cut it out."

Today's not a good day to test my temper.

I throw it back at him, and he grips it with his fists and chucks it back. Gasping, I grip the pillow by my side and launch it at his side in retaliation.

"I said cut it out!" I shout as he catches the pillow mid-throw, white-knuckling the fabric.

I stand ready to confront him, but my back hits the mattress as he pins me down with a hand to the throat, keeping me in place. Harry brings his face just inches from mine, his gaze fiery.

The look in his eyes is unmistakable: he's raging.

But as if it were yesterday, I can count every eyelash, every flicker of colour in his eyes. Through my anger, I can't help but notice his skin looks even more beautiful up close as the red flicker of the neon motel sign filters through the window, highlighting the forest green of his eyes. The sight of him so close evokes a pang in my chest, a stark reminder of bitter truth that sits submerged in my poisonous insides.

But anger must still linger, because I purposely taunt, "Gonna kiss me?"

His eyes darken, and he tightens his grip. "I could kill you."

"But you won't," I say, my throat hoarse.

Then he does something I certainly don't expect.

He rips the T-shirt I'm wearing in half, straight through the middle, with his dagger. My breasts bounce from the sudden movement, but he refuses to shift his gaze.

"Aren't you meant to love seeing me in your clothes?"

"Underwear. Now."

I freeze. "What?"

"Did I stutter?" he growls. "Take off your underwear before I bend you over this bed and fuck some sense into that pretty little brain of yours."

My voice betrays me, and I ask quietly, "A-and if I want that?"

Although he's fully capable of taking them off himself, I slip the fabric down my legs and hand them over to him.

Harry curls them in his fist. "Open wide."

I open my mouth cautiously, and he stuffs my mouth with the black silk. His thumb skates over my bottom lip before he pulls away, tearing the T-shirt into shreds. He slips his hand to the back of my neck and uses an additional piece to cover my eyes, tying a knot at the back.

Everything goes dark.

As my suspicions start to heighten I edge for my gun on instinct, but I feel the evident loss of weight as Harry disarms the holster. My spew of protest comes as a wordless mumble against the gag.

My nipples start to harden in anticipation of his gaze running rampant over my body. I attempt to squeeze my legs closed, but his hips halt the action, and the insides of my knees meet his hips.

I freeze as the tip of the blade skates down my chest and over my stomach.

Perhaps I've underestimated Harry.

Perhaps this time I've pushed him too far.

With an edge to his voice that I can't quite place, he says, "I've never been attracted to a helpless woman ..."

The clatter of the knife hitting the floor makes my nerves evaporate. Yet when I hear nothing else I start to blink as if I can see through the fabric. No matter how much I try, I only see darkness.

For a solid few seconds nothing happens.

The bed doesn't even dip with his weight.

He says nothing.

Then I feel hot lips against my pelvic bone.

My eyes flare underneath the cloth, and although I try to fight it, I instinctively arch into him. I always forget how dire I crave this feeling – this emphasis of hatred. I crave this connection like I crave air.

Though I'll never admit it, these moments, Harry's supernatural ability to create the realest emotions I've felt in a long time, become more addicting than any merciless desire within the Circle.

I keep my arms above my head as if I'm physically restrained. His lips move delicately over my stomach until he reaches the other side. He blows gently against the wet skin and lowers his head, hot breath dancing above where I need him the most.

I try to beg against the gag, but it's useless, coming out as a mumbled grunt.

Still, at my plea he slips a finger into my entrance, my arousal allowing him to push in easily. I throw my head back into the pillow as he thrusts his fingers in at a fast, torturous pace.

He presses his forehead against my stomach, breathing heavily as he picks up a rhythm, slipping in a second finger and fucking me faster. His breath fans my stomach as he curls his digits, brushing across my most sensitive spot.

Oh God! I think, unable to use my words. *Just like that.*

With my stomach tightening and release nearing, it doesn't even cross my mind to think Harry is punishing me. Despite how loud my ears ring with the intense pressure, my arousal is louder, making my cheeks redden with heat. Right as I feel myself nearing my peak Harry withdraws his fingers, making the feeling quickly subside.

Struck for breath, the sensation eases. And he thrusts his fingers in again.

Harry continues the sick torture.

Again.

And again.

And again.

I cry out in frustration, tears beading in the corners of my eyes as I relax from another comedown. Right at the point of release he retracts his fingers. And all I can feel is his forehead pressed against my stomach and his eyes screwed shut.

Tears soak into the fabric of my blindfold as the torture becomes unbearable, forcing my vulnerability to the surface. Regretful decisions flood my vision, making me feel like I have a direct line of sight to the self-harm on his chest.

As if he's sharing his self-inflicted torture with me.

I feel the effects of each burn, each inch of hurt causing me to break apart. The scorching pain that was once limited to my neck covers my whole body, igniting mark after mark after mark. It blisters the skin, pulling the life from my very lungs.

It hurts.

Fuck, it hurts.

When I start shaking my head, unsure of how much I can take, Harry quickens his pace, and my vision fills with speckled dust, prepared for the inevitable crash. My stomach tightens with the effect of doing a thousand sit-ups, and my body convulses with borderline pain.

I can't take it anymore.

I'm so, so sorry, Harry.

Harry pulls the underwear from my mouth. "Trying to say something?"

Right at that moment he pushes his fingers in knuckles-deep. As he curls them into my G-spot my back bows off the bed, my nipples tightening in anticipation.

"O-oh God!"

“What did I tell you before, Gigi? Even he can’t save you from me.”

My hand finally shoots down, squeezing unforgivingly at his wrist. “Please.”

“Please, what?”

My teeth chatter, the adrenaline running through my veins. And just as I’m about to finally hit the hardest orgasm of my life, Harry pulls out of me again.

Spinning my body around, he pulls my hips back against him so I’m kneeling on all fours. His tip presses against my entrance, and he thrusts inside me fully.

“Did that teach you to be quiet?” he asks breathlessly.

It doesn’t take long for my body to seize up, my orgasm exploding as I reach a new realm. Spots of colour explode before me, replacing the darkness of the mask. My arousal drenches his cock, and my stomach explodes with a feeling I can only describe as pure ecstasy. Harry grabs my shoulder, pulling my body flush against his as he pounds me from behind, extending my release until I’m struck for breath, my body weak.

He isn’t far behind.

When I finally fall weakly against the bed, he unties the fabric and discards it to the floor with whatever little composure remains. My legs are shaking as he pulls out of me, my whole body broken. He falls back against the mattress beside me, and our heavy panting fills the room, along with the backing track of a sitcom on the television, which has long been ignored. The occasional bulb from the motel sign blinks with each flicker, but other than that, complete silence.

Eyes zeroed in on the ceiling, Harry says, “I always roll a six.”

I turn to him slowly, lost in thought. “Huh?”

“I had a dice with all sixes hidden in my sleeve. I knew they’d be too focused on you to notice I’d changed them over.” He rolls his head towards me. “To them, the chances of me rolling a six were so minuscule that the shock alone would be enough for them not to bother checking the numbers.”

The words tumble out of me. “Oh.”

“I would never have put you in any danger.”

A moment of pause.

“Never,” he says with quiet emphasis.

Silence stretches between us again.

We stare at each other for a moment too long – too long to be an accident. It’s different, this look. Mutual understanding that things will never be the same between us. We’ll never return to the people we once were.

Harry’s the one to finally break. He sits up with a huff, swinging his legs around to his side of the bed.

“I’ll sleep in the car.”

This is the ideal situation.

So why does the remaining intact part of my brain say, *Is it worth what you’re trying to achieve? Is the pain worth it?*

I was always able to make everything look painless, but now ...

Harry leaves the room before I can protest.

When I look out the window the shadow of his body stalls, his head tucked to his chin. He turns back to the door, appearing as if he might walk back inside.

Then he shakes his head and walks to his car.



“My best friend. Really, Gigi, could you stoop much lower?”

And to think I almost forgot about this callous routine.

I push my face further into the pillow as if it’ll ease the ache drilling my mind and push him away. It’s hopeless, of course, since the words are loud and clear, hitting me with necessary damage.

“Christ, you make me so fucking embarrassed.”

The words Harry once said must have really made an impact since each time is as painful as the first.

I’ve been fighting this endless cycle for months. The little nagging voice that started as an unwanted opinion of my actions grew tenfold in my subconscious. It turns out it’s merely him. Jack. Tormenting me further.

“You fucked his brother. Now you’re fucking my best friend. You might as well fuck Andy next—”

I wake in a pool of sweat, moisture gathering at the back of my neck and alerting me to my reckless slumber. A headache lingers at the back of my skull – a reminder I’m human. I do suffer pain.

The other side of the motel bed is cold, and Harry’s belongings are absent from the room.

Standing to my feet, I wrap the tartan blanket around my shoulders and peer out my window at his car idling in the middle of the parking lot. A stab of guilt has me standing motionless in the middle of the room.

Much like mine, Harry's demons hide far under the surface. And I've never understood how deeply they lie until tonight. Until I felt the physical torment he's been suffering in recent months.

Despite Jack's lingering words, it's regret that moves my feet out of the door and towards Harry's car. He sits slumped in the driver's seat, fast asleep, his long legs struggling to fit in the footwell. A baseball cap is pulled over his dark eyes, but it doesn't help the sharpness of the red motel sign.

Carefully, and with the hope of not waking him, I open the passenger door. I pause as his breathing shudders, his breath hitting the cold air and creating a fog in front of his parted lips.

He must be freezing.

With the confirmation he's asleep, I slip the material from my shoulders and lean forwards. Shuddering at the cold that hits my body in my thin pyjamas, I carefully drape it over his lap and place it down gently.

Harry's peaceful as he sleeps, yet his brow is furrowed as if distress lingers under the surface. As if the sight is a magnet to my chest, I take a step back and quietly close the door before allowing the pang of guilt to fester.

No matter how much Jack's words try to cut deep.

FIFTY-NINE

Sigi

That taunting voice in my mind has become increasingly painful. But perhaps more importantly, it's making me tired.

I've always known what I want ... but recently my desire has been faltering.

Something flipped inside of me the night at the motel with Harry. Seeing how deep his scars lie and how unmistakable his hatred is triggered something so strong in me that it shattered my common sense. And I can't allow it to happen again, no matter how much a part of me aches for him.

I struggle to make any thoughts clear other than profound jealousy. I'm so irked that Harry has his emotions intact while I feel like I'm falling apart on the inside, in a mental tug-of-war, with my head pulling in one direction and my heart in another.

Is it worth it? That question keeps coming back to haunt me.

I don't know, and I don't want the answer.

Spent and mentally exhausted, I've been avoiding him, spending most of my days stuck in the boardroom, deep in piles of documents, eyes stinging from the flare of Whizz Tech Dan's laptop screen as we go over endless plans.

Richard has put the recruits under extreme pressure, fearing Paolo Ricci is still desperately trying to tear down the barricades we've built. My gut has recently tried warning me he's up to something else, but I'm convinced it's only another fragment of my distorted mind. As a means of gratitude for our hard work, he's giving everyone the night off, and we're all spending the night in Chequers in Soho. The very bar that haunts my dreams.

I don't realise how much my memory of this club torments me until I take a drink with each unwanted thought that arises from my past. Welcoming the burn against the inside of my throat, I drink.

And drink.

And drink.

And drink

I'm a complete mess.

And it's a thought that someone like me – someone with such a high position in the Circle – can't afford. Perhaps if I greet them with this vile version of myself on the surface, they won't see how devastating I am beneath.

I've climbed the ranks, and I should feel victorious. But as I look towards the bar and see Harry interacting with a random woman, I feel poor and utterly useless.

As if it's another heist and my life is on the line, I analyse my options, thinking of the best-case scenario. Debating how I can rid my mind of these feelings. Perhaps if I give way to that voice in my head, the one reminding me of my bad decisions, they'll finally leave me alone. If I consider one of the worst sins, maybe I can banish the haze that's swallowing me. God knows I've made enough mistakes. What makes another?

And a man like Harry, his weakness lies solely in jealousy.

Unfortunately, he doesn't care for me anymore, let alone feel the sort of white-hot jealousy he'd feel if I were with another man, which leaves my options extremely limited. There are only a few men who can grate at Harry's nerves, and one of them is standing at the bar, drink in hand.

I stumble my way through the crowd of drunks and fall up the steps as I come up beside Andy. Placing my hand on his elbow, I cock my head towards the dance floor.

"Come dance with me."

Panic rises in his eyes. "Uhh ..."

His eyes are red-rimmed, so I don't doubt he's on something stronger. When he finally gives in, he calls back in apology to the person he was talking to at the bar. The action catches Harry's attention, causing his emerald eyes to squint to slits as he watches in concern.

Pulling on Andy's hands, I encourage them to my waist and slip my arms around his neck, moving in time with the music. The

feeling makes my body crawl, but I blame my excessive drinking, having downed each one like water this evening.

Andy's head falls to mine, and he slurs, "We shouldn't be doing this."

He drops his head to my throat, and I slip my fingers through the back of his hair. An odd feeling crawls over my skin as I feel Andy's lips skimming my collarbone. I refuse to turn to Harry's piercing stare, afraid of what emotions it could force true.

You're sick, that male voice comes through. *I'm so fucking embarrassed.*

I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting through.

Just persevere for a few more seconds, Gigi, I beg forcefully. *A few more seconds and it won't hurt anymore—*

But it's too much.

I force my own subconscious too far, slipping into a deep hole of nothing but endless darkness. My nails dig in deep, aching for escapism, welcoming this numb reality until my weakened feelings leave.

I become nothing, enclosed in a cocoon of darkness.

I'm breathing, but I might as well not be.

I have to get out.

But I don't want to.

"You smell like roses," Andy mumbles, breaking my reserve. "And bad decisions."

I can hardly hear him over the roar in my ears.

When Jack's words try to force through I slip further into the dark part of my mind. His words pound with fury, but they bounce off the shields I've built up.

Yet it's my own voice that screams, *Andy's like a brother! What are you doing?*

His lips move up my jaw to my chin and then dangerously close to my mouth.

My eyes fly open, and I can barely pull myself together. Can barely do anything but shove him off as if I've committed the ultimate sin.

Confusion flashes across his eyes.

I shake my head. "I ... I'm not doing this. This isn't me."

I bring both hands down my face – a desperate plea to sober myself. When I withdraw my palms, blonde hair fills my vision. The person standing in front of me is frozen in time, turning to stone and sending my blood cold.

"Mia," I say breathlessly.

My ... my best friend.

She's still, and even under the strobe lights I can see the glassiness of her eyes. They dart over my shoulder, and I follow her gaze, seeing Andy tumbling sideways, his hand falling to my hip.

My head whips back around to Mia, and I watch a stray tear fall down her cheek.

She wipes it away.

"It's not what it looks like."

Her shoulders stiffen and her nostrils flare. Despite the rage coursing through her face, her voice is deadly calm. "Who even are you?"

She storms past me and grabs Andy's arm, forcing it around her shoulder as she struggles to lead them towards the communal toilets.

"Mia, I—"

"For months!" she shouts, whipping her head around and losing composure. "I tried contacting you for months, and nothing! Do us all a favour and just leave us the fuck alone."

Her voice brings the attention of onlookers, and I wrap my arms around my stomach, my body feeling like it'll cave in on itself.

The notorious criminal shouldn't be bothered by wandering eyes. If anything, she'd live for it. She'd think of all the creative ways she could stop them from ever looking at her the wrong way again.

Instead she feels utterly disgusted.

What's happening to me?

SIXTY

Harry

“Leave me alone, Emily. You do not want to be around me right now.”

The click of her heels against the pavement grates at my brain, inspiring another memory of Gigi outside this club, with a man putting his filthy fucking hands all over her.

The night is dark, and only the surrounding buildings are lit with a gentle glow, the occasional blinker of a traffic light or a passing car giving me additional sight. But in my head my vision is completely clear, wreaking havoc as I charge ahead to increase the distance between me and that fucking demon trap.

I really shouldn't have my back to Emily with the risk of sleazy men lurking these streets, but after the display I just saw inside, it's not safe for me to be around anyone right now without unintentionally causing them harm.

Her grip reaches my jacket, attempting to turn my shoulder. “Talk to me.”

Forcing my hands up between us like a white flag, I warn, “I don't want to hurt you.”

“Is that the girl? The one who was with Andy?”

I sputter, “What? No.”

My eyes burn from how hard they squeeze shut – a similar effect to what I reckon could be achieved through sticking pins into my pupils.

Her voice is soft and wary, like a bystander trying to talk a suicidal man off a ledge. “I saw the way you looked at her while I was speaking—”

I crane my head away. “Stop.”

“Gigi. That's her name, right?”

“Please be quiet.”

“What was her last name again? Tommy ... Tony ...?”

“I'm not asking you again.”

“Thomas! It was Thomas, wasn't it?”

My eyes fly open.

“And she was with Andy. Your friend—”

“He's my best friend.” I whip my head around. “MY BEST FRIEND!”

My throat is hoarse from raising my voice, and my hands shake with the pressure of having to draw in my anger. I very rarely lose my temper with Emily; she doesn't push my buttons the way Gigi does.

She doesn't deserve this. She doesn't deserve any of this. I've been fine keeping my distance at home. I'm only out tonight because she fucking *begged* me to pull myself together. And look how far that got me.

We were there for barely an hour before Gigi stole my gaze. I was like a moth to a flame.

And then her hands were all over *him*.

I left before things escalated into something I'd burn my eyes to rid from my memory forever.

The thought of what they're doing right now makes me feel fucking murderous.

“I'll drop you home,” I tell Emily. “It's not safe out here.”

SIXTY-ONE

Sigi

Tired. I'm so unbelievably tired.

It's been a week since the incident at Chequers, and I still feel drunk.

The barricades I've erected to protect myself are crumbling. I've become so repeatedly beaten with inner verbal abuse I've been too weak to rebuild.

In what now feels like a different lifetime, Richard warned me to cut contact with Mia. As if all warnings have gone amiss, I've tried desperately to get hold of her. But she hasn't entertained my pleas to talk. The first phone call cut off halfway through, and all attempts since have gone straight to voicemail.

Tears fill my eyes at the thought, and I bury my face in my hands.

Adding to the mix, Jack is a sour reminder of the poor decisions I continue to make. He's become such a burden that I'm refusing sleep until my body gives out. The edges of my vision are practically black now, and my body aches to shut down completely.

Sliding my palms upwards, I run my hands through the birds' nest on top of my head, my eyes threatening to close in endless sleep.

It's a feeling I can only describe as being drugged.

My movements are slow, sluggish.

Like a damn snail.

As I sit slumped in one of the chairs in the boardroom, Richard beckons orders for the latest department-store robbery. Steal some cash. Art. Whatever keeps our numbers up. It's all petty work, and we're awaiting the news we really want to hear.

"Boss?" Whizz Tech Dan asks, slightly stunned.

"Yeah?" I respond on instinct.

Silence fills the room, my eyes heavy as I see the awkward smile stretching over Dan's features. He clearly wasn't referring to me.

As if the thought spurred his anger to the surface, Richard trudges over to the mini-fridge in the corner of the room, retrieves a bottle of water, and offers it to me. "Drink," he demands in annoyance.

I unscrew the lid, taking a heavy mouthful as he speaks.

"Go on. What is it, Dan?"

The door to the boardroom opens, giving way to the large figure in the entryway. My gaze clashes with Harry's, green eyes pinning me to my seat. For a moment I think I see his brow creasing with worry, but the expression disappears as quickly as it registers. He must think I look like death.

I fist the plastic bottle in my hands, the sound crinkling across the room packed with office chairs, paperwork, and surveillance screens.

It's the first time I've seen Harry since the nightclub. I thought he'd be riddled with hatred, but something else swarms him.

He walks into the room, hands pushed deep into the pockets of his black jeans as he takes long strides to one of the unoccupied chairs.

"We've fucking found him," Dan says.

My eyes snap up. "You're joking."

He laughs hysterically, in utter disbelief. "We've found the fucker. He's been captured by one of our surveillance cameras in West London entering some billionaire mansion."

Richard bows his head between his shoulders, shaking it. "Paolo fucking Ricci."

This could be the most detrimental heist we've ever seen.

And normally, I'd willingly drown in the feeling.

But all I feel is fucking tired.



“You’re weak,” that harrowing voice says. *“You’re not an asset to the Circle.”*

I groan inwardly at the dull recognition of Jack’s voice. My body is failing to keep up with the repercussions of everyday life, let alone the torment of my lucid state.

I’m mentally exhausted; utterly drained.

“Not you again,” I groan, my breath shallow. *“I can’t cope with this anymore. Please, just leave me alone.”*

“Have you thought about why that is?” he deadpans. *“Considered this is karma coming to bite you—?”*

“ENOUGH!”

It wakes me with a start.

Rain pounds ferociously against the window. A flash sparks through the room as lightning strikes. Eyes threatening to deceive me, I see a hunched figure perched on the end of my bed.

Movements slow, I press the heels of my palms into my eyes until I start to see weird shapes. I pull them back slowly, seeing the intimidatingly tall, black-clad human. His hair is drenched, soaked to the root and dripping water unforforgivingly onto the floorboards.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I imagine it’s water, but as my eyes drop to the white silk sheets I notice splatters of scarlet.

“Painkillers. Water bottle *sealed*,” Harry says with quiet emphasis.

Turning to the side, I see the box on the counter alongside the unopened bottle.

I rub my eyes, tired. “What are you doing here?”

Fuck, my head is pounding.

“Tablets,” he demands, a possessive desperation in his voice.

I lean over onto the counter, take a hefty drink of the water, and retrieve two painkillers to swallow. After I’ve placed them back on the side Harry turns his head over his shoulder slowly.

As our eyes meet a shock runs through me.

I barely recognise him. Even through the strip of moonlight his eyes look a shade no lighter than black. Features stern, skin tainted with blood, he looks paranormal. My eyes flicker over to my Glock in awareness, and panic strums my pulse at the realisation it’s missing. As Harry edges closer, forcing my body back into the mattress, I find the weapon concealed in his palm, and another flash of lightning strikes.

He cocks the gun slowly, pressing the barrel against my forehead. My throat tightens, barely recognising the man above me or the tears crowding his eyelids.

“I could kill you for what you do to me,” he says, voice shattering.

The last time he issued this threat it left little bite, but as he clicks off the safety with his thumb panic strikes me stiff. He presses the barrel harder against my forehead than before. And when the lightning flashes again I screw my eyes shut tight.

Tears leak from the edges of my eyes.

I’m nothing without my Glock.

I feel weak. Pathetic.

I—

“Do it,” I say.

“I should.” He pauses. *“I will.”*

A minute passes without so much as a breath from him, and when I find the courage to flutter my eyes open I’m met with a raw, intense stare that entices a sob from my chest. There’s a war raging inside him. I double-take the water crowding Harry’s eyes.

He winds his free hand into the back of my hair, bringing his mouth so dangerously close to mine that it threatens to pull me under. My chest rumbles with a weak cry as he eases closer, just enough that I can feel the heat of his breath against my mouth, the warmth of the blood coating his hair now staining my neck.

With his lips brushing the skin of mine, he decreases the distance, and our chests press tight together as he speaks against my mouth. “But I won’t.” He breathes slowly. “Because I’m a fucking coward.”

He thrusts me away from him, and I sink further into the pillow as he throws the gun to the bed. I flinch as it lands.

When I tear my eyes upwards Harry has already departed the room, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.



The next night, Harry sits in an identical position at the edge of my bed. His broad back and shoulders face me, his head ducked. Shallow breathing causes the muscles in his back to twitch.

My Glock sits untouched on my bedside table, yet he's still here anyway.

With a soft curse, he stretches his arms above his head as if he's been in the same position for hours. Harry leaves without another word.

When he exits the room I notice a note where he was sitting.

Please look after yourself.

Days pass – and I don't.

SIXTY-TWO

Harry

Another heist. Another party.

With each of these events I feel my restraint wavering. No matter if Richard is choosing the lushest venues in all the city – I don't want to fucking be here. With each moment I'm kept within the confines of the Circle I feel my body suffering. But if I'm forced out ... if I beg for the mercy to leave ... I'm sacrificing more than just my occupation.

I'm sacrificing my life.

Sacrificing the opportunity to save Gigi from the darkest pits of hell.

Allowing Richard and his greasy fucking men to get away with the unspeakable.

After Poppy and I rescued that young girl from the derelict barn, we were able to reunite her with her family. But she's just one of many we've yet to find.

I fear the men are going to start upping their techniques, especially if they know their trafficking rings are being targeted. Or perhaps they'll start making their risks worthwhile. Have more elite women, a higher price to outweigh the risk.

There's only one woman who comes to mind. My eyes find Gigi, and my body doesn't know whether to drop its shoulders sadly or scream for her to come closer. She's struggling lately, as if she's mentally and physically sick, and I'm too fucking petrified to consider what that means.

I watch her, hating that my gaze always happens to find her immediately in a crowded room. The action is so effortless it's downright painful.

What she did with Andy should be unforgivable, and I should hate her for it. But fucking hell, I don't.

Even after everything.

After every sick, sadistic thing she's done. I fucking crave her.

Love for both the woman and the monster sits on the surface, threatening to devour me.

I can't bear speaking with Andy right now, but I'll get there in time. Something within me knows he's struggling with something far greater, and I wish I had the time to prioritise him. But after the stunt at Chequers I'm prepared to leave him in agony for a while longer.

Gigi schmoozes the elite, her signature pistol strapped around her thigh. I know it's still imprinted with our initials. Times were so much simpler back then. If Richard wanted to put a bullet in my brain for fraternising, I'd happily take it at this point, hence the weight of everyone's safety fucking drowning me.

Poppy walks through the open doors, and I catch the flash of orange hair as she approaches the bar. Her eyes find mine, and she nods subtly in understanding. I just texted her about another lead to investigate tonight after the bar closes its doors.

Returning my gaze to Gigi, I frown as a man approaches her. Her exterior shows a blush, but as if I can see straight into her soul, I know she's oozing paranoia. He's far too young to be one of the men hunting women in the inner circle, but I still refuse to let my guard down.

"Harry?" a voice says, straying me from my thoughts.

Struggling to deter my gaze, I ask, "Hmm?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

I turn my head, locking eyes with Brody, the new recruit. "No."

"Oh." He lifts his shoulders and asks sheepishly, "I was wondering if you could help me sharpen my aim in the shooting range. I've been struggling a little, and ..."

His voice is drowned out as I turn back to the corner of the room to find the small woman with silky brown hair. I stiffen when I realise she and that man have both disappeared. My head whips towards Poppy, and she shoots to her feet.

A part of me begs, fucking prays, for me to leave Gigi alone. After everything she did. With everything she continues to do. But an even bigger part of me screams at me to find her.

“Just gonna grab a smoke,” I tell Brody, leaving his side.

I walk towards the end of the bar and near the pool tables, trying to find my target. The lights down the hallway towards the bathroom are dark and low. She could’ve gone down there, but my nerves aren’t racing like they usually do in these scenarios.

Stepping out through the fire exit, my ears perk up at the sound of shuffling. My stomach fucking plummets as a scream breaks the silence.

“Where are you?” I yell.

“HARRY!” Gigi’s voice is frantic. “Help—leave me alone!”

My feet slam into the pavement as I rush towards the noise, skidding to a stop when I reach the corner. Gigi is digging her dainty heels into the floor, slamming her shoe down on a body that isn’t there.

I rush forwards as she stumbles back. Looking around the alley for signs of the man, I ask, “Why didn’t you use your Glock?”

She’s silent.

I turn to look at her completely as her body tremors. Her eyes are screwed shut. Even though I can’t see them, I know if I could I’d see her exterior broken, revealing the fragile girl underneath.

I approach her slowly as if she’s a cat about to pounce. “Hey,” I say softly. Her breathing increases, and I catch her cheek, turning her face back in my direction. “You’re okay. I’m here. Look at me.”

She shakes her head.

“Look at me.”

I know I should hold back from pressing her to open her eyes again, having been through relentless training on how to approach victims of assault. But since my self-restraint knows no bounds with her, I stroke my thumb over her cheekbone.

“Please open your eyes, baby.”

Lips parting, her eyelashes flutter, giving way to beautiful brown eyes. They’re deep, mesmerising, and utterly sane. She instinctively leans into my touch, and for a fraction of a second I wonder if she’s finally come back to me.

“Gigi,” I say, my voice wavering.

A darkness crowds her vision, and suddenly, in a lightning-fast motion, she’s retrieved her Glock from her holster. She stretches out her arm, watching me down the neck of her gun as she points it straight at me.

Straight at my chest.

Hot tears fill her eyes, and I just know she’s stuck elsewhere. Somewhere in the past – in her subconscious, possibly. Fighting the demons that torment her head. A battle of emotion rages through her, and she sobs with the force of holding back.

“Why can’t you leave me alone?” she asks, her voice sounding distant, like it wasn’t meant for me.

She’s warning me not to approach.

But I do. Because I’m a fucking fool around her.

I take cautious steps forwards, stopping when the barrel’s pressed over my heart.

“Kill me,” I say.

With her palms trembling, I hover my hands over her skin, carefully turning off the safety of the gun. Gigi visibly stiffens at the sound. Her gaze is still zeroed in on my chest, yet the tremor that lingers is one of raw emotion.

“Like Romeo and Juliet,” I remind her.

Every day I see a woman trying to face her torment alone, her very soul struggling below the surface. From the moment I laid eyes on Gigi it became my destiny to protect her. But perhaps fate is short-lived. It’s only fantasy after all.

She requires a pulse, a surge of adrenaline, to bring her purity back. Maybe this is it. Maybe my life, the one she threatens to end every day, could be her fix.

I’d allow it. For her.

I’d welcome Death, greet him proudly, having risked my life for something worthwhile. Since life isn’t worth living without Gigi gracing this earth with her pure, genuine smile.

“You’ve ruined me,” I confess. “Save me the misery of feeling for you. Save me from suffering a life of torment knowing no other woman in existence could ever compare to you.”

It was fucking foolish of me to waltz into her room when I was at my lowest, knowing I had nowhere else to turn but to the woman who is my demise. And I’d love to admit it’ll be the final time I come crawling back to her or beg for her to take care of herself. The only way that would be possible would be if she ended my torment here and now.

Tears choke her, deep sobs rocking her body.

“So. Fucking. Embarrassed.”

“Pardon?”

Her watery gaze rises from the gun to my face, utterly blinding me with the sight. Appearing as if she’s seen a ghost, she whispers, “He’s so fucking embarrassed.”

Reality hits me like a blunt sword, and I force a swallow.

Is that how my words have tormented her?

My poor, sweet girl.

“I didn’t—”

“That’s what you said.”

I clamp my mouth shut, because she’s right. I did say that. And it seems as if my words are buried deep below a surface I’ll never be able to retrieve them from. No amount of forgiveness would work. It’s evident in the darkness of her eyes, as if she’s struggling with sleep.

As if sobriety sparks her senses true, she takes a cautious step back and holsters her pistol as if she never touched it.

“Took you long enough to get over here,” she says, a laugh following.

I know what she’s doing. She’s pushing the pain away by putting on a façade, a cocky exterior, since the alternative – lowering her barricades and giving someone a glimpse into her heart – is far too painful to bear.

And it fucking breaks mine.

SIXTY-THREE

Sigi

Since the team discovered Paolo's whereabouts, Harry and I have been staying at a hotel in West London near his last-seen location. Unlike last time, we have separate rooms for this heist.

With each passing day, my body aches to rejoice in the distance I've put between myself and the Circle headquarters, but all attempts are futile. To be brutally honest, I feel ... different.

While that sluggish-type energy has disappeared and I have more energy to push against that harsh voice in my mind, I waver every time. But I don't have time to think too deeply about it. I have a role to fulfil.

Some things haven't changed. I have my own plans for Paolo Ricci. But Richard has asked us to leave him alone. We're under strict instruction to infiltrate a party he's hosting in the city at one of those properties with wrought iron gates, pillars lining the front door, Ferraris and Lamborghinis out front, and burly doormen guarding the entrance.

Our job is simple: take the hard drive from his office, get the information back to the Circle, and discover what dirt he's uncovered.

Someone knocks at the door of my hotel room, and I get to my feet.

I open the door. "Oh ... hey."

Harry looks up from fixing his cufflinks to his sleeves and welcomes himself inside. His suit is perfectly pressed, and he wears a handkerchief the same colour as my ballgown. Wine-red.

His eyes crease. If I had to put money on it, I'd say he thought my distance from home would elate my emotions. Whatever that means.

His face falls in slight disappointment. "What? No snarky comments?"

I don't have it in me to muster up a response, so I simply turn my back to him. Even putting on the dramatic jewellery feels robotic. But I do it anyway, knowing I have a part to play.

After a moment I finally turn back to him.

His voice is soft, desperation wrapping around the words. "Come on. Play with me."

I'll entertain him. If that's what he wants.

Slipping on that eerie Cheshire cat smile, I make my steps towards him slow and torturous. Harry's muscles tense as I step around his body, brushing my fingertips over the backs of his shoulders.

"You look dashing."

He swats away my hand as if it's an irritating gnat, but the attempt is weak.

"Ouch," I sneer.

He adjusts his *Rolex*. "What's the time to intercept?"

"Well ... it'll take us about twenty minutes to get there. And then we'll have about four minutes between Whizz Tech Dan infiltrating the system and the lock tripping. But that's always been a bit optimistic for you, so I'm thinking of a quickie for the first three. I'll suck your dick to finish you off. And then—"

Finally, he gives me a little bit of attention. Harry backs me into the wall behind us and brings the tip of his dagger to my throat within a matter of seconds.

His lips quirk in a half-smile. "There she is."

With a smile as if he truly missed me, which I find hard to believe, Harry tightens the grip of his knife in warning, but it packs little bite.

He steps back and wipes the blade against his thigh before pocketing the knife in the waistband of his trousers. The blade must have nicked at my skin, but I barely felt it. I touch the slit on my neck, smudging the few drops of blood between my fingers.

"I'm surprised your blood isn't black. That's what happens to those without a soul, right?"

I smile, but the motion doesn't quite reach my eyes. Harry watches my every movement, then he asks quietly, "Is everything okay?"

He's asking me if I'm okay? Even after I selfishly did one of the most unthinkable things imaginable by almost kissing his best friend.

I nod, not trusting my words.

He checks his earpiece is working. "Shall we?"

I slip my arm into his and straighten my shoulders. "Ready."



Hundreds of elites fill the marble floors – from the billiard room to the ballroom, the bar, and so on. The sounds of voices, clinking glasses, and lingering piano music echo throughout the halls, while glass chandeliers decorate the ceilings, projecting light onto the priceless artwork.

Being back on the field pulses energy through me, and I feel infinitely more alive than I did just a few hours ago. These are the moments I live for within the Circle. Being able to play the role of this harsh, inhuman character is like a security blanket, able to protect me from whatever feelings try to break through. Yet for the first time in a while the effort feels weary.

My eyes scan the crowd for our suspect. He isn't in our immediate vicinity, but I won't let my guard down. We have four minutes after Dan unlocks the door to find the hard drive and then get the hell out of here before the lock trips.

"Are you ready, Dan?" Harry mumbles into his earpiece.

Time to focus.

Reciting the floor plan from memory, I picture the blueprints as if they're directly in front of me. I imagine my fingers sliding over the scrolls of paper, just like they did this morning. The grand staircase is in front of us, meaning we're in the west wing.

I nod to the hallway parallel to us. "Down that hall. Third door on the right."

As we walk, a waitress steps in front of us, holding a tray of bubbling liquid in flutes. "Champagne?" She grins. "There are plenty of other options in the billiard room."

Fuck, we're wasting time. Think!

"Thank you, but I can't," I say, hovering my hand over my stomach. "Not for another six months. We're so excited – aren't we, sweetie? Our own baby boy. Just like Daddy." I grin lovingly up at Harry.

His composure doesn't crack.

Not one bit.

Unease in her eyes, the waitress scurries off.

Harry mutters, "Are you ever serious?"

And we're quickly back to the toxicity we thrive in.

I'm better, more protected, with this version of myself.

After checking our surroundings, we walk down the empty hallway, keeping a watchful eye out for any lingering witnesses to our rebellion. Thankfully, Dan has already tripped the lock, so we rush inside before anyone spots us.

"No one saw us," I say.

"Don't let that fool you. We don't have long."

Harry and I part ways in the small square room to cover as much ground as possible. With each passing second I feel my pulse racing harder.

Where would you find a hard drive?

Computer is too obvious.

But you'd want it somewhere within close reach ...

As Harry tears apart the desk drawers I make my way to the bookcase, scrutinising the spines until I find one significantly different from the rest.

One that doesn't fit amongst a selection of classic books.

Tearing the odd novel from its space, I whip my head over to the clock on the wall, checking the time.

Two more minutes.

Prying open the book, I'm close to crying out in revelation as the pages give way to a safety box. The little black device falls into the palm of my hand, and I hurry to push the book back into the case.

"Gotcha!" I grin, holding the hard drive between my fingers in victory.

Harry's head whips up. "Great. Now we get out of this place before they notice anything's wrong."

I nod and push the small stick into my cleavage, which attracts a rather unpleasant eye roll from him. But I don't let his

pettiness dull my spirits.

“We work well as a team, y’know.” I bump his shoulder as we walk towards the door.

“Don’t get used to it.”

Harry reaches out for the doorknob, and I immediately grab his wrist to stop him. Confused, he attempts to yank it out of my grip, but I press my nails into his skin in silent warning.

The lock is turning.

Someone is about to enter.

Fuck!

This wasn’t part of the plan!

When they catch us, I don’t doubt they’ll want to execute us on the spot.

Keeping a death grip on the inside of Harry’s wrist, I back away from the door with both our hands raised in caution as if it might explode.

“What do we do, Harry?” I whisper, terror evident in my voice.

He’s silent for a beat.

“Kiss me.”

I turn to him so fast I almost give myself whiplash.

“I—”

No. No. No.

While my emotions may be haywire, this is a certainty I can’t change.

I can’t kiss Harry – it’ll kill me.

I need more time.

More time to prepare for what will happen when my restraint wavers and I feel his mouth on mine again.

I don’t know if it’ll be good for me. For him. For us—

I can’t—

“I can’t kiss you.”

“Gigi!” Harry warns, glancing to the door in fear.

“It’ll ruin me.”

“Then don’t let it.”

“I won’t be able to help it!” I shout.

But there’s no time.

By the time the door opens Harry has already captured my wrist, pulled me forwards, and slammed his lips against mine with urgency.

We stumble back against the wall, and he kisses me desperately, sucking the air from my lungs. Harry threads his fingers through my hair, arching my head backwards to kiss me hungrily. His other hand travels up my exposed thigh, igniting a trail of goose bumps in its path. He kneads the skin between his fingers. The action makes my mouth part and draws a warm line in the depths of my stomach.

I don’t know what to think. Don’t know what to feel. Don’t want to do anything other than kiss him harder and let him ravage me.

Harry deepens the kiss, grabbing fistfuls of my hair and pushing his tongue deeper between my parted lips. I let him in like clockwork, running my tongue up the length of his, savouring his taste.

The hunger is deadly, and we kiss like starving animals.

It’s only then I remember we’re in a life-or-death situation.

But I’d be happy to die right now. Right at this moment. The thought makes me lift my thigh a little higher and tug on his hair a little harsher.

A cough sounds.

I’m reluctant to pull away, knowing my time with him is limited, and scared of the emotions that will impale us at what we’ve just done.

Another cough, and we finally separate from each other.

Breathless and struck for air, our eyes meet in a lusty haze. Harry’s lips look plump, and his tie is askew from our fumbling, and the sight of him so dishevelled takes my breath away. My heart feels like it’s beating too fast to keep me afloat, and I’m convinced he can feel it with how tightly his body is pressed to mine.

“You two. Out!”

Harry’s hands drop from my body. Watching the moment the lust drains from his eyes, I immediately notice the oh-so-familiar look that returns.

Regret.

He hesitates, something washing across his face that looks like he’s done something unthinkable. I wince.

Blinking once, twice, he storms past me and exits the office. The security guard watches with disdain as I stand riddled with my emotions. Finally coming to my senses, I smile apologetically and slip underneath his arm to chase Harry down the hall, running to keep up with his long strides.

He barely spares me a glance.

“Where’s the exit?” he asks, his voice chillingly low.

It takes me a minute to catch my breath, but I nod to one of the hallways. “Cellar. Second door on the left.”

He nods.

During our awkward silence I ponder over what just happened. Harry’s idea was clever – I’ll give him credit for that. From their perspective, we were just a couple of horny strangers who found ourselves in an unoccupied room struggling to keep our hands to ourselves. Hardly the villains.

I spare him a glance, but his walls are up, barricading his emotions. Yet the telling look on his face is proof our interaction derailed him. Something akin to hurt floods my body, but I push the feeling down as quickly as it arises.

What’s happening to me?

I used to beg that he’d hate me for my insanity – it’d make things far simpler. But there’s no begging now. It’s as clear as day. Harry hates me. I can walk around now without the guilt dragging me back that he still harbours love for me.

I push the part of myself to the surface that I’ve grown accustomed to. The version of myself that has become naturally cold-hearted towards others. I feel better – safer – like this, when people can’t see underneath.

I shouldn’t be the girl who gets punctured by a man’s presence anymore – especially Harry’s.

“Good acting.”

He finally turns to me, distracted. “Hmm?”

“The kiss.”

“Oh ... yeah.”

Awkward.

We head in silence to where we expect the getaway vehicle should be waiting, ready to escort us to safety undetected. Thankfully, this time no waitresses interrupt our pursuit by offering us champagne. Yet the more I think about it, I could benefit from a drink.

I nod in the direction we should head in. “That way.”

Harry doesn’t bother acknowledging my comment. He’s supposed to be my lookout, but I don’t even try to ask him, the likelihood someone will catch us this deep into the building being small. I sigh and pull out one of my bobby pins to pick the lock. It only takes a little bit of manoeuvring before I hear the angelic sound of the lock flipping. I open the door, and Harry pushes past me before I even have a second to think about stepping through.

We trudge down the steps in silence. The only sound echoing around us is that from the lone droplets of water seeping through the concrete ceiling.

“Harry. I think we—”

“Just save it.”

“But I think—”

He throws a warning look over his shoulder. “Drop it!”

I sigh, defeated.

We finally reach the ground floor, and a chill races up my spine. I rub at my bare arms as I inhale the air around us, the scent of a wet sewer making me immediately gag.

Oh God, what is that smell?

Perhaps something has rotted ... yet instinct warns me otherwise.

“Where’s the door?” Harry asks.

The cellar’s stone ceiling is low. The room is undecorated. Stone floors. Stone walls. Directly in front of us is a large pile of wooden crates printed with skull symbols. A tiny window on the far wall hangs above a lone single bed. A pair of handcuffs, one cuff clipped to the bed frame and the other hanging free, makes my blood run cold. Sparse light from a flickering bulb overhead emphasises the dirty bedding.

I turn, looking around us. “I ... I don’t know.”

Suddenly, a loud clatter rings out.

The steps we just descended are now concealed by a black iron gate.

We’re trapped!

SIXTY-FOUR

Sigi

I squeak in fright as Harry races to the bars and tightens his grip around them, rattling them until they're bashing against their hinges.

"What the hell?" he growls.

The light from the stray bulb above us flickers, and I squint my eyes as I watch it, quickly looking around the room. The sound of metal on metal is grating as Harry shakes the bars with all his might.

"You set me up!" he roars.

Before I can even spit out defences he's striding towards me. I suddenly know where the source of trickling water is coming from as I press my back to the wall, feeling a rush of cold liquid soaking my shoulder blades, coating me in the vile smell.

"I-I swear I didn't," I croak. "I'd choose something far prettier than a dungeon."

His nostrils flare, eyes boring into me like he's trying to extract the answers right from my soul. When he discovers nothing he huffs and turns away.

Regaining my composure, I straighten my shoulders, banishing the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. Harry falls back against the single bed with a heavy exhale, shutting his eyes as if he's ready to drift off for a nap.

"Where am I going to sleep?"

He shrugs. "I don't care."

"Well, you can't share the bed with me," I say, folding my arms across my chest.

His hands are behind his head, eyes closed. "I'm not a gentleman, princess. I tried that last time. Didn't work. If you want to sleep on the floor with the rats, be my guest."

My voice wobbles. "There's rats?"

His lips turn up at the corners in a smirk. "It's going to be a long night."



"*Help*," I plead, my voice lacking conviction. "Anyone?"

It's been hours.

Torturous, torturous hours.

"No one is coming for us tonight," Harry says, his voice echoing across the small space.

Our phones don't work down here. The guards on standby have been instructed not to suspect anything untoward until at least twenty-four hours have passed with no communication, and it hasn't been anywhere near that yet. We can't use the communication device hidden inside Harry's suit jacket. While that would allow us to alert the pickup truck nearby, if the signal reached and we didn't make it to the vehicle within the designated three minutes, they'd storm the place with gunfire. Having the team come crashing through the front doors is not a risk I'm willing to take. I've been so distracted I almost forgot I was running this job, but I am. And I'm not ready to call defeat yet.

We simply have no other option than to just sit here and wait it out.

"Is anyone there?" I repeat, banging my forehead against the cold metal and keeping it there. "He'll kill me if you don't let me out. I'm too pretty to die."

I hear the smirk in Harry's voice. "Now, that might be true."

I don't ask him to clarify which part.

Whether I like it or not, we're stuck in this makeshift dungeon for who knows how long. The metal is cool against my head, briefly distracting me from the rotting stench. The floor is too dirty to consider sleeping there, and by the looks of things, Harry isn't planning on it either. I thought he'd be jumping at the opportunity after what happened in the motel room, but alas, he's showing no interest, sprawled out on the mattress, legs crossed, flicking his dagger above him and catching it by the handle every time.

"What do you think they're going to do with us?" he asks, keeping his eyes on the knife.

The action is gruelling, attractive, and screws my common sense. I trudge over to him, snatching the knife mid-air on his latest throw.

"Hmm." I turn the dagger back and forth. "Pretty." I hand the weapon out to him with my palm up, purposely leaning the upper half of my body over his torso. "Like me."

This is safe.

This is protection.

In the moment of distraction, memories of the last time Harry and I spent a night together come rushing to the forefront of my brain. It seems he also remembers as his fingers brush my cheek.

His voice drops dangerously low. "I remember the last time we spent a night together ... like this."

"Yeah," I say breathlessly.

His hand moves down my jaw to the back of my neck, enticing me in slowly. Drawing our mouths closer, my lips part as I feel his hot, minty breath drifting across my face.

"And it's not a risk I'm willing to take."

My eyes fly open. He grips both of my hips tightly in his hands and throws me over the bed, onto the dirty stone on the other side. I land with a huff, and when something squeaks, running parallel to the wall, I scream and kick my feet.

Harry's laugh rumbles throughout the small space, but I'm too angry to see the beauty in the sound. It's dark, but my imagination doesn't have to stretch far to consider what might squeal like that. Getting to my feet with an unpleasant huff, I smooth out the creases in my dress and approach Harry's side, attempting to lie down on the mattress.

His body stills. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to get comfy."

"Well, don't."

It's a struggle, with his unnecessarily large body, but I manage to squeeze onto the right side of the mattress, a fraction away from falling back onto the floor. Harry's long limbs dig into my back, and I hiss as they press against the base of my spine.

I crane my head to look at him over my shoulder. "Can you try moving over a bit?"

His hands are back behind his head as they were earlier, a smug look on his face as he stares up at the ceiling. "Nope."

Releasing a grunt, I turn and face the opposite wall again, trying to get comfortable. I toss and turn. Harry doesn't move an inch. At only one point does he creep an eye open to watch as I move my body around.

The Glock is uncomfortable against my thigh, but I don't trust disarming myself while we're locked underground in a cellar. When I finally think I'm comfy, I sigh at the dull ache of my gun and turn over again. I draw my head back when I see an angry scowl burning down at me.

"Stop moving," Harry insists. "It's putting me on edge."

"Worried I'll stab you in the back?"

This is safe.

This is ...

This is wrong.

Harry's face falls as if I just ignited a sour memory.

He sighs and turns his back to me. "Not tonight, Gigi."

His tone makes a beeline for my fractured heart, forcing me to ask, "Was it something I said?"

He doesn't reply.

I sigh and lie back against the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Was this how Jack felt when he lost his grip on humanity? Because right now I just feel numb. It poses the question of whether people really do fear me as I want them to or whether they think I'm pathetic. Maybe both. Maybe I've slipped so far under I can't sense anything other than desperation. Pathetic. I'm just pathetic.

My head starts to spin, and no matter how much I push at the emotions, hoping to keep them at bay and protect myself, I can't help myself.

My lips start to move, and before I know it, I'm allowing Harry a raw glimpse into my aching heart. "The thing with Andy ... I'm so, so sorry ..."

Silence.

"Harry?"

More quiet follows.

He's asleep.

Condensation gathers on the ceiling directly above our heads, and slightly off-centre is a lone water droplet, ready to break the mould and fall free from the rest. God, I feel like that stupid fucking raindrop, daring to break.

I'm not sure why I choose now, with the comfort of his body next to me but without the worry of him hearing, to lower the walls I've built to conceal my emotions. The tears are gathering in my waterline before I even start to speak.

"No matter what you think, nothing happened," I say, my voice low. "You never deserved that. You deserve so much better. Someone who doesn't push you to the brink of insanity. Someone who isn't me."

Harry's body momentarily stiffens, and I freeze. He releases a long exhale, signalling that he's asleep. With a sigh of relief, I turn back to the dirty ceiling.

It isn't long before my body succumbs to sleep. Not a deep one. Between the tightness of the bed and Harry's obscenely long limbs, it's difficult to truly rest. After an hour of interrupted shuteye, I feel a noticeable shift as Jack's presence creeps in.

Eyes heavy with tiredness, I can see Jack as if he's here before me. He's leaning up against the wall by the entrance to the cellar, watching down on me with a heavy look in his brown eyes that mirrors our mother's. He appears far from the nagging, relentless figure that's riddled me sick for months. Instead his expression softens.

I sit up in the bed, mindful of waking Harry. My eyes burn hot from the tears that flooded them just hours ago, and I rub them tiredly. "Now I'm imagining you in real life too. Aren't my dreams enough torment?"

He says nothing.

Silence stretches between us. The only sound comes from the dripping water and the odd exhale from Harry's chest.

A question hammers at me, and with each second that passes I find the words struggling to remain in my throat.

"Are you embarrassed of me?" I ask, feeling the weight of his answer heavier than ever before.

He cocks his head slowly.

This is the time I should feel his harsh judgement. I imagine it'll be particularly aggressive today with my conflicted emotions. But he doesn't speak. He doesn't say anything, actually.

"Well?" I press.

I await his response ... but it doesn't come.

Reality hits me in the silence, and the back of my neck pricks with realisation.

I don't need his approval. I never did. He's only a figment of my imagination. Someone to remind me about the importance of sanity. A saving grace, if you will.

I've selfishly let his words in for days, weeks, now. Even when I'm not sleeping. I've numbly been accepting the fact I'm a bad person. I'm not an asset to the Circle no matter how much I try to deny it. I'm far from it.

"I don't need to hear you say it anymore," I clarify, speaking it aloud to render the words true. "You're embarrassed of me. I get it. The words have hit home enough."

He's silent still.

My driving need for approval required his opinion and brought it to the forefront of my brain. But I don't ache for redemption anymore.

A droplet falls from the ceiling, and I wipe it away.

But I still have a role to fulfil – something that could change my destiny.

"Thank you," I tell him. "Thank you for bringing me back."



A soft object bounces off my head, and I groan, digging my head further into the crusty pillow.

"Five more minutes ..."

"Up."

My blissful dream gives way to a smelly little dungeon, and my eyes shoot open as I remember where I am. Sitting back on my elbows, Harry stands across the room with an unamused look on his face. I rub my eyes against my shoulders to clear my vision. They sting with the motion. Swinging my legs over the bed next, I stretch my arms above my head and sigh at the satisfying crack.

"No time for yoga, princess," Harry says.

My eyes feel like they're about to pop out of my head as he swings the gate open with ease. I rush to my feet and over to the bars, watching the steps to freedom warily.

"It could be a trap," I say.

"Surely, it can't be worse than being stuck down here with you." Moving towards the front step, he says, "Let's go—"

I grab the back of his jacket. “Wait!”

He turns to me. “Don’t you want to get out of here?”

“Uhh ... yeah ... I just ...”

He lifts a brow.

I shake my head of the wandering thought, exhaling a breath. “Let’s go.”

I’m on edge as Harry leads me up the stairs and down the hallway. We can’t have been let out as easily as this. Those crafty Italians don’t do things by halves, so the only reasonable explanation is that the electricity must have tripped overnight.

They shouldn’t – *wouldn’t* – have let us out so early.

The mansion is quiet and lacking in life this morning. If it weren’t for the maids, I’d expect to see an abundance of empty champagne glasses and beer bottles littering the floor. But of course, it’s squeaky-clean.

Staying close to the walls, Harry and I keep an eye out for any activity. But the house is eerily quiet.

When we reach the first floor he gestures to one of the unoccupied bedrooms. “In here.”

The large balcony windows are ajar, giving way to a short platform. Light shines through, decorating the old-fashioned room with sunspots. A four-poster bed sits in the centre, and the room is decorated with yellow-and-gold furnishings.

Harry and I approach the open window, and he pulls it towards him, allowing him just enough space to slip into the crevice between inside and out. A black pipe descends the side of the brick building, starting from the roof and leading to the ground. If we were to attach ourselves to it somehow and use it as leverage, it would be the perfect escape route.

“Come out with your hands up!” a voice roars through the bedroom door. “We know you’re in there.”

This is it.

Harry steps onto the outside window ledge, holding out his arms for balance in a hurry to escape unscathed.

I can feel the anxiety creeping in.

This needs to go smoothly.

And while I’d like to admit that in my increasing fear I hope he doesn’t fall down the side of the building to his immediate death, it isn’t that.

Harry parts his feet on the ledge, keeping his balance steady as he stands on the tips of his shoes.

A little bit closer ...

He clasps onto the pipe with his palm.

“All right. Grab onto me—” Harry starts to turn.

Now!

I slip the handcuffs from my pocket, capturing his wrist in one cuff and the pipe in the other. Reaching around his body, I press the emergency button hidden in the inner lining of his suit.

It’s kind of fascinating when you can watch the effects of your own actions unfolding right in front of your eyes. In this instance, Harry’s immediate response is confusion.

I smile. “You have less than three minutes.”

The emergency signal will alert the pickup to his impending arrival. He’ll have less than three minutes to get into the getaway vehicle before rousing suspicion, causing them to storm the place with an array of deadly weapons and high-powered explosives.

Descending the building will take at least a minute.

And no matter how angry he’ll be with my decision, he’s not stupid enough to let them come charging into this property with all guns blazing. We wouldn’t last two seconds against the Italians.

Trust me, I know their arsenal.

“What are you doing?” Harry asks, his voice wavering.

“It didn’t take much for me to unpick the cuffs from around that crappy little bed.” I pat the spot on my head. “My trusty bobby pin never lets me down.”

“Gigi!” he shouts, his features morphing into anger.

“I can’t go with you.”

“What? Why the fuck not?”

He’s about to find out I’ve been keeping a secret. If not now, then very shortly. How hypocritical of me. And it’s not just any little white lie.

People really shouldn’t have made the mistake of undermining me.

“You’re wasting time,” I say.

Harry needs to leave now. If I stand here too long, I risk letting him convince me to turn and run with him. I’m trying to be brave. Trying not to picture the betrayal that must be sitting in his chest.

I’m not sure when I finally surrendered to my feelings for him. Maybe it was the kiss that sweetened the deal, or perhaps it was how defeated he sounded afterwards.

I turn my back to him, headed for the door. Commotion picks up outside, forcing me to shout, “I’m coming out. Don’t shoot!”

Harry's chest grumbles with his desperation to get free, utter frustration clawing at his throat as my hand hovers over the handle.

"Don't be the hero!" he shouts.

"Trust me, I'm not."

He bashes hard against the cuffs, finally giving up in defeat.

"Come back! You want to face them? Fine. We'll do this together." His voice cracks. "Please."

His utter desperation almost breaks through my composure, tempting me to turn around.

Almost.

"Together," I say, training my focus on the door, "ended a long time ago."

SIXTY-FIVE

Harry

Rage consumes every part of me until I can feel it scorching my skin. Once I get my hands on the bane of my existence, I'll wring them around that pretty little neck of hers. She won't expect me to be stupid enough to go charging in after her – so that's exactly what I'm going to do.

After landing on the ground, I advise the getaway truck to stand down and wait in the backstreets while I collect the package. I'm too angry to even think of a foolproof plan, so I storm the mansion steps as if I own the gaff, throw my suit jacket to the ground, and push the shirt up to my elbows to ready myself for business. Strangely, though, besides the two people guarding the front of the property, whose throats I slit as I barge through, there's no one around.

Italians and their fucking fortresses. You'd think they'd have tighter security.

Then it hits me how serious Gigi's presence must be to these assholes.

Surely, they're not ...?

I shake my head, refusing to jump to conclusions.

Pushing my hands into my front pockets, I stroll leisurely inside. The hallway plays host to no less than six guards circling around two people in the centre. I recognise one of them instantly as Gigi. The guards and their heavy weaponry turn in my direction as I step closer.

"Hello, men," I say in greeting.

Gigi's head whips towards me at the noise, her brunette strands catching against her lips. She throws her head back in annoyance, staring up at the ceiling on my approach.

I smirk, coming up beside her. "I'm going to fucking kill you if we make it out of this alive," I whisper in her ear, and I notice the pebbling of her skin.

Interesting.

"I think it's time we go," I say.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Do you know this man?" a man with a thick Italian accent asks.

I turn to the voice, forced to do a double-take.

Paolo fucking Ricci.

His hair is neatly gelled for the early hours of the morning, and his grey suit is accompanied by a handkerchief, his dress shoes freshly polished. If I had to put money on it, I'd bet he was expecting this interaction.

What the actual fuck?

"He sure looks like he knows you," the Italian states.

Pissant.

"Who the fuck are you?" I spit despite knowing exactly who he is.

"Is this man bothering you?" he asks Gigi.

The little brat fucking smirks.

"He is."

The guards nod in unison, storming towards me. I throw my palm up, keeping them at bay.

"If you still want to see your wife and kids for dinner, I advise you to take a step back." Turning back to Gigi, I demand, "We're going. That's an order."

She stares up at me. "You're not the boss of me."

My fists curl as I try to maintain my composure. "I'm not. But if you don't come with me willingly, I'll throw you over my shoulder or drag you out of here kicking and screaming. And trust me, princess, I don't particularly want to lay a hand on you right now."

Her brow furrows in frustration.

There's so much beauty in anger.

"No," she finally says.

Having enough of waiting, I grip her arm. Gigi tugs, but my strength overrides hers.

"Thanks for the show, gentlemen, but I think we're both going to get going."

As if in a robotic trance, the guards raise their guns in quick succession, pointing them directly at us both. We're no match against all this arsenal. Though knowing Gigi, she'll still have her gun holstered on her thigh.

But there's two of us.

One weapon, excluding my daggers.

And at least half a dozen of them.

"Let the girl go," Paolo says.

I sneer. "I'll take my chances."

"Harry, get off me."

The Italian chuckles. "You have ten seconds—"

"You're so generous," I taunt.

"Ten ... nine ..."

"I'm working with them!" Gigi shouts.

Whipping my head down to look at her, I sputter on nothing. My lips close and part, struggling to say anything other than, "You're what?"

She catches her breath. "I'm working with them."

"You're working with them," I repeat tonelessly.

Gigi turns to me fully, clutching my biceps over my white shirt. She tilts her head, those pretty eyes trying to tear me down as she pleads, "Deep down, if there's one part of you that still loves me, then trust me to know what I'm doing is right. Just give me ten minutes to speak with them."

"I'll come in there with you," I insist.

The shake of her head is her only answer.

Help me, Lord.

I hate this woman, but I'm also so incredibly in love with her that it hurts every fibre of my being. Screw her for being my main priority throughout everything.

I begrudgingly nod my head.

"Thank you," she says breathlessly.

"I will never forgive you if this ends badly."

She shakes her head. "I'm not worth forgiving."

You're worth it to me.

Leaving a moment of pause, I take a step forwards so I'm toe-to-toe with Paolo. "You won't touch her. You won't lay a finger on her. If I know you've even looked at her wrong, I promise with my whole existence that it will end with your body in the ground."

Paolo's eyes widen at my threat.

Gigi steps in front of me, pressing her hands against my chest and pushing me back.

"He's joking," she says.

No, I'm fucking not.



Ten minutes, my ass.

It's been at least an hour. I'm pushed to limits, to the point I've started to count the wrinkles on the guard's forehead. There must be at least fifteen. Probably from all the obsessive frowning.

I can't deal with this anymore.

Rising to my feet from the decorative settee, I raise my hands, letting them know I'm not a threat.

Not yet anyway.

I'm not a threat right now, but I will be if they even think about hurting one hair on Gigi's head. If they did that, I'd rip off their fingernails and feed them through their back passage.

Right on cue, she and Paolo walk through the large wooden doors.

“What took you so long?” I charge forwards, pointing a finger at her.

Gigi raises her head quickly.

“Did he hurt you?”

She keeps me at bay by placing a hand on my chest. If I wasn’t so angry I’d be relishing the feel of her touch.

“I’m fine,” she says. “He didn’t touch me.”

“We’re leaving.”

“Thanks for our delightful conversation, Gigi,” Paolo says. “I’ll make sure to think thoroughly about what you said.” He smirks and gazes between us, though his attention is elsewhere. “Gentleman, if you will ...”

The guards around the room suddenly raise their weapons in our direction.

Christ, not again.

I wait to hear Gigi confess this is another secret she’s been keeping. Instead her entire body stiffens and her face quickly drains of colour.

“You set me up,” she grits.

Out of all the men, my anger is directed at Paolo, who aims his own gun at my princess’s forehead.

“Did you really think I was his enemy?” he drawls in his thick Italian accent. Anger swarms Gigi’s features as he mimics her with a feminine voice. *“I’m so sorry, Harry. You deserve so much better than me.”*

What is he talking about?

I turn to Gigi slowly, confused. Her face turns a shade of red as she keeps her eyes forwards.

Paolo throws his head back with laughter. “Richard will have a field day when he hears about your disloyalty. From a Thomas, no less. The irony is astounding.”

I whip my head towards Paolo. “What about Russo De Luca?” I reference the man Andy and I killed after he was “spotted” near Richard’s offices searching for damning information last year. “You’re saying it was all a set-up?”

“De Luca was a guinea pig,” Paolo clarifies. “He ratted me out within minutes of your interrogation. He was a risk to my empire.”

“And Lorenzo Gallo?” The sadistic bastard from the casino.

Paolo shrugs matter-of-factly.

Realisation slaps me in the face, a haunting memory hitting the forefront of my brain. The signs were right in front of our eyes.

“Did you hear Poppy is engaged?” Andy asks.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.” He nods. “They were talking about it on the drive over.”

My brows hit my hairline. “What the fuck?”

“Don’t remind me,” Poppy groans. “Not something that happened by choice, I might add.”

“Who to?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Some descendent of the Mafia. Richard set it up.”

“I didn’t know Richard was getting friendly with the Italians. That’s news to me.”

“Maybe this is his way of calling a truce. Besides, if I get a good payday out of it, who cares who the guy is?”

“Did you hear my son is getting married?” Paolo asks as if reading my mind. “I’d be a fool not to work alongside the most feared man in all of London. *Everyone* answers to him after all.”

How were we so oblivious?

Fury rising, Gigi’s hand edges towards her gun, and my pulse races. If she uses her Glock, she’s practically asking for a motive to shoot. And I don’t plan on dying today.

“Don’t you dare,” I hiss. “Neither of us are getting out of here alive if you use your gun.”

Paolo smirks, my warning going amiss. “Don’t take it personally, Miss Thomas. It’s strictly business.” He switches off the safety. “I’ll tell Richard I did him a favour.”

“Fuck it—” Gigi reaches for her gun.

“NO!” I roar.

A bullet goes off, and a bloody roar sounds through the white noise, quickly followed by a high-pitched feminine scream that shatters my barricades.

FUCK!

At the sound of the shrill cry I turn to Gigi immediately. She’s watching on in complete and utter horror. Blood splatters stain the fabric of her dress and her picturesque features.

In a fit of panic I whip my head towards the sick fucking bastard who shot her.

But his gun isn’t pointing at her ...

It’s funny, really, how you don’t feel pain until you see the cause of the issue.

Sweeping my gaze lower, I watch as the blood pours unforgivingly onto my white shirt.

Squeezing my eyes shut to rid the sight from existence, I immediately get flashbacks to my first initiation.

So ... much ... blood ...

Then the pain hits.

“HARRY!”

SIXTY-SIX

Sigi

The events of that night creep up on me when I least expect it. I find myself bolting up in bed drowning in my own sweat as I recall holding Harry's lifeless body in my hands. And I'll run to the bathroom to clean what I think is blood staining my skin.

I've fucked up multiple missions.

Richard and my team say I'm being too cautious and not like the risk-taker I usually am. Any chance someone could be in danger, I put a stop to the whole thing.

No heists means no payday.

No payday makes for very unhappy people in the Circle.

My loyalties changed after that night. In the weeks following I found myself relaying every single detail in my brain, contemplating if there was anything I could have done differently. But I came to the same conclusion every time: I couldn't have changed the outcome.

Harry stumbles over his own two feet, and I dart forwards, catching his body to help soften the blow.

"H-Harry's been hit!" I scream into the earpiece, hysterical.

I feel like I can barely breathe as I watch the life draining from his face.

Raising my head, I find Paolo smirking, and I don't allow him a moment of decency before I raise my Glock between his sick fucking eyes and pull the trigger, shooting a bullet straight through his forehead. Harry's body tumbles from my grip, and I spin, ducking down from an oncoming bullet and popping all three guards in the head.

They drop like dominoes.

Crouching to the floor, I reach my hand into the front of Harry's shirt and unsheathe his daggers. Flipping them between my hands, I see so much red that it threatens to overtake my vision.

Daggers and bullets fly through the air.

I duck.

I slice the throat of several fucking guards.

I'm a weapon of mass destruction.

And when the last guard pleads for mercy, clutching onto his leg, I grab his weapon and fire it into his crotch. Again. And again. And again. And again.

Finally clear of threats, I drop the weapon as if it's scorching my skin with fire and throw myself onto the ground beside Harry. On my knees, I grip the front of his shirt. His blood instantly starts to pool on my hands, staining the fabric of my dress. It mixes in with the wine-coloured fabric, making it a struggle to see how bad the loss is.

But my hands are drenched with crimson.

There's so much blood.

"Why would you do that!" I scream to no one in particular, my voice hoarse.

This was never meant to happen!

Harry was never supposed to be hurt.

Tears spill from my eyes quickly, splashing against Harry's skin, which is quickly paling.

"Don't you dare die on me."

"I ... I don't think I'm getting out of this one, baby."

With what started as a way for me to climb the ranks and reach the top of the Circle, I'd been gaining Paolo's trust for several weeks, hoping I could put an end to Richard. Specifically on the night Harry and I infiltrated the mansion. That hard drive would hold such damning information that he'd have no choice but to crumble. My priorities may have fallen through the cracks, but I wasn't a fool. I knew Richard was hiding something cruel, dark, and sadistic.

Not to mention, Jack's appearance had felt like much more than my inner demons. Whenever people referenced him, they

brushed off the subject as quickly as it arose. God, even Hudson Anderson said nothing when I asked.

I didn't doubt that someone out there knew the truth.

I'm not sure when I figured out my morals had changed and that I wanted Richard dead for his secrets rather than his position in power. Either way, none of it was worth it now.

I was oblivious to Paolo playing me. If only I'd been sane enough to realise his true intentions. If only I hadn't been embodying this stupid fucking alter-ego, I would have realised what was really happening around me.

The guards were supposed to collect me from the cellar after Harry and I were "trapped", but it turns out the electricity really did trip overnight, almost ruining everything. Things progressed far too quickly for either of us to handle, and before I knew it, Harry was shot and bleeding out.

He was rushed to medical, and the doctor said I kept him alive in the car with the pressure I applied to the wound near his heart, pushing so hard I thought I'd break his ribs. Richard arrived and said it was in both of our interests for me to leave. While every part of me was screaming to stay, I knew it was for the best that I left. God knows what the repressions would have been if he had seen me crying over Harry's broken body just minutes earlier.

He slipped into unconsciousness shortly after impact. While I did everything to save him, it'll seem to Harry like I still hold several secrets and that I refused to be beside him even in his close call with death.

Oh God, this is just awful.

Richard is yet to find out about my disloyalty to the Circle, but it's only a matter of time.

The thought creeps up on the back of my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

Now I watch over my shoulder like a horror-movie victim, just awaiting my own fate. My own passing bullet.

But I do know one thing.

If my brother's death suggested anything ...

Sanity is as precious as your life.



I wake up to a flurry of activity on my bedroom window. Rain pounds ferociously and unforgivingly. When I come to my senses I half-expect to hear Jack, but his voice in my subconscious has disappeared completely now. Even he knows having the truth slap me in the face is a harsher punishment than any words could ever be.

As I sit up fully I hope to find Harry sitting on the edge of my bed. Anything. Anyone. But there's nothing. And there's no one. I'm all alone.

When I climb out of bed I head straight to the kitchen to subconsciously wash my hands. Something that has become a tedious routine by now.

A water bottle sits on the kitchen counter, and I take it, downing a hefty mouthful as I trudge back into my bedroom. Once I slip inside I swear I can picture exactly where Harry would be. Where his hunched posture would sit. How his chest would fall.

I'm trying to act brave, trying to embrace this caricature, but the action is fruitless. I take a seat on the part of the bed where I imagine he sits, and I reach onto my side table to that piece of paper he once wrote.

Please look after yourself.

God knows how many times I've stared at it by now. How many times I've hoped I would bring the words into fruition if I read them enough.

I clutch the paper hard, careful not to crease it.

It isn't until lightning strikes through the window that I bring it closer to my eyes. Realisation hits my chest, and I can barely believe my eyes as I turn it over. I sit forwards, looking at it intently, and a battlefield of sorrow rages in my body.

I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you.

It's written over and over again.

I try to gather strength – try to do anything to keep my emotions intact. But all I can do is release a pathetic, broken gasp of breath.

Pain squeezes my heart at the thought of Harry. Agony sparks my chest at how his true feelings were right here, yet I blindly ignored them, brainwashed by the need for power, bloodlust, and—

Stupid. I was so fucking stupid.

It hurts, reading that he missed me back then. But not as much as the utter heartbreak of missing him right now. And nowhere

near as much as the harsh reality that he's better off without me.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Bigi

I give up trying to contact Harry after three months. It all comes down to one depressing night in Pixies, when I finally decide I have nothing left anymore.

My job is in the dumps, and it's only a matter of time before I'm met with my own bullet. My friends hate me. My mother still tries to contact me, but that's a path I'd most definitely rather not cross.

I have nothing left to live for anymore.

Word on the street is that Harry's lying low, staying under the radar. I check the rota every morning and he's never scheduled in.

I haven't seen him since the night I held his life in the palm of my hands.

"This is the voicemail service—"

I hang up the phone, sighing as it drops to my lap.

I'm sitting on a bar-stool, leaning my elbows back on the counter as I watch Poppy take the stage. The sticky residue pools on the skin of my elbows while I wait for my next drink to be served. Morale is low and the Pixies crowd is lacking, but Poppy still struts her stuff as if she's a stripper.

This is the third time I've ventured into the club this week, which really shows my desperation. When Liv, the fashion designer, tried wrangling me into some performances, I said no at first, but then I had to submit to a few so my increasing alcoholism wouldn't look too suspicious.

Turning to grab my drink, I raise the glass to my lips and relish in the taste of vodka.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Hudson asks, coming to my side.

I frown, taking in the sight of him since it's a rarity to ever see him out of his booth. Standing by my side, his posture seems relaxed, yet his three-piece suit always reveals he's in business mode.

"You wouldn't want me to bother you with those," I confess.

"Try me."

Fuck it. What do I even have to lose at this point? Might as well scare off the last human in my life who can cope with my existence.

"Harry hates me."

Hudson nods slowly. His eyes drop to the free bar-stool beside me, and he asks politely, "May I?"

I hold out my hand. "By all means."

The stool struggles to accommodate his large frame. Mirroring my posture, he leans his elbows back against the bar, and I grimace as the expensive designer fabric sticks to the surface.

"I'm assuming this is about the run-in with the Italians?"

"You've heard?" I sputter.

"Word gets around fast."

I bow my head to stare at the drink in my lap. "He took a bullet ..." My voice threatens to break. "It shouldn't have happened."

Silence fills the space between us.

"Do you love him?"

Tears well in my eyes. "It doesn't matter."

"Hey," Hudson says, squeezing my knee gently. "You can tell me anything."

I sigh, focusing on his hand. "Why did you always give me attention and not the other girls?"

His brows rise at the sudden change of topic.

"People talk, Mr Anderson ... the GQ model who doesn't give any of the women attention. Who sits alone in the shadows

seeking out his next victim.”

He chuckles, throwing his head back. “What am I – a vampire?”

“Sounds like it,” I say, concealing a smile. “But why? You gave me attention out of everyone ...”

He runs his finger around the rim of his glass. “You aren’t like the others. You’re ... different.”

I tilt my head. “How so?”

He turns his attention to the other guests. Pressing his elbows further back into the bar, he asks, “Do you see it?”

“See what?”

He moves closer, taking hold of my jaw gently. Hudson turns my head towards Poppy grinding onstage, drinking in the echo of cheers. Then he directs my focus towards a female recruit who puffs out her chest while passing the bill to a diner.

“They’re all trying too hard.” He releases my chin. “I regret saying that this was no place for a woman like you. If anything, it seems far too natural for you, and I deeply apologise.” Leaning closer, he whispers, “And perhaps I thought you were pretty.”

I slap his chest. “You did not!”

“I did so.”

“I need you around to boost my confidence more.”

“I’ll be wherever you want me to be.” He hums as he brings his drink to his lips.

I follow suit, forcing myself to swallow more vodka.

“What are you up to right now?”

“Right now?” I repeat, choking on my drink.

He nods, placing his beverage to the side. “Let’s go do something. It’ll be my treat.”

I stare at his awaiting palm as if it will unveil all the answers I’ve been searching for my entire life. But it doesn’t. It just encourages me to take it and allow myself a night away from my inner turmoil.

So I do.

Hudson and I spend the night traipsing through Covent Garden eating ice cream despite it being past midnight and the weather incredibly chilly. It’s a pleasant distraction from my suffering.

Like a typical gentleman, he wraps his suit jacket around my shoulders to keep me warm.

And then, when I least expect it, he kisses me.

He kisses me like any man in a business suit would kiss. I don’t doubt I’d ask him to spend the night with me if it weren’t for the vice grip on my heart making my feelings shine true.

I’m not sure when it first began, but I realised that night I was in love with Harry St. James.

From the very moment I found him in my brother’s room, I was fated to fall in love with the villain.

I’m completely, unforgivingly, in love with him.

A part of me always has been ...

But it’s too late now.

SIXTY-EIGHT

Gigi

I'm roped into attending another charity gala. I'm always happy to spend an evening with the less fortunate, but everything seems different now. My days consist of trying to get back to the place I was at before the incident with Harry, but no matter how hard I try, I just can't shake the feeling of him.

I'm yet to hear about his condition, and whoever I ask chooses to avoid me like the plague, not wanting to be associated with me anymore.

Everyone I know is at the gala tonight. Poppy. Richard. Andy. Hudson is probably around here somewhere too – amongst so many others. But there is someone missing. Harry. If he were here, I'd feel that strange mechanical pull towards him that I experience every time.

Women are in their fancy ballgowns, and men are in their tuxedos.

They laugh.

They cheer.

They clink glasses, and I just stare at nothing.

It's unfathomable to me how so many people can be oblivious when you're hurting so hard on the inside.

Seamstresses demanded I wear a bright, cheerful colour this evening – pink, yellow, baby-blue – but it didn't feel fitting for my mood. I chose black as if it would represent how I'm feeling on the inside. No one has approached me all evening, which probably means the black gown is scaring them off. Or perhaps that's just me nowadays.

Eager to make amends, I spot Andy near the bar, pick up the front of my gown, and head towards him. As if he can sense my approach, he throws back the rest of his drink and walks off into the sea of people.

I reach the bar, white-knuckling the wood as I release a heavy sigh.

"Gigi!" Richard calls.

Sighing, I squeeze my eyes shut. "Coming!"



I've danced with so many men this evening that I'm starting to smell like the opposite sex. Expensive cologne practically seeps out of my pores, and my feet hurt. I have blisters on my toes *and* on the balls of my feet.

I'm passed from man to man as if I'm in a brothel. Song after song plays through violins, and I don't have a chance to catch my breath or even rest my feet. I'm with each man for approximately three minutes before the song changes and I'm swung into another's arms. It's like speed-dating – billionaire edition.

The current song comes to an end and I use the opening as my opportunity to escape from the charitable benefactor. Approaching a waitress at the side of the dance floor, I grab one of the closest drinks and chuck it down my throat without so much as asking what it is. She watches me in surprise but doesn't utter a word as I slam the glass down onto her tray and pick up another.

Champagne, I think as I pour the next glass down my throat.

"Gigi ..."

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, catching the excess liquid on my skin, as I meet Richard's disapproving glare.

I'm embarrassing him.

He's standing alone with a glass of *Jack Daniels* in hand, his brows downturned in disapproval, boasting the kind of stern

look a father would give to a child when they've been caught red-handed.

"What can I do for you?" I gaze back down at my half-filled glass.

"Walk with me."

"I'm fine, really—"

"It wasn't a question."

I chug down the remainder of my drink and set the glass back down on the tray. Smiling at the waitress in thanks, I join Richard's side as he walks us to the corner of the room – the perfect vantage point. We stand with our backs to the wall, hundreds of guests socialising in front of us. They laugh and act like they don't have a care in the world. Why would they? They've got more money than sense. Whoever said money can't buy happiness is a fucking liar.

"You're angry about something," he states.

I fight the urge to look at him, keeping my eyes forwards. "Just tied up with work. You know how it is."

"Don't play smart with me," he grits through his teeth, turning to me. "What do you take me for?"

I remain silent. If he chooses execution as my punishment, so be it. A bullet sounds a lot more appealing than anything else at this point. But it seems Richard's got me right where he wants me, because his smirk grows wide even in my peripheral vision.

"It's really a pity ..." he starts, and I turn to him slowly, "that he felt he had to make the decision."

I frown. "I'm not following."

"Didn't you hear?" he asks. "Harry's leaving us."

He finally turns to me, and it's as if an ice pick has impaled my stomach.

A mixture of emotions threatens to choke me.

And I ... I can't *breathe*.

This wouldn't have been Harry's choice. Richard has driven him out, and it's telling through the way his smirk overtakes his lips. He isn't even trying to hide it.

No one gets out of the Circle unscathed. He's punishing Harry for something.

He could kill him.

He could—

My composure threatens to crack as I ask, "Will you excuse me?"

I don't have a chance to listen for his response since I'm already charging from the ballroom. People call out my name, but I leave without looking back, fearing I'll cause a scene if I stay. I can feel my fists balling at the sides of my body, crescent moons slicing the skin of my palms, and it isn't long before a thin layer of blood is pooling in them.

I throw open the double doors, most likely leaving a bloody imprint against the wood. My throat scratchy, I try to inhale.

But I'm in a spiral with no end.

I'm suffering the loss of him all over again.

With the room spinning, I catch the wall beside me.

I can't think. I can't muster up words other than, "I ... I-I can't breathe." I say it again and again, a desperate plea for my body to react to what's happening.

My mind is closing in, and it's a struggle like I've never known to pull myself free. Every intake of breath feels like fresh bruises forming on my skin. Nothing works.

I'm free-falling ...

I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe—

I claw at my chest. I rip at the fabric and tug at my corset, but it won't budge.

Stupid fucking thing.

Stumbling down the hallway, I find myself in a kitchen. Waiters and waitresses turn to me, stunned when they see my flustered expression. I toss my head back and forth, grabbing one of the knives from the rack before storming back out.

At the nearest bathroom, I collapse inside the stalls like an old drunk, turning in the full-length mirror to catch my appearance. A roar of frustration tears up my throat as I try to rip through the thin silk.

When the blade strikes true through the ribbon I finally catch my breath. And I clutch at my chest desperately. It's as if I can feel the organ breaking, just out of my reach, the pain washing over me so hard I'm forced to balance on the bathroom door.

Breathe, Gigi.

You need to breathe.

With my forehead resting against the wood, I catch sight of the knife still at my feet. My reflection is distorted in the blade, making it appear shattered and muddled – just like my brain.

As a thought comes to fruition I tilt my head slowly.

I could do it.

I could kill Richard.

Right now.

I've been aching for the opportunity. And now I have the chance at my very fingertips, a lethal weapon at my disposal. I'd

cause a scene, dethroning him in front of his worshippers.

Bending down slowly, I pick up the knife and turn it thrice in hand.

Fuck it.

Holding the blade behind my back, I swing open the bathroom door and storm out. I hurry back towards the ballroom, passing guests and some of the elite on my way through. They attempt to stop me for conversation, but I rush forwards without blinking. My feet grind to a stop finally at the double doors, and I stare through the glass panel.

He's there.

In all his glory.

Talking smack with high-profile stars and billionaire men.

The blade of the knife is in my palm now, the sight of him making my anger flourish enough that I start to grip the metal. It splits skin, tearing apart the flesh. But I feel nothing.

Except numb.

Blood is warm against my skin, pooling in my hand before rushing down my arms and collecting at my elbows, where it falls to the floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Keeping my hand holding the knife behind my back, my other gripping the door handle, I throw it open, destined to kill—

Hands catch my arms, desperately tugging me back from the open door.

“No!” I shout. “I need to do it!”

I don't care who it is.

I don't care what the repercussions are.

I'll kill them.

I turn around quickly, prepared to strike, but the stranger grabs my elbows, disarming me. They swing me back around before I can even catch a glimpse of their face, pinning me to their front.

Despite the restraints I thrash and scream and cry and kick.

“You need to calm down.”

Hudson.

“Get off me!”

Pulling me back from the door, he insists, “You don't want to do this. Trust me.”

My thrashes grow weaker and weaker the further he pulls me from the entrance, as if I can feel the opportunity slipping through my fingers. Blood soaks my palms and my wrists to the extent that his grip slips, and I puddle to the floor in a mess of sobs and screeches.

Hudson consoles me.

He wraps his arms around me and strokes my hair, his shirt stained with my blood.

The sobs scratch at my throat so hard it burns.

I was ready to kill anyone. Consequences be damned.

SIXTY-NINE

Gigi

“Thank you,” I tell the elderly guest and his mistress. “I hope you have a good evening.”

It’s a rarity to have such luxurious events held at the grounds of the Circle’s nineteenth-century manor, but this is a momentous occasion after all. The farewell to a recruit should call for nothing less than a reference to where it all began.

I heard whispers through the halls that Richard was planning something for this evening. It’s still a struggle to look at him knowing there’s something hidden under the surface, but I’ve been forced to be his ally in the hope he won’t stop me from saying a final goodbye.

We stand at the grand entrance to our home, a litter of Bentleys, Porches – you name it – sweeping the drive. Guests climb out, walking up the marble steps to where Richard, Hudson, and I stand ready to greet them.

As always, there are tuxedos, formal dresses ... It’s the typical extravagant affair. Having fallen through the cracks lately, I’ve chosen a floor-length black gown to help solidify my role here now I’ve lost all motivation to kill my boss.

The man of the hour hasn’t even arrived yet and my nerves are apparently obvious, my jittery hands a dead giveaway of my real feelings.

Hudson whispers in my ear, “You’ll be fine.”

Gnawing at my bottom lip, I ask, “Is it that obvious?”

“Just to me ... I’ve got you. Don’t worry.” His hand drops to my lower back, holding the material to stabilise me.

“Andy, so glad you could make it,” Richard says, pulling my attention forwards.

Andy only lives a few yards away, in one of the apartments, but I’m still shocked to see him here nonetheless. His hair lacks product, hanging in front of his eyes, which are still as red-rimmed as they are whenever I see him.

He nods in acknowledgement. “Boss.”

A ringing phone pierces the silence, and Richard says apologetically, “Excuse me, ladies and gents. I must take this. Gigi, please stay here to welcome the last remaining guests.”

Bringing my attention back to my colleague, I try my most convincing smile. “It’s good to see you ... This is Hudson.”

“Hi, mate. Good to see you.”

Through the silence a burning question overwhelms my thoughts, and it’s on the tip of my tongue to ask Andy how he is. The worry that he’s deteriorating in front of our eyes is real. Yet as I open my mouth to speak, he says, “I’ll be heading inside. I hope you two have a good evening.”

As he steps through the large doors I release a long sigh, causing Hudson to return his hand to my lower back.

“Relax. You’re doing great. A whole interaction with your friend and nothing embarrassing has happened.”

“Yet.”

“You still have time to mess it up, don’t worry.”

I laugh at the stupid remark. I feel incredibly lucky that Hudson has been so supportive throughout all this. It didn’t feel right to lead him on knowing my heart was elsewhere. While I was initially terrified to expose my insecurities about Harry and everything he meant to me, Hudson hasn’t so much as blinked an eyelid at the infidelity.

“Thank you,” I say, turning my head briefly to catch his eye.

At the thought of him allowing the two of us to be so close without intimacy, I lean up and press a gentle kiss to his cheek to show my gratitude. As I pull back, the look in his eyes falters, and I instantly panic.

“What is it?”

“You may want to turn around, princess,” Hudson whispers, Harry’s pet name hitting me straight in the gut.

At the mere thought of him my breath catches. I turn, suddenly unable to breathe.

“Harry.”

Oh fuck, I can’t do this.

As if he can sense the sudden change, Hudson's grip tightens on the back of my dress, keeping my legs from buckling underneath me.

Harry nods at my presence, his voice lacking emotion. "Gigi."

He looks incredible. His tousled black hair is swept back perfectly from his face, except for the lone strand that hangs down from his forehead – that piece has always had a mind of its own. He looks like everything I remember and everything I don't. Instead of his typical white shirt, he's wearing black. It's an unwritten rule that all men must opt for a white button-down under their tuxes, but rules never did seem to matter to Harry.

"And who might you be?" Hudson asks, pulling me back down to earth.

Through my pining I almost didn't see the stunning woman standing at his side. She hangs off his bent elbow as if she's always belonged there. There's no denying it no matter how much I want to glass the bitch with my leftover champagne: she's absolutely stunning. Her hair is cropped beneath her chin and incredibly shiny, the type of unachievable standard seen in cosmetics adverts. The strands are light brown, a similar colour to her eyes. The light illuminating the mansion at our backs bounces off her glowing complexion.

I hate to admit it, but they look perfect together.

"Emily."

Even her voice is perfect. Soft and gentle, kind of like a chime.

Silence stretches between the four of us again, and I force the gears in my mind to form a coherent sentence, remembering I haven't even acknowledged this woman yet.

"I've heard a lot about you. Your dress is lovely."

"Thanks!" She beams.

"*Prada*. Last year's season. I know it well."

Hudson pinches my lower back in warning.

Interrupting what would have been another awkward silence, Richard approaches. I can tell it's him because his steps seem to echo long after he's taken them. It's a chilling way of expecting his approach before he's even arrived.

"Harry!" he exclaims. "So glad you could make it. And you, lovely lady, must be Emily. You sure do know how to pick 'em, don't you?"

I shudder inwardly at the crude remark, and I swear Harry's eyes flicker over to me. But maybe I imagined it.

Richard steps forwards and takes hold of Emily's fingertips, raising her hand. He kisses her knuckles gently, and my eyes briefly dart to Harry, trying to gauge his reaction.

Harry blinks once. Twice.

Emily takes a step back. "It's great to finally meet you, sir."

"Look how civil we're all being together. It's just magnificent. No hard feelings, Harry?"

"None at all. I'll be collecting my final belongings by the end of the week."

"Very good." Richard nods. "Please, head inside before the last of the champagne disappears."

"It was a pleasure to meet you all." Emily's musical voice echoes behind them as they go.

After greeting a few more guests we finally head inside. The living quarters and the cafeteria have been cordoned off for today's event, so we're all gathered in the main hall.

Everyone I recognise is here. B and Andy are over by the bar chatting away, and Richard is talking with some older men in the far corner. While Harry isn't in my immediate vicinity, I can feel his presence in the building.

"Gigi," Poppy says in greeting, walking past with a spiteful look on her face.

"Poppy," I spit.

Stepping in front of me and blocking her from my view, Hudson whispers, "I thought we were choosing to play nice?"

"That was before I knew she would be here. Did you know I beat her up once?" I smile.

Since almost murdering Richard in cold blood my loyalties have been askew. Yet for some unknown reason, I still continue to put on this façade in the company of others, instantly choosing to act on defence in the worry they'll see the shattered state of me underneath. But with Harry in the building, I can feel the weakness he imposes on me cracking through everything.

Hudson and I work our way around the room greeting guests and talking bollocks. A few even mention the twins Billy and Bobby, still struggling to come to terms with how they were pulled from the Thames last year.

I purse my lips, feigning ignorance.

A silver spoon taps against the rim of a glass, echoing around the space and drawing our attention.

Richard's using the steps like a pedestal as he stands overlooking his people. His typical whiskey has been replaced with a champagne flute as he projects his voice. "Can I have everyone's attention, please? Thank you for coming this evening. It's great to see another successful turnout. We've welcomed faces old and new tonight, which brings me to say ... I'd like to raise a toast. This will be the last formal event for Harry."

I briefly shut my eyes, trying to compose myself.

"I'd like to welcome him to dance with none other than our strongest asset ..."

There's a defining pause.

No.

Don't say it.

Please.

"Gigi!"

FUCK!

My chest tightens as panic overwhelms me. I haven't even turned around yet, haven't looked into the eyes I know are green, beautiful, and capable of utterly destroying me.

"I can't do this," I whisper.

I can feel every attendee's gaze on my stiff form.

This is far, far worse than any performance at Pixies.

"You can, and you will." Hudson pushes me forwards. "Now go."

I catch Richard's smirk as he raises his champagne flute to his mouth. "Will the two of you kindly meet in the centre of the room?"

My feet lead the way, betraying my head, which screams at me to run in the opposite direction. I've been aching for the moment I can be in Harry's presence again for months, but here, my feelings will be analysed under the watchful eye of so many others. And I'm terrified of what they'll discover.

I walk closer until I'm just inches from Harry. He stands in the centre, and I focus on his black leather shoes before my eyes sweep up the length of him and reach his strong eyes.

He's here.

He's alive.

Offering me his palm, he asks, "Let's give them what they want then, shall we?"

As if we never spent a minute apart I place my palm into his, and he pulls my body towards his chest simultaneously. My heart beats so fast I fear he'll hear it. His fingers brush against my lower back, drawing me closer. Chest pressed against his, my fingers intertwine with his free hand slowly.

We both move to the music as tension grows between us, the burn in his eyes forcing me to turn away. His touch is overpowering, forcing me to surrender subliminally. Our silence speaks volumes, insinuating more than words could ever say. But I feel inclined to say something.

"I thought you were going to leave me stranded up here," I whisper.

I glance up at Harry's face finally, but he's staring longingly into the distance.

"I was going to."

After a pause he brings his eyes down to mine, and I see the rawness in his features. To just anyone he'd look cool and composed. But I see his real emotion instantly.

This is hurting him.

Trying to bring up a more comfortable topic, I ask, "Her name is Emily, right? She's very beautiful."

"She is." He nods and pauses for a beat. "But she's not you."

I squeeze my eyes closed, fighting the force of the words. The girl who fought for top rank wouldn't stand for this. But that girl was only fuelled by power; she didn't feel love.

Before my shocked expression becomes a talking point for our audience, Harry extends his arm to spin me. My hair blows away from my shoulders before he quickly brings me back in, our bodies even closer than before. The air gets knocked out of me, and my eyes flutter open as an echo of applause rings around us.

The noise comes in waves of distorted colours.

"You seem really happy. You deserve it," I say.

I'm not sure I've seen Harry happy in a long time. But that's the kind of compliment you give to your ex, right? That you've noticed they've visibly moved on.

I'm not sure if I believe he has.

I'm not even sure if I have.

I'm not sure I ever will.

"Emily's my cousin," Harry says. "She knew I wouldn't be able to face tonight alone."

I blink quickly to hide my surprise. "Oh ..."

I really don't know him at all anymore.

A moment of silence stretches between us.

Harry's voice is low, like a whisper, but painful. "What happened to us?"

The question is overloaded with meaning. It impacts me like a knife straight to the heart, shattering it into a million pieces, and piecing it back together jagged and scarred.

Tears splinter my vision, my voice cracking. "I've been mourning you for months. You were never supposed to take the

bullet.”

But he isn't talking about that.

He's talking about the secrets we've kept.

Secrets that will forever outweigh our trust.

Throughout the next few minutes we move our bodies in silence as other people join us on the dance floor.

“You look beautiful tonight,” Harry says eventually.

“Don't be the good guy. I don't deserve it,” I whisper, closing my eyes as I feel the sting. “Not after everything I put you through.”

A part of me aches to seek out Hudson for comfort in this crowded room. But he'll never put me at ease the way Harry could. The way Harry *can*.

“This certainly wasn't how I expected my night to go, but I knew our paths would cross again at some point.”

“It'll be unfortunate to see you leave,” I say in a choked whisper. “You really were a good asset to our team.”

“Someone took my job.” He smirks until his expression fades, a different emotion rising to the surface. “They realised I was a liability. The Circle wasn't my main priority anymore ...”

In one swift movement Harry dips my body. The strands of my hair brush the marble floor before he pulls me back to his chest, our hearts close but our lives a million miles apart.

“In another life I'd like to think I never would have joined,” he says. “I wonder what the other me is doing now. If he's happy ... if he's with you. I wonder if you hate me in that life too.”

“Harry ...” I beg.

“I'd like to think I've loved you in a thousand lifetimes.” He raises his hand to my cheek, brushing away a stray tear. “I can't be mad about that. That's more than any man has ever wished for ... but happy endings aren't for people like us.”

I want to scream the words through my chest: *I don't hate you*.

I'd always put myself in any type of harm's way to save him. Even now. But we've passed the point of no return. No words will bring us back to the couple we once were. That was a lifetime ago.

Love overpowers my head as I plead desperately, “Don't leave me.”

“I don't have a choice, baby,” he says, and I shake my head. “I'll be out of the city soon. You'll never have to see me again.”

Fuck Richard, fuck Emily, fuck Hudson. Fuck everything. Fuck everyone! Screw every heist. Every penny earned. Damn every kill! I can feel each materialistic win evaporating at my fingertips. None of it is worth a life without Harry.

I clutch onto his hand as he continues to hold my cheek. He tilts his head, focusing on the pad of his thumb against my cheekbone as he says, “I wish I could change things, but I can't. I've made a lot of mistakes in life. But out of all the things I've done ... falling in love with you was the best decision I ever made. You were my greatest adventure, but they all come to an end. Wherever you end up, I hope you'll be happy. I'll try to be too.”

“I'll come with you.” I shake my head, feeling like I'm losing the ability to breathe. “We'll leave here together.”

Harry smiles sadly, his voice soft. “Richard will kill the both of us before we even get out of London.”

“I don't care,” I say, gasping for air. “I'll change for you. For *us*.”

“But you shouldn't have to.” A tear glistens in his eye. “You're perfect the way you are, Gigi. Don't give up everything you've worked hard for.”

My lips part, the words burning my throat. “I love you.”

“I know,” he says softly.

He pauses, his eyes pained.

Dropping his hand from my skin slowly, he takes a step backwards. Shaking his head as if he's debating doing something foolish, Harry turns around and walks away.

My gaze meets the floor and I squeeze my eyes shut as tight as possible. But even with my vision distorted I can feel the room shrinking around me. The internal screams that slice through my ears are so strong they threaten to bring me to my knees.

The room spins faster.

I can feel every eye boring into me – except one pair.

Blinking my eyes open, I find Harry walking towards the exit with his head down.

I feel it deep within my chest that with each step I'm losing him further. Unlike that day back at my house, where I saw a stranger invading my home and felt elastic bands tightening around us, struggling to keep us apart, I can now feel the bands fraying between my fingers.

Nothing will pull us back this time.

When I scan the room, Emily meets my eye and watches me with quiet realisation. She's standing alone, but her smile is full of knowing. I swear she even nods in understanding.

As if he can sense my inner turmoil, Richard's gaze is harsh as I spot him on the stairs. Harry was right: we'd never make it out of the city alive. It'd be obvious we were fraternising behind closed doors. If Richard didn't kill me, he'd only drag me back to the Circle kicking and screaming. And from the way he's currently assessing me with his glare, I know if I run now I'll

be risking everything – every secret, every sin – just to tell Harry goodbye.

Richard raises his glass to his lips in warning, watching me over the rim. His dark eyes are full of meaning. Acting out will end in punishment.

But the repercussions will be nothing compared to how much I'll hate myself.

Fuck it.

Inhaling a sharp breath, I bunch the hem of my gown into my palms and rush towards where Harry exited. I throw open the double doors and shiver at the bitter-cold breeze, tossing my head back and forth to try to catch a glimpse of him. On the marble steps I strain my eyes to see through the black shadows for any glimpse of movement.

Worry washes through me.

Worry that captures the organ in my chest, squeezing it tight in the fear I'm too late.

"Gigi?"

I whip my head around as Harry steps forwards from the brick wall, a cigarette falling to the floor beneath his feet.

Relief blows through me like a gust of wind. I find myself wanting to clutch at my knees and suck in air like water, but I don't dare waste this moment. As if my feet have a mind of their own, I rush forwards, my pace starting as a walk and then turning into a run before I throw my arms around him.

The action catches Harry by surprise. It takes him a second to embrace me back just as strongly. I push my head into the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent one last time. It's always the same – leather with a hint of mint.

"I never got to say thank you," I whisper into his skin, keeping my eyes closed. "Thank you ... for everything."

He pauses, and I contemplate if he heard me.

But it doesn't matter, I think. As long as I've spoken my truth to him.

Despite my concerns I don't pull away from his embrace. His body shifts as his hand moves to the back of my head, tangling my long strands between his fingers.

I rest my forehead against his. "I've loved you in every lifetime too."

"Do you enjoy pushing me to my fucking limit?" he whispers, and I smile sadly at the memory.

Oh, how simple life was back then.

But too much time has happened, and too many repercussions stand in our way for us to return to the couple we once were.

Harry's eyes flicker to my lips, and for a fleeting moment I think he's going to kiss me.

And in that moment of vulnerability, I silently hope he does.

I crave the feeling like I crave air.

But when he sighs and drops his hand, I'm thankful. I would never have been able to let him go if he'd grabbed me and pushed his lips against mine.

As I drop my arms from around his neck and take a step back Harry smiles. I force one in return, fighting the unworldly feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Goodbye, Gigi."

"Goodbye, Harry."

SEVENTY

Bigi

When I wake up discomfort swarms my shoulders, pressing heavily on my neck. My eyelashes feel like they weigh a hundred tonnes as they flutter with the force of trying to open.

When they do I'm surrounded by darkness.

My body succumbs to panic, and as I take in a shaky breath my lips brush the tweed fabric of the bag over my head, restricting my sight. When I attempt to move I find my arms have been restrained behind my back.

"Where ... where am I?"

I move unwillingly with the bumps in the road, having deciphered I'm in the back of a car. My head spins with a feeling akin to overdosing, and I feel my fight dissipating as I slip back into unconsciousness, hearing a voice say, "Not long now ..."

As the darkness starts to overtake me I taste the remaining essence of champagne on my tongue.

My drink ...



I slip in and out of unconsciousness for hours, until I finally have the strength to walk on my own two feet. Tight grips on my elbows keep me upright, but I continue to wobble like a new-born calf until the bag is ripped from my head.

Bright lights assault my vision, and I squint my eyes to accommodate the harshness. I'm dressed in a sheer fabric that leaves nothing to the imagination, accessorised by trashy stiletto heels.

"What ... what are you—?"

I lift my head slowly at the sound of heavy footsteps, spotting a dark, menacing stare. Richard clasps his hands in front of him.

"The last step of your initiation," he says, his grin lethal. "Prove your loyalty."

As if I've been branded with a hot poker again I thrash against the restraints, screaming and fighting, paying with my life. "You're kidding me! I don't want part of this shit fucking society. I want out!"

Ignoring me, Richard says, "You will be sold to the highest bidder, and you must spend the night with them. If you fail to do so or try to pull any funny business, the cost will be your life."

"Then kill me!"

He rolls his eyes. "If only it were that easy."

"What?" I spit. "You're involved in human trafficking now?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

I resist desperately, and I can tell his patience is wearing thin. He huffs, checking his watch while I cause a scene. He finally speaks over the commotion.

"You will be silent throughout. Show them what they're investing their money in. Otherwise we'll drug you. But I suggest you choose the alternative."

"Get the fuck off me!" I scream until my voice is hoarse. "You can't do this!"

He nods to one of the guards in the corner, and I throw myself hard against the wall, almost knocking myself out cold. A needle pricks my forearm, and I feel my fight giving out instantly, my senses dulling on impact.

"Sweetheart, I think you'll find I can. My men and I have been slipping drugs into your drinks for months, awaiting this very moment."

My vision is hazy, but I notice him nodding to one of the guards.

“Get her ready.”

My legs shake underneath me. I’m pulled up to my feet, aided by a strong grip on my elbow. My head is spinning, but I can decipher odd shapes and sense a presence immediately in front of me.

A girl. I see the panic rising on her features as we lock eyes.

I promise I’ll put an end to this stupid fucking society once I’m out of here.

For a moment I wonder if I deserve this. Wonder if it’s karma trying to punish me for every bad decision I’ve ever made.

A flash of loneliness stabs me.

The curtain draws back, and the poor girl disappears behind it as she’s ushered through. A speaker echoes behind the fabric, but I struggle to hear. And then, when a few minutes have passed, she’s escorted out by a burly guard, her eyes finding mine in the chaos.

“Stay on your own feet,” the guard says. He shoves at my body, and I stumble onto the stage.

It’s an elevated platform, in a circular shape, like the boxing ring within the grounds of the Circle headquarters. Glass panels cover the edges, providing a viewing platform for everyone to see. It’s only one-sided, so my reflection in the sheer outfit assaults me from every angle.

I know there must be men behind there.

Watching.

Ogling.

“We’ve saved the best for last.” A woman’s mechanical voice booms through the speakers. “The bidding will begin at one hundred thousand.”

My body no longer feels like its own as I’m shaken with tremors, barely able to keep myself upright. Thick fog surrounds my vision, and I can barely make out the LED lights overhead.

One hundred thousand pounds.

It’s absurd. Utterly barbaric.

And despite everything ... for a fleeting moment I wonder if it’s Harry. Wonder if he’ll come save me one final time ...

“I have one hundred and fifty—”

“Two hundred. Two hundred thousand.”

I trip over my own two feet, catching myself against the glass with the shock that knocks my body off-centre. My reflection stares back at me, and I suddenly recognise that vulnerable, fragile girl I lost several months ago.

She stares back at me with pure, guttural panic as the voice booms, “Two hundred and fifty. Two hundred and fifty thousand.”

“Five.”

“Five fifty.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting back the onslaught of tears as I push myself back to my feet. My hands desperately work to cover my body, trying to stop these sick, vile men from looking at me. But my attempts are pathetic – I’m barely able to lift my limbs.

“Six—”

“Seven fifty. Seven hundred and fifty thousand.”

Tears swarm me. Balance weak from the quivering of my limbs, I fall to my knees, catching myself with my palms as my body meets the hard ground. Lifting my head slowly, I lock eyes with myself in the mirror, praying I’ll fight.

Praying this won’t ruin me.

Closing my eyes, I breathe slowly, trying to calm my racing pulse.

Just persevere for a few more seconds, a voice in my head pleads. *You can do it. A few more seconds and it won’t hurt anymore.*

The effect of the drug gnaws through me, distorting my sense of time and reality.

When I open my eyes a guard is storming towards me. They lean down, grip my arm, and force me to my feet, dragging me towards the exit.

“What ... what happened?” I ask, tripping over myself.

But they say nothing.

Attempting to keep up with their long strides as I’m tugged down the corridor, I catch sight of the large LED board displaying the final price above the exit. I force myself to do a double-take, the lights blurring in front of my eyes while I struggle to make out the seven numbers.

One million pounds.



It's been hours since the final figure was called. I was taken into medical and given a concoction of medicine to work as an antidote against whatever they put into my system earlier. I'm not sure if I believe them, but I do feel slightly more like myself. As human as anyone can feel after experiencing the havoc of what I just went through.

As if to make matters worse, after leaving the medical room I was given strict instructions to dress to impress. The feeling made me sick. I was ushered into a room with Liv, the fashion designer from Pixies, who was standing by a rack of dresses and heels and barely glanced in my direction as I entered. She simply looked me over to see which dress would be the most flattering and then opted for a floor-length gown with beads, dark purple in colour. In another life I might have thought the dress was pretty. But it makes me feel ugly.

It makes me feel utterly disgusting.

When I'm dropped off by the escort vehicle, an odd sense of déjà vu hits me as I step out in front of the building Harry first took me to. That first gala as the impressionable girl who ached to be a part of the glitz and the glamour.

I close the door behind me, swallowing back the sick feeling in my mouth as I hold onto the front of my dress and walk up the parade of steps.

There's no one here. No guards. No onlookers. Just silence.

A nagging voice tells me to run free, but I'll only face a worse punishment for my incompetence. Besides, they're bound to be here at any moment.

As I search the property, the eeriness and the silence send a cold chill up my arms that makes me hug them to myself instinctively. The highest bidder must be pretty important if Richard is willing to vacate a property like this.

Distracted by the thought, I barely hear whoever approaches from the marble steps. The hairs on my arms stand on end, and I make a slow turn to look over my shoulder before spinning my body around fully.

My lips part in shock at the sight of the person standing at the entrance. My heart stops altogether.

I definitely wasn't expecting *him*.

"What ... what are you doing here?"

SEVENTY-ONE

Sigi

I can't wrap my head around the fact the man in front of me would spend a million pounds on one night with me. The idea seems completely absurd, but then ... also completely plausible.

I guess if it was going to be anyone ...

It would be Hudson.

My body almost tumbles over in relief at the sight of him, and I'm forced to catch myself on the back of the sofa. Like a tidal wave the floodgates open, and he walks towards me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders.

"Happy to see me?" he mumbles into my hair.

My fingers grip the fabric of his shirt, and his hands run down my arm in comfort as my body shakes with tremors. He cautiously leads us towards the living space.

We sit down on the cream sofa, and he claps his hands around mine to stop them from shaking. It takes me a while to pull myself together, but when I'm finally able to compose myself, I wipe my tearful eyes against my shoulder.

"What were you doing there—?"

"Are you okay?" he asks, soothing me.

I nod despite feeling anything but. My fate feels like an utter fantasy compared to the less fortunate girl who met my gaze with panicked eyes. Heart stinging at the thought of her, I barely recognise the sound of my own voice as I ask, "What happened?"

"There was no other choice," Hudson says. "The alternative was just unthinkable."

"How could you spend all that money? There were other girls—"

His expression falters, and I tilt my head, confused.

"You were the highest bidder, right?"

He squeezes at my clasped hands. "Not quite."

My brow furrows at the statement before someone with an even bigger presence in such a large room catches my attention, standing in the doorframe like an angel sent down from above. The light shines from behind him, emitting a glow over his body that almost looks like a halo atop his head.

Time seems to stop as I look at him.

All-black hair swept to the side except for that damn stray strand. He's dressed in a full black suit, the top few buttons undone, his hands tucked into the front of his trousers as he rocks back on the heels of his shoes. The sight of him brings a fresh layer of tears to my eyes.

"Hey, baby," Harry whispers.

Tears scold my cheeks, and I rise to my feet slowly. I'm stunned into silence, afraid my sight is betraying me. Pressing a hand to my chest, I double-check my heart is still beating.

It is.

Barely.

As if every minute catches up with me in that very second, I'm suddenly rushing over to him like we don't have a second to waste. Throwing myself into Harry's embrace, I almost knock him off his feet, but he catches my hips with steady hands.

His arms slip around to my back, clutching onto me with everything he has left as he brings me closer to his chest. I squeeze my eyes shut, digging my face deep into the crook of his neck to unleash every emotion in the comfort of his hold.

"Shh, it's okay. I've got you. I'm not letting you go."

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," I confess.

He pulls back and cups my face in his hands, his thumbs dancing across my cheekbones. I lean into the touch instinctively, aching for nothing but time.

Seeing I'm in safe hands, Hudson leaves me and Harry alone. We sit on the large sofa, a glass coffee table in front of us, and

I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm really here.

"Why would you do that?" I ask. "You-you should've ..."

Harry smiles sadly, his eyes bearing the weight of a thousand emotions. Leaning forwards to clasp my knee, he says, "The truth ... no more secrets."

I nod slowly as his hand flexes around my skin. Encouraging him, I thread my fingers through his.

"I'd die tomorrow if it meant I could have just one minute of normal life with you, and that we weren't part of this fucked-up world I've wrapped us into."

"Don't make promises like that." I shake my head. "You almost did."

"I'm speaking from experience." Harry brushes the pad of his thumb over my skin. "So that's why we're getting out of here.'

My eyes widen. "Sorry?"

"The rules are that the highest bidder has one night uninterrupted with you. So, technically, you're mine until tomorrow. While he may not like the idea, there's nothing Richard can do about it. It goes against everything the Circle believes in. As far as they know, you're Hudson's anyway," he says, his jaw ticking.

I shake my head. "This is crazy."

"Experience one night of a normal life with me."

One last night.

We owe it to ourselves at least.

Harry stands, offering me his hand. "Go on. Entertain me."

SEVENTY-TWO

Harry

One million pounds looks like time spent drinking McDonald's milkshakes and waiting in line on the London Underground. It's a small price to pay for Gigi's safety.

I've yet to find the man who bid against me, but I don't doubt I'll find him in time. Fortunately, Poppy was able to intercept the truck holding the remainder of the girls and drive them from the location unscathed.

It still doesn't make any of this right.

My nerves are jittery, still carrying the burden of many secrets, as I watch Gigi leaning against the wall while we await the Tube towards Oxford Circus.

The bottom of her dress blows in the wind as the oncoming train approaches through the tunnel, and her rose-scented body wash drowns me, practically begging me to get to my knees and worship this woman at her very feet. A large fur coat conceals her skin, protecting her from the bitter winter breeze. Her nose is pink, and her cheeks redden with the cold that seeps through her. As I watch her silently like this, I want to give her everything ever in existence to make her happy. But I fear there are still consequences we've yet to face.

I thought saying goodbye to her at the Circle would serve as a mental block against my feelings for her, but the second I left they came back to me tenfold.

Once Gigi walked away, Emily came outside to check up on me. I've always been grateful for how she can help pull me back together, but we both knew I needed time to process everything alone.

I stood there outside taking drag after drag after drag of my cigarette, until finally, my ears perked up at the sound of suspicious activity at the back of the property. A woman was stumbling over her two own feet as if she were drunk, ushered into a vehicle and driven away within minutes. If I hadn't spotted the movement, I dread to think what could've happened.

Poppy and I followed as if our lives depended on it, but this was far bigger than anything we'd experienced before. When the truck pulled up, we watched an abundance of women get dragged out, half of them drunk and drugged, and it wasn't until I saw the black silk dress on Gigi's small frame that I was ready to go hell for leather and burn the place down.

There was no other alternative.

The money had to be physically withdrawn from my bank account before I could get all those girls to safety, but we fled before they realised someone was crumbling their system from the inside out.

I'm not sure what to do from here.

Not sure where to start.

Now Richard has kicked me out of the Circle my hands are tied.

It all seems too easy. He's never given anyone an out from the society as easily as he did me. And with all my snooping around, I fear I'll meet my own fate in time.

Hudson took the plunge, standing in place as the "highest bidder" and buying me time to get the rest of the girls to safety before I finally arrived at Gigi's side. I'm still not sure what to think of him, but for now I can only trust he's an ally as I teeter on the edge of insanity, my wires dangerously close to crossing.

She hasn't asked me how I came to find her. I fear she doesn't want to know. Frankly, I'm relieved about that, afraid of what she'll find out and what we'll become now. But knowing my own ill fate could be waiting just around the corner, I stride towards her, cup the side of her neck in my palm, and crush my mouth against hers.

I kiss her selfishly, unforgivingly, as if our time is limited.

The wind sweeps her dress, tangling it around my legs, and her hair blows wildly on the breeze of the train. My lips are like a magnet to hers, remembering everything about them, what she likes and what she dislikes, and I don't allow myself a second to breathe before caressing her face and slipping my tongue into her mouth, finding hers instantly like a twin flame.

Tears spill from her eyes and into our mouths, letting me know she's feeling every ounce of the emotion I'm pouring into her.

I hold her closer all the while.

After we finish sightseeing around London, I take her back to the mansion and make love to her. No threatening her airways with my palms. No snarky comments. I rock into her with every bit of emotion I have left in me, catching her breathless lips and allowing her to drain the life from mine.

Our actions will come with repercussions. We'll have to face Richard's wrath for my stunt.

But right now my only concern is her.

"No more secrets ..." she says against my lips as I thrust into her deeper.

"No more secrets," I reiterate in a broken whisper, feeling a pang in my chest.

As she tilts her head back against the pillows, nearing the peak of orgasm, my lips skim her bare skin and I whisper to her quietly – too quiet for her to even hear me.

"Forgive me, Gigi."

SEVENTY-THREE

Bigi

“I just need to go home and figure my life out,” I say.

Hudson turns to the side in silence, diverting his attention out the window. There’s a restless energy to his movements this morning. I hope he’s not disappointed because no feelings grew between us, or that I wasn’t longing for him to be at that house instead of Harry.

At the mere thought of him my fingers brush my mouth as if I can still taste his lips.

It was preplanned that Hudson would pick me up and escort me back home to stop Richard from finding out any misdemeanour went on behind the scenes. Harry was anxious to let me out of his sight, but his mind seems to be elsewhere, and I’m afraid if I look too closely I’ll be terrified by what I see.

Besides, Hudson Anderson is harmless. He bought me ice cream once, even let me wear his jacket.

The comfort of my memories makes my eyes flutter, and before I know it, I’ve drifted into a deep sleep. I must sleep for the rest of the journey, because the next thing I know, the car’s jolting to a stop.

I try to take in my surroundings, tiredly rubbing at my eyes as I look out the window at a parking garage. “Where are we?” I yawn, turning to Hudson.

His eyes are pained, lips pressed into a thin line.

I turn, seeing several men approaching the car, and then I whip my head back towards him, my hair flying into my mouth. “Hudson?” I panic. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, his smile strained. “I had no other choice.”

The door behind me is yanked open, and strong hands grab onto my body.

“YOU FUCK—WHY?” I scream, gripping the leather seat tight between us. “Why would you do this!”

“Please don’t take it personally. It’s strictly business.”



I can hear my breath pumping in my ears, feel my heart pounding in my chest, but I can’t feel the pain coursing through my body, rendering my limbs useless after hours of mindless physical torture.

My chin is tucked into my chest, the chair creaking beneath my weight as I sway with the motion of trying to stay awake. Ties hold my wrists hostage beneath my back, and the bulb flickering above my head stings my left eye. Panic swarms when I don’t immediately feel the same feeling in my right. From forcing different expressions, I can feel the remnants of dried liquid against my forehead.

Blood must have leaked into my eye from a wound Richard inflicted.

He’s been punishing me for hours, claiming if I don’t confess to my sins, it’ll only prolong the beatings. But I don’t feel the pain anymore; I just feel numb.

Fucking Hudson.

I’d love to say I knew it was coming, but I was none the wiser. That stupid prick played me. *Why?* Maybe he has a whole other family. Maybe he has a kid and a wife at home. I kissed that bastard. The thought instantly makes vomit creep up my throat in disgust.

Hours later, a slap to my cheek pings me awake, and the harsh lights burn so bright against my eyes I almost think I hear them sizzle.

“Jesus, you look fucking terrible.”

My tongue runs over the split in my lip as I raise my eyes to find Richard looking down at me with the same grimacing smirk on his face. Hudson stands in the corner of the room. His arms are crossed, and his head is bowed.

“Don’t look at him,” Richard says, gripping the sides of my chair. “You look at me.”

So I do.

“Go on,” I say.

“You thought you and that rat could disobey orders, huh? After everything I’ve built up, I’m not losing my legacy to you—”

A slow, menacing smile spreads over my lips, to the point it hurts my cheeks. A rumble of laughter creeps up my chest before it pours out of my mouth and overcomes me so hard it makes my head tilt back.

I laugh so hard I can’t stop.

Fuck, it hurts.

But bloody hell, it doesn’t.

Richard’s fist sends my head tumbling to the side, his rings splitting my cheek with the heavy punch, silencing me. He leans down into my space, but I turn my face away from him, my head soaring with pain.

“You think you know everything, don’t you? Think Jamie fucking Callahan conveniently met you on your lunch break and wasn’t my watchdog for months. Think Harry told you the truth,” he taunts. “You may not hate him now, but you will do after you hear the secrets he’s been keeping from you …”

EPILOGUE

Harry

One month later

The bitter wind is cold against my skin, and I push my hands deep into my jacket pockets to try to maintain the warmth. It's the coldest winter we've had in years, but as I spot Gigi standing in the centre of the park, all I feel is warmth.

It suddenly feels like a summer's day.

She tucks her chin to her chest, her hands stuffed into her armpits. I walk up to her quickly and wrap my arms around her from behind. Gigi jumps at the contact, but I bury my face into the crook of her neck, struggling to let go. It's the first time I've seen her since that night at the mansion. She's been too busy with work to meet me.

"Hello, baby," I whisper into her hair.

She mumbles something under her breath that I can't quite hear, but it causes me to pull back. When I see the distant look in her eyes, the coldness of her expression, concern tightens my stomach into knots.

I tilt her chin up with my fingers. "Is everything okay?"

Gigi turns away, fighting my gaze, but I can already see her tears glistening in the sunrays. My fingers find her chin and I tug her face back in my direction, noticing the pink of her nose and the darkness under her eyes.

There's something wrong. And all my concern that she was ignoring me for weeks suddenly comes racing back to the surface.

"I can't believe you."

I frown. "What are you—?"

"Why didn't you tell me Richard was my father?"

I retract my hands from her skin as if they're on fire.

Gigi's expression is blank. Unreadable.

But she knows.

She knows I've committed the ultimate sin; kept the deepest of secrets from her, the woman I claim to love yet continue to betray. It's like a toxic trait I've mastered. And in the midst of it all, it's not the last one I'm harbouring under the surface.

"When did you find out?" I ask.

Her body recoils with disgust as she fights my gaze.

"Say something, baby," I plead, the panic that I'm losing her closing in.

Releasing a shaky exhale, she says with eerie stability, "I thought he was lying at first ... A part of me believed you wouldn't lie to me *again*. After everything." Turning to me slowly, with ice in her expression, she adds, "But that's all you are. You're a filthy liar. And you'll never change."

How could I have been the one to break the news that her blood is tainted with evil? How could I have been the one to utterly wreck her by confessing her life is littered with secrets and truths she'll never understand?

I catch her arm before she can leave. "Let me explain."

"Get off me," she demands, pulling herself free.

"They've got their hands on you again. You don't know what he's—"

"What he's hiding from me?" She thinks she's finishing my sentence for me. "I know the secrets you've been keeping about Jack."

I shake my head, desperation in my voice. "Give me a chance to—"

"I'm giving you the opportunity to leave."

"Gigi, please ..."

"You kept things from me, Harry. Dark secrets. You've always known more about my family than you've let on." Her face morphs into a lethal calm. She looks the darkest and most disassociated I've ever seen her look. "Leave. Because I promise

you, the next time I see you, I won't be so forgiving. The next time I see you ... I'll kill you."

SEQUEL TO SECRETS COMING SOON ...

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